

St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Good Friday 2024
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Two Hours 12-2pm

Introduction

The Scripture reading in this first cycle begins at the end of the longest teaching of Jesus in the New Testament, the Farewell Discourses at the Last Supper on the evening before his crucifixion. Those five chapters are like a course in discipleship. They give wave after wave of teaching on the three key essentials of Christian living: first, **learning**—disciple (*mathētēs* in Greek) simply means ‘learner’; second, **servicing and loving**, which we thought about in last night’s Maundy Thursday service through Jesus washing his disciples’ feet; and, third, **praying**. And all of those are to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, the greatest gift promised by Jesus.

The Farewell Discourses culminate with an astonishing prayer by Jesus to his Father, a prayer that is for me the deepest chapter in the whole Gospel. And in the culmination of that prayer comes the culmination of the desire of Jesus. That desire is: for us to be learners of the truth, about which he earlier said, ‘**I am ... the truth**’; for us to trust and believe in him, as modelled by his trust in his Father in this climactic prayer; and for us to be utterly united in love with him and his Father, and with each other, for the sake of the whole world. Truth, trust, and love are all taken up into prayer by Jesus in Chapter 17.

Then the final part of our reading jumps into the middle of the trial of Jesus on the first Good Friday, when Pontius Pilate cross-examines him about whether he is a king, and Jesus identifies himself again with the truth.

I Truth, Trust, and Love

- a) Hymn 489: The Servant King (Kendrick)
- b) Reading: John 17:17-26; 18:37-38
- c) Address
- d) Sung Psalm 42
- e) Silence

Reading I

John 17

17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

25 "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

John 18

37 Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." 38 Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

Address I Truth, Trust, and Love

Who is Jesus?

That is the central question of all the Gospels, and especially of the Gospel of John.

The Prologue of John's Gospel, its first eighteen verses, which has perhaps been the most influential short text in Christian history, makes the amazing statement that Jesus is the Word of God who is one with God. *God is free to express who God is as this human being, and has actually done so.* Jesus is the self-expression and self-giving of God in love. And that has immense implications for us. The Prologue says, **'From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace'** (1:16), and that note of abundance is sounded again and again all through the Gospel: abundance of life, wine, water, food, light, truth, joy, love, and the Holy Spirit—given, says Jesus, **'without measure'** (3:34).

Our access to all this is very simple: we are invited to trust Jesus. As the Prologue says, **'To all who received him, who believed (trusted) in his name (in who he is), he gave power to become children of God.'** (The Greek word translated 'believe' also means 'trust', and scholars agree that in our culture it is best to think of it primarily as 'trust', without losing the meaning of 'believe' and 'have faith'.) Later, John addresses us readers, and sums up the whole purpose of his Gospel by saying that he has written it **'so that you may come to trust/believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through trusting/believing you may have life in his name'** - life in a deep, trusting relationship with him.

Every chapter of John's Gospel is concerned with who Jesus is, and this focus on his identity reaches its greatest intensity in his own **'I am'** statements: **'I am; do not be afraid!'** he says, as he comes to his disciples walking on the water of the lake (6:20); **'I am the bread of life'** (6:35); **'I am the light of the world'** (8:12); **'Before Abraham was, I am'** (8:58); **'I am the good shepherd'** (10:11); **'I am the resurrection and the life'** (11:25)—and there are more .

The greatest depths of who Jesus is are opened up in the Farewell Discourses at the Last Supper as he prepares his disciples for his death: **'I am the way, and the truth, and the life'** (14:6); and, deepest of all, is that final prayer in John 17, where we not only get a glimpse of his relationship of truth and love with his Father but also, amazingly, are invited to share fully in that truth and love through our trust in him.

Yet, right from the first chapter, John also prepares us for the death of Jesus, for what we are especially concentrating on today, Good Friday. When John the Baptist sees Jesus he cries out, **'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'** (1:29) Jesus is later crucified while the Passover lambs are being killed. Time after time during his public ministry he speaks of this **'hour'** to which his life is oriented; and his **'I am'** statements are often connected with his death: **'I am the**

bread of life ... the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh' (6:35, 51); **'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.'** (10:11)

Again, we find the greatest depths are opened up in the Farewell Discourses at the Last Supper, and the key to them is in their headline statement: **'Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.'** (13:1). The key is love. As he says later, **'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'** (15:13) And he has already made clear that there is no limit to who his friends can be, with whom he can have a relationship of trust, truth, and love. We even read in John 12: **"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."** He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.' (12:12) He has been sent, as we are sent, to love the world (3:16), to love people, and his final prayer in John 17 pours out to his Father his desire for unity, in truth, trust, and love, with his Father and with us, for the sake of the whole world. (The Greek word for world, *kosmos*, comes 16 times in that prayer.)

So it is not surprising that, when we come to the final act of his life on the first Good Friday—his arrest, trial, and crucifixion—there is a massive emphasis on who Jesus is. John underlines it in his arrest, when there are no less than three **'I am'**s. In his trial, Pilate's first question is, **'Are you the King of the Jews?'** (18:33), and he follows up with the question in our reading, **"So you are a king?"**

The response of Jesus shifts the focus from power to truth. **"You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."** Here in the public sphere, facing the political, military, and religious authorities, Jesus does not speak of love or of prayer, but of truth. Truth in the public sphere is one of the most urgent and challenging issues in our world now.

The response of Pilate is to ask, **"What is truth?"** We do not know in what tone of voice that was said. A genuine question? A cynical or scornful one? But however it was meant, in the light of the rest of the Gospel of John, as readers we know that, faced with Jesus, this is the wrong question. The right question is: Who is truth? Pilate had ordered a great many crucifixions, and on this day there were three more. But the distinctive thing about this one was who was on the cross in the centre. That was where something uniquely important, a world-transforming event, was happening. But even to say 'something' was happening is to make Pilate's mistake. This event was above all about 'someone' happening, someone who was, and is, utterly at one with God and utterly at one with human beings, with each one of us.

II Humiliation and Crucifixion

- a) Hymn 184 Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
- b) Introduction to reading
- c) Reading: John 19:8-22
- d) Address
- e) Sung Psalm 69 (extracts)
- f) Silence

Introduction to Reading II

John Chapter 19 begins with the humiliation of Jesus. Pilate has him flogged, a brutal beating with a whip weighted with metal. Then the soldiers press a sharp crown of thorns on to his head, put a purple robe over his flogging wounds, jeer at him, **‘Hail, King of the Jews!’**, and strike him on the face. Pilate shows the priests and the police this beaten, humiliated man, saying, **‘Here is the man!’**, and they shout **‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’** When Pilate says **‘I can find no case against him’**, they say that according to their law he should die because of who he claimed to be: **‘... because he has claimed to be the Son of God.’** Who Jesus is remains central.

Our reading takes up the story from there.

Reading II

8 Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. 9 He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. 10 Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" 11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." 12 From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

13 When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. 14 Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" 15 They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?"

The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." 16 Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; 17 and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. 18 There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. 19 Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

Address II Humiliation and Crucifixion

Pilate again, from the standpoint of readers of John, asks the wrong question, **“Where are you from?”** In the Gospel of John, as in the other gospels, the most important thing about the origins of Jesus is that he is from God, that he has been sent by his Father. So the question should be ‘Who are you from?’ And this is implied by what Jesus says, **“You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above...”**

Earlier Jesus has not only said he is from God his Father, but even that he is completely united with his Father. **‘The Father and I’,** he says, **‘are one.’** (10:30), and, a little later, **‘... the Father is in me, and I am in the Father’** (10:38). This is essential for beginning to grasp what happened on that first Good Friday in the crucifixion of Jesus. *Who Jesus is, in his relationship to God and to us, is utterly crucial.*

Our reading has described the actual crucifixion, the nailing of Jesus to the cross, in just one sentence, and even in that sentence the two men crucified with him are also included: **‘There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.’** What, among those three, is unique about Jesus, so that now, two thousand years later, we are especially remembering him?

That is the question to which a very remarkable poem gives a response. The author of the poem is Denise Levertov, who is for me the most profoundly Christian poet in English of the twentieth century—only rivalled, perhaps, by the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh. (Levertov’s poem is quoted in full in my commentary on the Gospel of John.) The poem is called “On a Theme from Julian’s Chapter XX”. That title refers to chapter 20 of ‘Revelations of Divine Love’ by Julian of Norwich, the 14th Century woman of prayer, who had a series of visions of the passion and death of Christ, and spent many years reflecting on their meaning.

Levertov’s poem has two quotations from Julian’s ‘Revelations of Divine Love’. The first is *‘the oneing/ with the Godhead’*, meaning the uniting, or union, of Jesus with his Father and the Spirit, his being completely ‘at one’ with them. The second is *‘Every sorrow and desolation/ He saw, and sorrowed in kinship.’* That is about his uniting with us, with all human beings.

Here is the poem.

“On a Theme from Julian’s Chapter XX”

Six hours outstretched in the sun, yes,
hot wood, the nails, blood trickling
into the eyes, yes—
but the thieves on their neighbor crosses
survived till after the soldiers
had come to fracture their legs, or longer.
Why single out the agony? What’s
a mere six hours?
Torture then, torture now,
the same, the pain’s the same,
immemorial branding iron,
electric prod.
Hasn’t a child
dazed in the hospital ward they reserve
for the most abused, known worse?
This air we’re breathing,
these very clouds, ephemeral billows
languid upon the sky’s
moody ocean, we share
with women and men who’ve held out
days and weeks on the rack—
and in the ancient dust of the world
what particles
of the long tormented,
what ashes.

But Julian’s lucid spirit leapt
to the difference:
perceived why no awe could measure
that brief day’s endless length,
why among all the tortured
One only is “King of Grief.”
The oneing, she saw, *the oneing*
with the Godhead opened Him utterly
to the pain of all minds, all bodies
—sands of the sea, of the desert—
from first beginning
to last day. The great wonder is
that the human cells of His flesh and bone
didn’t explode
when utmost Imagination rose
in that flood of knowledge. Unique

in agony, Infinite strength, Incarnate,
empowered Him to endure
inside of history,
through those hours when he took to Himself
the sum total of anguish and drank
even the lees of that cup:

within the mesh of the web, Himself
woven within it, yet seeing it,
seeing it whole. *Every sorrow and desolation*
He saw, and sorrowed in kinship.

—Denise Levertov, *Breathing the Water*, 68–69

We can ask, ‘What was happening on the cross?’ And that does make some sense. But at the heart of the profound wisdom of these two women, Julian of Norwich and Denise Levertov, as they open up the meaning of this event, its uniqueness and its embracing importance, is the way they change the question I have just asked. The question should be: ‘Who was happening on the cross?’ *Jesus Christ, utterly one with God, and utterly one with us: this is who was happening on the cross.* This was the once and for all event that we celebrate today.

Let me attempt an illustration—which is bound to be inadequate, but which I hope will help to begin to take in this overwhelming event.

In South Africa, apartheid happened to Nelson Mandela, and he suffered decades of imprisonment for opposing it. But Nelson Mandela also happened to apartheid. It probably saved South Africa from a massive bloodbath that, through those years in prison, Mandela became the sort of person who could risk negotiating the end of apartheid with F W De Klerk, and had the moral and political authority to envision South Africa as a rainbow nation—even though many of his supporters thought violence was the only realistic way.

Just as apartheid happened to Mandela, and Mandela happened to apartheid and changed it, so *suffering, sin, evil, and death all happened to Jesus, culminating in his crucifixion; but Jesus also happened to suffering, sin, evil, and death, and changed them.*

The realism of the cross does not involve closing our eyes to the appalling reality of suffering, sin, evil, and death, as Denise Levertov describes it—the branding iron, the electric prod, the abused child, ‘women and men who’ve held out/days and weeks on the rack’. We acknowledge all that, and far, far more. We only have to watch the news.

But the realism of the cross is also the reality of who Jesus Christ is, utterly one with God and utterly one with us. And that means that suffering, sin, evil, and death do not have the last word. Jesus Christ, the first Word, is also, in person, the last, decisive Word—and we can begin to live in that truth right now, with him, as his followers.

That is news as well, good news, on Good Friday.

III Love at the Cross

- a) Hymn 147 My song is love unknown (omit *4, *6)
- b) Introduction to reading
- c) Reading: John 19:25b-27
- d) Address
- e) Music
- f) Silence

Introduction to Reading III

Only in the Gospel of John do we have the deeply moving and quite momentous event that our next reading describes. The humiliated, crucified Jesus, as he hangs on the cross, creates a new household, a new community, bringing together under one roof his mother and his beloved disciple.

Reading III

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." 27 Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

Address III Love at the Cross

What an event!

Four women and one man at the foot of the cross.

Among them is the mother of Jesus, who in this Gospel is never named. I think this may be because we are all meant to identify with her. We think of Jesus saying in Mark's Gospel: **'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'** (Mark 3:35; cf. Matthew 12:50); and in Luke's Gospel: **'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it'** (Luke 8:21).

The mother of Jesus has appeared once before in John's Gospel, in the second chapter, at Cana in Galilee, before Jesus begins his public ministry. There she is responsible for Jesus doing his first 'sign'. And what a sign! It is a sign that immediately performs what has just been said about Jesus in the Prologue: **'From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.'** When the wine runs out at a wedding, he changes huge quantities of water into very good wine. It is a sign of celebration, joy, and abundant, vibrant life. There are few happier events than a good

wedding. That wedding at Cana is the most striking possible contrast to the scene on Good Friday—symbolised by the best wine and the vinegar. But even there at Cana, amidst all the celebration, there is a note anticipating the crucifixion, when Jesus says to his mother, **‘My hour has not yet come’** (2:4).

The man at the foot of the cross is the disciple Jesus loved, who at the Last Supper had reclined on the bosom, the breast, of Jesus—just as the final verse of the Prologue says that the place where Jesus is is on the bosom, the breast, of God his Father—or, as the NRSV translation beautifully puts it, **‘close to the Father’s heart’**. This is the ultimate chain of love, the flow of divine love, into which we too are invited: from the Father, through Jesus, to us—and back again. The beloved disciple, whose core identity is described simply as being loved by Jesus, is also not named in this Gospel. I think the reason is the same as with his mother: we are all meant to identify with him. The core identity of each one of us is that we are loved by Jesus, and can live confidently trusting in that reality.

So, now Jesus is on the cross. He has already said at the Last Supper: **‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’** (15:12). He is laying down his life in love, and what does he do? *He forms a community of love.* There is the strongest possible connection between the death of Jesus and the community we are part of. To enter into the reality of the crucifixion of Jesus, as we are doing on Good Friday, is to find ourselves invited by Jesus into a community of the deepest possible love. It is a love that is always on offer, freely given, without us needing to do anything at all except trust in the one who gives it. It is a love that gives us a fresh start every day. It is at the heart of our baptism. It is at the heart of Holy Communion, the Eucharist, which we will soon be receiving.

Here on the cross Jesus speaks in love to the mother he loves and the disciple he loves, and he creates a new family of love: **“Woman, here is your son.”... “Here is your mother.”** It is a family that crosses generations, that is male and female, and that unites his birth family, the family into which he was born, with the wider family of all who trust and love him. There are no boundaries to this love. Earlier he had said: **‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself’**, on which the author of the Gospel comments: **‘He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die’** (12:32-33). Now he has been lifted up from the earth on the cross, and that process of attracting people into a community of love, centred on him, has begun with two of the people dearest to him, his mother and the beloved disciple. That strange attraction into the love of the crucified Jesus has been happening ever since, century after century, and is still continuing all round the world; and here today, in Bury St Edmunds, we too are part of it.

There is a lovely touch in John’s writing that is not as clear in English as it is in Greek. John writes, **‘And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home’**. The word for ‘take’, *lambanein*, can also be translated as ‘receive’. This is an extraordinarily important word in the Gospel of John. It comes twice in the Prologue.

The first time is about the beginning of our life in the family community around Jesus: ‘... **to all who received him, who believed/trusted in his name** [in who he is], **he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.**’ This is the primary identity we are given by Jesus: not being male or female, black or white, rich or poor, intellectually able or disabled, neuro-typical or neuro-divergent, British or non-British. It is our primary identity of being beloved disciples, as much a part of his family as his mother, and each of us called by name.

The second time it comes in the Prologue is: ‘**From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.**’ Life in this family continues to be a life of receiving, from the ongoing love and generosity of Jesus, grace upon grace upon grace upon grace... This never ends, but is continually fresh and new.

As if that is not enough, here, in what Jesus does on the cross, there is a further dimension of receiving. It is about receiving each other. As we reflected yesterday evening, when Jesus teaches the meaning of what he has just done in washing the feet of his disciples he tells them, ‘**you also ought to wash one another’s feet.**’ (13:14) But that is not all. In the climax of his teaching he follows that with an astonishing revelation: ‘**Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.**’ (13:20)

So now, on the cross, Jesus is ‘sending’ his mother to his beloved disciple to create a new family community. If we take seriously what he said earlier we are to understand that the beloved disciple, in receiving her is also receiving both Jesus himself and his Father. Where there is this sort of love, receiving each other in love, there is God, there is Jesus. Jesus gives himself and his Father to us through each other.

So, when we ‘happen’ to each other in acts of loving service, and in welcoming each other in love and hospitality, there we find ourselves receiving Jesus and his Father. Who is it that Jesus is sending to us? Who is being sent to our households? Who is being sent to our church community? Those are just some of the deep and vital questions with which we are faced on Good Friday .

IV "It is finished"

- a) Hymn 157i When I survey the wondrous cross
- b) Introduction to reading
- c) Reading: John 19:28-30
- d) Address
- e) Music
- f) Silence

Introduction to Reading IV

Jesus now suffers and dies. The plain, clear testimony of all the Gospels is that Jesus suffered and died. In John's Gospel, as he hung nailed to the cross, Jesus also suffered thirst and was given sour wine, vinegar. He said "**It is finished**", stopped breathing, and died. There are other levels of meaning in this passage, which we will try to open up, but it is essential to be completely clear that Jesus suffered and died. Let us listen to John's testimony.

Reading IV

28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), "I am thirsty." 29 A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. 30 When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Address IV

John never lets us forget *who* is on the cross at the centre of the three being crucified. We heard earlier Julian of Norwich and Denise Levertov going to the heart of this unique, singular reality, the reality of Jesus: his utter unity with God and with all humanity. Here, in this passage, the relationship with God is suggested by saying that '**Jesus knew that all was now finished**', and that what he said was a fulfilment of scripture. His relationship with us is there in his cry, '**I am thirsty**', and then, decisively, in his death. He was mortal and died. We are mortal and die.

That cry of thirst echoes Psalm 69 (some of which we heard sung earlier), where the psalmist, suffering terribly, says, '**I am weary with my crying, my throat is parched... Many are those who would destroy me... for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink...**'.

Yet that psalm is also, through all the suffering, centred on God: **‘It is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that shame has covered my face... It is zeal for your house that has consumed me** [that has already been quoted by John in his telling of the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus, where he also speaks for the first time of Jesus being ‘raised from the dead’-2:22; and Psalm 69 goes on to insist even more emphatically that it is not suffering or death that have the last word, but God:) ... **in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me. With your faithful help rescue me from sinking into the mire... I will praise the name of God with a song, I will magnify him with thanksgiving... Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive... Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them...**’

That radical trust in God is in line with the whole of John’s Gospel and with the other Gospels for a very simple, obvious reason: they are testifying to the death of Jesus in the light of his resurrection. John especially tries to testify, simultaneously, to Jesus as both one with God and one with us. This means that he tells the story of Jesus both from a pre-resurrection standpoint, more than once showing Jesus in anguish, weeping, or deeply disturbed (11: ; 12: ; 13:), and frequently pointing forward to the crucifixion; and also, at the same time, never letting readers forget that suffering and death do not have the last word: resurrection does, because God does. But, as Julian and Levertov both perceive, who Jesus uniquely is does not lessen the suffering of Jesus, it intensifies it. Remember the lines of Levertov:

But Julian’s lucid spirit leapt
to the difference:
perceived why no awe could measure
that brief day’s endless length,
why among all the tortured
One only is “King of Grief.”
*The oneing, she saw, the oneing
with the Godhead opened Him utterly
to the pain of all minds, all bodies...*
Unique
in agony, Infinite strength, Incarnate,
empowered Him to endure
inside of history,
through those hours when he took to Himself
the sum total of anguish and drank
even the lees of that cup:

within the mesh of the web, Himself
woven within it, yet seeing it,
seeing it whole. *Every sorrow and desolation
He saw, and sorrowed in kinship.*

He 'took to Himself/the sum total of anguish and drank/even the lees [the dregs] of that cup.' John too has Jesus taking a bitter drink. As we hear Jesus cry '**I am thirsty**', we think back to him in conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. There, '**Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."**' (4:13-14) Jesus is both thirsty and thirst-quencher. He wants a drink, and he also wants to give the water of eternal life. He turns water into the best wine, and himself drinks vinegar. He calls Lazarus out of the tomb, and he goes the way of the cross to his tomb.

Thirst and other suffering, sin, evil, and death happen to him. But he also happens to thirst, suffering, sin, evil, and death. And, in that happening, both sides are essential: his 'oneing with the Godhead', and him being fully human, mortal flesh as we are.

'**When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished."**' The culminating event has happened and is complete, finished. The account of the Last Supper began by saying that Jesus 'having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end'. That Greek word for 'end' is *telos*, and in our three-verse reading there are no less than three verbs from that root: '**Jesus knew that all was now finished-*tetelestai***', '**he said (in order to fulfil - *teleiōthē* - the scripture), "I am thirsty"**', and the last word of Jesus, just one word in Greek, is, again, *tetelestai* - '**It is finished**', completed. And at the culmination of the Last Supper, Jesus pours out his ultimate desire to his Father, that his followers might be '**completely one**' - *teteleiōmenoi eis hen* - united in love with him and his Father, and with each other, for the sake of the world he was sent to love. What is finished, completed, fulfilled, on the cross is the ultimate work of love. But this is a work that is embodied in and identified with this particular person, with the one who is on the cross.

So the way this love is received is by receiving this person. As the Prologue says: '**To all who received him, who believed/trusted in his name/in who he is, he gave power to become children of God**' - part of a new family of love, with his mother, with the disciple he loved, and with all the others who are loved by him and who trust and love him.

'**Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.**' He died.

V Spirit, Blood, and Water

- a) Introduction to reading
- b) Reading: John 19:28-37
- c) Address
- d) Silence

Introduction to Reading V

In the reading we are about to hear, we listen again to the account of Jesus dying, but this time, in the reflection on it, we will try to go deeper into the description of his actual death. Then we hear about the soldier piercing his side, and the flow of blood and water from it. What might that mean?

Reading V

28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), "I am thirsty." 29 A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. 30 When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

31 Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. 32 Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. 33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. 35 (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) 36 These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken." 37 And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."

Address V Spirit, Blood, and Water

‘Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.’ That can mean simply: he stopped breathing and died. But often in John the plain sense also has a deeper sense, and down the centuries many interpreters have found deeper meaning here. I am among them. The translation, **‘gave up his spirit’**, does not give us the literal meaning. The Greek for **‘gave up’** is *paredōken*, which can mean that, but more literally, and here, I think, far better, is translated, **‘handed over’** or **‘passed on’**. It is the verb used for Judas handing over Jesus when he betrays him, and it is also used for handing over or passing on tradition. The translation **‘his spirit’** is literally **‘the s/Spirit’**—there is no ‘his’ in the Greek—and this is a crucial difference, because **‘the s/Spirit’** can mean not just the last human breath of Jesus but also the Holy Spirit, Spirit with a capital S. The King James authorised version, that will soon be sung in our Good Friday Liturgy, is better on this. It says that Jesus **‘gave up the ghost’**, which allows for us to understand, ‘the Holy Ghost’, the Holy Spirit.

I remember taking a long walk with the great English scholar of the New Testament and of the early centuries of Christianity, Frances Young, when I was deciding how to understand this verse in my commentary on the Gospel of John. It was very encouraging to hear her final verdict: Yes, it can be understood as the first giving of the Holy Spirit by Jesus. What that means is that this ending, this death, is at the same time not only an ending but also a new beginning. In the opening chapter of this Gospel, John the Baptist testifies: **‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him...’**. So all through what follows we are to understand that the Spirit and Jesus are inseparable—until this moment of death, when he hands the Spirit over. To whom? Obviously to the women and the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross. But why stop at them? There is also that soldier.

Our reading goes on to place great emphasis on the piercing of the side of Jesus by one of the soldiers who had executed him, and says, **‘... and at once blood and water came out.’**

Think of the fundamental importance of blood in the teaching of Jesus about the Eucharist after the feeding of the five thousand in John Chapter 6: **‘So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them...”** This is the life-changing mystery into which we are drawn by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and by every celebration of Holy Communion.

And think of the immense importance of water in this Gospel, not only in the conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman in Chapter 4, but even more so in the climactic moment of the Festival of Booths in Jerusalem, when Jesus dramatically cries out: 37 **‘On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was**

standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, 38 and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" 39 Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.' There we have thirst and thirst-quenching, and in John's Gospel the crucifixion is above all the event in which Jesus is glorified. And the Spirit is identified as breath, *pneuma* in Greek; and also as water, *hudōr*, given by Jesus. And both these, *pneuma* and *hudōr*, Spirit and water, figure in our reading: the Spirit is given by Jesus through his death.

What is happening here?

This is nothing less than a God-sized event, soon to be completed in the resurrection of Jesus.

Suffering, sin, evil and death have happened to Jesus. But Jesus has happened to suffering, sin, evil and death. This is about *who* is happening through what is happening. On Easter Sunday the truth of this God-sized event is revealed to the disciples. God has acted in raising the Jesus from the dead, and Jesus appears in person, bearing the marks of his crucifixion. He, the crucified and risen Jesus, happens to his disciples in a new way. And this new happening has at its heart the giving of the Holy Spirit, and the giving to those disciples, and to all of his followers ever since, our core vocation, our calling, our deepest meaning and purpose.

Listen to it: **'Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.'**

We are sent as Jesus was sent. That is our vocation. We receive Jesus and his Father. We receive each other. We receive the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is given to lead us in our learning, into more and more truth (and the simplest, most direct way to begin receiving the Spirit is to trust Jesus and what he says—as he says, **'The words that I have spoken are Spirit and life'** - 6:63). The Spirit is given to draw us deeper and deeper into prayer and worship, modelled on that astonishing prayer of Jesus in John 17, with which we began these meditations. And the Spirit is given to encourage us daily to live lives of inspired loving as beloved disciples of Jesus.

We are sent as Jesus was sent, to serve and to love: to happen to each other and to our world as Jesus happened in his time. And on Good Friday we especially take to heart that, as he was sent into darkness, so are we. For us, the darkness is in ourselves; and there is darkness in the church; and the world is place of great darkness.

But, in the light of the cross, the resurrection, and the giving of the Holy Spirit, we can be utterly confident that whatever the darkness, whatever the suffering, the sin, the evil, the dying and death, he is with us in our darkness as our teacher, our light, our friend, our shepherd, our way, our truth, our resurrection and our life, our saviour, our joy, our love, and, as Thomas cried out in the culminating truth of the Gospel, **'My Lord and my God!'** (20:28).

'Love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.'

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