

Good Friday

Three Hours' Devotion

*Seeing God Through Rainy Eyes**

St Thomas, Fifth Avenue, New York

2019



*The Man of Sorrows in the Arms of the Virgin**

The Rev'd Elaine Farmer

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Notes on the Three Hours' Devotion

This service is customarily held on Good Friday from noon to 3pm, the hours of Our Lord's Passion. It is not a new service having been instituted by the Jesuits after the an earthquake in Lima in 1687. Within the Church of England, the first observance appears to have been in the 1860s; the first officially recorded service was at St Paul's Cathedral in London in 1876. A contemplative service, it usually involves seven sequential sermons on the seven last words of Jesus from the Cross. The order is customarily hymn (or music), collect, lesson, sermon, silence.

The Three Hours' Devotion, despite being offered for the last 350-odd years, is nevertheless considered a relatively new addition to the Church's devotional year, and not one of Good Friday's central, essential services. They are Mattins, Litany, the Ante-Communion Service and Evensong. There is no celebration of the Eucharist on Good Friday, because the Church was to fast, acknowledging Jesus' words as recorded in Luke 5:35: *The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.* The Three Hours' Devotion, with its more hortatory or preaching content, is better considered an extended meditation, a small retreat from the world in order to reflect on the life of Christ, his gift of renewed life to us, and our personal responses thereto.

One of the great commentators on Church of England liturgical practice, The Rev'd Percy Dearmer (1867-1936), was very particular in what he had to say about this service. It must be said that this reverend gentleman was very forthright in his opinions on all matters ceremonial and was much given to swingeing criticism and dictatorial direction. Of The Three Hours' Devotion he has this to say:

Care should be taken in those churches where the Three Hours' service is held, to mark the fact that it is not a liturgical service, but rather a sort of meditation, which is strictly subsidiary to the proper Good Friday offices. For this and for other reasons it is better for the conductor to wear his cassock, gown, and tippet, as he would for a mission service. Of course he would not in any case wear a stole. It is better to let one or two men at the back of the church lead the hymn-singing, and to dispense with boys: certainly it is not an occasion for a surpliced choir.¹

Certainly our devotional services have moved beyond The Rev'd Percy's times, attitudes and strictures but his care to provide an occasion for quiet meditation is worth emulating.

MEF

The Three Hours' Devotion was last held at St Paul's Manuka in 2005. We are reproducing below the texts of sermons delivered on Good Friday 2019 by The Reverend Elaine Farmer during the Three Hours' Devotion at St Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, New York. If you wish, an audio version of the Three Hours' Devotion, music and sermons, can be accessed online by clicking [here](#).^{*} The text has been specifically formatted as an e-publication. We recommend viewing it at 100% resolution or higher. An asterisk indicates an internet link, including for the music clips provided at at the end of each sermon.

¹ Percy Dearmer, *The Parson's Handbook*. Henry Frowde, London, 1909, pp. 526-527.

I

*Jesus said, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.**

On Christmas Day hope was born. On Good Friday we humans tried our best to kill it. On Christmas Day we sing, 'O little town of Bethlehem ... the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight'. On Good Friday we sing, 'Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended ... by foes derided, by thine own rejected'.

Which makes this a confrontational day. Year after year, we come to meditate on Jesus' words at Calvary and the first ones are sobering: "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*" but we do know what we do. We do. Much written about this day sometimes seems to trade only in theological '-isms' and spiritualised comfort but 'there is no comfort to be had from soft words spoken at a safe distance'.¹ The deeds of this day are not safe, nor far away. Perforce, as Christians, we gather at the Cross – now, this day – to face 'the tragedy of the murder of God'.² To say again, "O Lamb of God, that takes away the sins of the world, grant us thy peace. Tell us again of your forgiveness!"

Forgiveness, the gift of this day, comes as holy blood. A life for life. The self-gift of God and there is no other gift that could give us the forgiveness we need.³ For we are our own disease and we cannot cure ourselves.⁴

Because of this gift we dare to name this day good. I say 'dare' because the world professes not to understand that 'good', caring more for deeds than for mystery. The world sees only a coarse cross and sharp-pointed nails and dripping blood. It hears only the discordant clash of hammer on steel, the anguished cries, and the wails of the women. It does not hear a dying man whisper of forgiveness. The world hears only incomprehensible words. Sees only death and shame. Not life and grace. Nor does it sense the aching love of God seeking to ease human hearts in search of understanding – of themselves and of their world. The world does not sense a God haunted by us,⁵ as we are haunted by God's transcendent glory, infusing the world with beauty and mystery.

When I was a very new Christian we lived here in New York and were parishioners down the road at All Saints East 60th Street which many of you will know began life as a chapel of this great church.⁶ For me, the first Good Friday there was a confusing assault of this day's horror and blessing. A day for 'rainy eyes', to borrow from Shakespeare. For the first time I heard The Reproaches sung, and God's cry through the prophet Micah: "*O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!*".* And I remember the torment and the bliss of the choir's bursting forth in "a kind of wailing melody ... a gush of lamentable harmony:⁷ Ἅγιος ὁ Θεός, Ἅγιος ἰσχυρός, Ἅγιος ἀθάνατος, ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς. Holy God ... Holy and Strong ... Holy Immaculate Mercy!

Thomas Hardy said, 'If way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst'.* That was what I discovered at All Saints – the wail of a haunted God –and the task for this good day. To stand at Calvary and hear the whispers of the Christ calling us to face ourselves. To face truth and name sin. To look at the worst of which we are capable. To be silenced by the words, "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*"

I want to read you from a poem by Australian Bruce Dawe that gives a stark picture of what we face. Called 'And a Good Friday was had by all',* it's about that Nazarene who made it easy for the soldiers to do their grisly job, quietly lying down on the crossed timber:

– not like the ones
who kick up a fuss so you can
do your block and take it out on them.

Silenus held the spike steady and I let fly
with the sledge-hammer,
not looking on the downswing
trying hard not to hear
over the women's wailing the bones give way
the iron shocking the dumb wood.

Orders is orders, I said after it was over
nothing personal you understand – we had a
drill-sergeant once thought he was God but he wasn't
a patch on you

then we hauled on the ropes
and he rose in the hot air
like a diver just leaving the springboard,
arms spread so it seemed
over the whole damned creation
over the big men who must have had it in for him
and the curious ones who'll watch anything if it's free
with only the usual women caring anywhere
and a blind man in tears.

Those arms were spread wide in love for us. Not just for the soldiers who wielded whip and sledge-hammer but for the whole God-haunted sin-riddled world! For the powerful – wielding advantage without care for other people. For the curious – gawking at the misfortunes of others but saying no more than, "thank God that's not me!". For the ones who care and do their best – railing over so much they cannot change. For the disadvantaged powerless – who can change nothing at all. For the indifferent – those who cannot see the misfortunes of others – and don't care. They're with us at Calvary now – in the crowd watching Jesus die, hearing him rasp out those words, "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*". We stand with them, bewildered to be here perhaps but, in faith, knowing Jesus doesn't care which group we belong to because we all fall within those 'arms spread ... over the whole damned creation'. All of us suffering from the same disease: sin.

In his book *The Testament of Mary* Colm Tóibín writes of the communal nature of sin in his description of the faces in the crowd watching Jesus struggle to die:

their jaws ... set and their eyes bright with excitement. There was dark vacancy in the faces of some, and they wanted this vacancy filled with cruelty, with pain and with the sound of someone crying out. Only something vicious would satisfy them now ... some vast satisfaction that could come only with shrieks of pain and torn flesh and broken bones.⁸

My God, that's a gruesome picture! It sounds suspiciously like the herd instinct of the animal world at work, like hens attacking – as they do – the weak one among them, pecking it to death. It's a tragically stark portrayal of human sin which has driven tyranny, massacres and empire-building throughout history. Not just the religious crusades and inquisitions, but the callous slaughter of millions in so many places: Nazi Germany; Stalin's Russia; Mao's China; Pol Pot's Cambodia; Vietnam; El Salvador; Afghanistan; Iraq. The ongoing mayhem in the Middle East. The barbarities of Islamic State and the Taliban. Psychopaths mowing down innocent people – in Europe, here in America, in Australia, in Christchurch, New Zealand. Sin-soaked human cruelty comes in many other forms. Lust for power, lust for gold, lust for its own sake, hatred, domestic violence, sexual abuse, discrimination, segregation, racism.

And still Jesus says, "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*".

The soldiers knew what they were doing – executing. The crowd knew what it was doing – mocking their sometime hero, relishing his suffering. Jesus knew what he was doing – imploring God to forgive. And the rest of us – at Calvary this day? Jesus' forgiveness is a call to repentance, which simply means turning back to God. We have trouble accepting that forgiveness. We're like Macbeth, agonising, "Wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'? I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' stuck in my throat!".* We trip over our pride but forgiveness can be ours – even when we have intended to err – if we accept the offer Jesus made. A life for our life.

On Christmas Day hope was born and a star hung over Bethlehem. On Good Friday the heavens darkened and blotted out the stars but a whisper floated in the darkness: "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*". Hope lingers in the darkness.

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JS Bach, Erbarme dich, *St Matthew Passion*, (BWV 244)*

References

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- ¹ Black, S. *All That Remains. A Life In Death*. Doubleday. London 2018, p. 4. Professor Dame Sue Black attributes this statement to Fiona Douglas, University Chaplain, the University of Dundee.
- ² Benson, R.H. *Papers of a Pariah*. Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1913, p. 78.
- ³ Brueggemann, W. *Finally Comes the Poet. Daring Speech for Proclamation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 31.
- ⁴ Holloway, R. *Crossfire*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 101.
- ⁵ The expression 'haunted by humans' comes from the closing statements by Death of Leisel in *The Book Thief*. The character Death names Leisel as the only person he would be sorry to gather to himself. Zusak, M. *The Book Thief*. Alfred A. Knopf, Revised Edition, 2007.
- ⁶ ie St Thomas, Fifth Avenue, NYC.
- ⁷ Benson, R.H. *Papers of a Pariah*, Longmans, Green, & Co. London, 1913, pp. 82-83 selectively.
- ⁸ Tóibín, C. *The Testament of Mary*. Picador, Sydney, 2012, p. 69.

II

And Jesus said unto him, *Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.**

On Christmas Day hope was born. On Good Friday we humans tried our best to kill it. But hope lingers. Only now at the place they called The Skull, it battles bitterness.

Jesus hung on a cross and two other men were nailed to crosses on either side of him. There were probably other crosses around, long-dead rotting bodies left untouched— touching a corpse incurred the worst kind of uncleanness – sombre reminders of the power of Rome. Matthew and Mark say the other men were robbers or bandits; Luke, criminals; John says simply *two others*. It's Jesus who has preoccupied the world for two-thousand-odd years but his fate was the same as those other two: public crucifixion as a common criminal, one of society's dross. The shame and humiliation of naked public display a warning to all.

There's no prettying this up. Or spiritualising it away. We post-resurrection people give Jesus numerous noble titles – Lord, Eternal Word, Son of God, Messiah – but, like the others that day, he died a common criminal. Judged so by the law. Accusation. Judgment. Crucifixion. All in a day's work in running the Roman Empire, particularly in troublesome Judaea. Pontius Pilate had to worry about the Emperor breathing down his neck if the locals rebelled – as Judas maybe hoped they would, with Jesus leading as warrior-king.

The Sanhedrin, Judaism's rabbinical legislative court, also wanted stability, not disturbance by a peasant preacher who'd wandered through the land from that dusty no-account village, Nazareth – stirring up the people with his talk of God's love and mercy for even the most wretched in the community. The 'unclean ones' it was their duty as leaders to keep away from the purity of God's Temple. He'd criticised them, the priests and the Pharisees, for the way they carried out their duties! Blaspheming, they thought. Threatening their power!

Caiaphas, the Scribes and the Elders, were likewise affronted, and there was outrage and tearing of robes and more accusations of blasphemy. So they took him to Pilate, dressing up these accusations as treason, throwing down the gauntlet to the might of Rome. They all had positions and status and establishment comfort to protect. And Jesus got in the way. Did any of them actually want Jesus crucified? Pilate seems to have been intrigued and troubled by Jesus but not enough to risk freeing him. The religious leaders would have been fools if they'd thought crucifixion not a possibility. And they weren't fools but they did kick the ball along. A problem out of the way was a problem out of the way.

But what of the other two crucified that day? Tradition names them Good Thief and Bad Thief. The non-canonical Gospel of Nicodemus calls them Dismas – the Good Thief who defended Jesus, and Gestas – the Bad Thief who attacked him. But only the jagged words between these three, as they struggled with dying, really matter. The leaders of the people and the soldiers standing around the foot of the cross were ridiculing Jesus and one thief joined in. Why? He had nothing to defend. He could change nothing. It's a reasonable guess that bitterness and rage had dogged his whole life. Plus self-pity at his powerlessness. Whatever he'd been, he lashed out bitterly against everything that had brought him to this point, convinced it was all somehow someone else's fault, not his responsibility. This man, this Jesus, had been so full of what God thought and didn't think, so full of himself. If he was all he was cracked up to be – this King of the Jews! – then why didn't he do something about it!

On the other hand, the other thief doesn't seem to have spoken words driven by bitterness, frustration or rage. Maybe he understood the difference between Jesus and himself and, even though dying, was willing to speak up for innocence. To defend Jesus. He understood himself, was probably no more surprised to end up like this than his bitter companion, but he simply shrugged his shoulders acceptingly. A sense told him his crimes were his. He accepted responsibility for his guilt and that justice demanded retribution.

But there's more. Even *in extremis*, this man drew from deep within something the angry first man had lost completely. Hope. "Jesus," he said, "remember me when you come into your kingdom".* It's a remarkable statement because he doesn't demand to be rescued. He asks a man who will soon be dead, to remember him. He trusted that this man's kingdom could not be dismissed as the ravings of a deranged wandering preacher. That about that kingdom, and about this man, there was something of God. And in the midst of cruel human punishment he received a reward with something of God about it. Jesus said to him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise".*

Why didn't Jesus say the same to other man, then consumed by rage at his fate? Jesus knew the scriptures. How Genesis taught that *God created humankind in God's own image ... male and female God created them ... blessed them [and] saw everything ... was very good*.* God doesn't create trash to be ignored. God created humankind to love and be loved. Did Jesus die before he could speak to that unhappy man? Or did he recognise self-loathing and sense the man was beyond reason, or comfort? Did he simply take it for granted the man could hear everything he said? Did he perhaps remember the psalmist's words, *Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit** – and leave it at that? We'll never know. This is just one question among many in the story of Jesus' Passion.

The clash between bitterness and hope going on around Jesus' cross evokes great passion. Is his cross a sign of hope or the death of a dream? We all live somewhere between the hope and bitterness it evoked, chopping and changing when stressful lives makes our hands sweaty as we try to hang on to hope. But, as Christians, we cannot be indifferent to the cross. Atheists claim indifference, though they do so with great passion, and look away from the cross. Agnostics stand uncertain, keeping their distance but unable to look away.

But we, standing with the crowd now, looking up at the cross, we see a man who had acknowledged that desire for power is the way of the world – and of its organised institutions, like our own – but who said "it shall not be so among you".* A man who had taught the paradox that the God with the power to create all things is not a god of indiscriminate overpowering force but of generous self-giving. That the God who gives life, gives along with it, freedom to reject even the very source of that life. We see a man who died to show just how far God will go to love us even when we act like the so-called Bad Thief, and Caiaphas, and Pilate, and everyone else in this sorry business who rejected the Word of God.

And we may see one more thing at the Cross today. I said earlier that history has focused on Jesus but there were three crucified together that day. One person is solitary and an end is an end. Three are company, the beginning of community. Community is memory, history, story. It has future. Community is never perfect so perhaps Jesus' speaking only to the so-called Good Thief was a sign that sin is ever with us and will infect our communities always and we have to deal with it. Perhaps. Whatever the truth of that, there were two voices for hope that dark day on Calvary. Two out of three is enough to be getting on with in building community to become the kingdom of God. Maybe that was Jesus' point.

For where two or three are gathered in his name, he will be there among us.*

There is a man who will not let me sleep,
Each night he comes and trembles by my side;
He cannot be touched yet wind disturbs his hair,
He cannot touch yet his shadow covers me.

I hear him though he does not speak a word,
The sound of something breathing, wind in the trees.
He stretches out both arms as if in pain,
"I come to wound you and to heal the wound".*

Hope waits to learn how we will respond to this call to community, for Christ's sake – and not our own.

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Gabriel Fauré, In Paradisum, *Requiem in D minor*, (Op 48)*

III

Jesus ... saith unto his mother, *Woman, behold thy son!* Then saith he to the disciple, *Behold thy mother!**

On Christmas Day hope was born. On Good Friday we humans tried our best to kill it. But hope was not ready to die. A drop of hope fell from the Cross, and a drop of love, and of pity for humankind, fell with it.

Birthing is the creating of new life through hard work ... God ... brought new life, Gospel life, to birth, stretched for hours on the Cross, autonomy removed by aggressive experts, the Eternal Word reduced to wordless cries, bleeding down into the dark ...¹

The idea that God has given birth is not new. The snippet I've just quoted comes from the 1980s but way back in the 13th century German theologian, philosopher and mystic Meister Eckhardt wrote about what we might call God's super-fecund² birthing creativity: 'What does God do all day long?' he asked. 'God gives birth. From all eternity God lies on a maternity bed giving birth'.

God and Mary both understood birth. God designed the system and Mary became God's partner in the birthing process of new life. She'd been weighed down by the Word of God.³ She remembered 'bleeding down into the dark' in that Bethlehem stable. She remembered a sweet baby, a little boy playing with wood shavings in Joseph's workshop, a strong young man with passionate eyes. She remembered an old man, Simeon, at the Temple, who'd held her startled eyes with his, saying, "*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too*".* And she'd been afraid. She remembered a strange scene on the banks of the River Jordan when that wild-eyed John had baptised her Jesus⁴ and there'd been that voice – from heaven some said – saying, "*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*".⁵

"There's more to this baby," old Simeon had said, "than fresh new life. He is God's sign of salvation, of light, of glory – and plenty will want to snuff out that light!" Now, in this gruesome place outside Jerusalem's walls, it was happening. Mary stood with rainy eyes watching her son's dying, seeing his life drip away, and her soul fractured. Then through his pain and sweat-filled eyes, Jesus saw her and said, "*Woman, behold thy son!*" And to the disciple standing by Mary – *the one whom he loved* – he said, "*Behold thy mother!*".*

What was Jesus doing here? In those ancient days, women were effectively the property of men. Mary was probably by then in her late forties and a widow. Evidence about other children or family is disputed by scholars so she might have had only the charity of her local village synagogue to sustain her.⁶ Jesus would have realised this. Alone and penniless, Mary his mother had no future. Her care given to the beloved disciple, she was given a future. Was this the caring act of a dutiful son? Probably. But did he also intend something more?

A little while ago I proposed the idea that the three crosses on Calvary that first Good Friday give us a kind of community: divinity, human goodness, and human sin. The divinity component – Jesus' promise of forgiveness and paradise – is the agent for change. It offers a different future in community, but as the hope-and-love-filled kingdom of God, not a sinful community of hopelessness and the misuse of power. I wonder whether Jesus' words to Mary and the disciple might have been trying to underscore that idea. Form a community.

Some have said he intended his gesture to mean 'form a church'. I'm not sure. On the one hand, Jesus left no writings to check but appears to have proposed a rejuvenated, enlightened Judaism, not a new church. Matthew says Jesus told Simon Peter, son of John, "*thou shalt be called Cephas – meaning rock – and upon this rock I will build my church*".* But that doesn't necessarily mean an institutional church as we know it. On the other hand, there's Paul who never met Jesus unless you count the Damascus Road vision. It was Paul who wrote, who mixed ancient mystery-religions with authoritative Judaism, who travelled, evangelised, theologised, and politicised Jesus into 'church'.⁷

Perhaps on this point of 'church' or 'community' we are simply left with what T.S. Eliot called 'the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings'.* In which case, I'm tempted to suggest Jesus meant 'form a community' more than 'form a church'.

So, if that was what he intended, did he succeed? In considering that question, we need to spend time with Mary, representative of women in such a community.

We know almost nothing about her. But whatever hard road social custom might have heaped upon her without Jesus' intervention, this woman cannot have been the silenced, demure, submissive and desexualised creature culture and theology have made of her. She had been God's partner in this great divine enterprise of redeeming humankind. "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,*"* she'd told the Archangel Gabriel. This was a real woman who would not have forgotten the wailing of the women whose babies were slaughtered by Herod's soldiers as she and Joseph escaped to Egypt.* A real woman who would be known in one Australian Aboriginal language as 'damagyeena', a mother who mourns for her dead child.⁸ Her voice would be added to the ancient wail from the scriptures: *A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel ... weeping for her children ... [refusing] to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.** A real woman who now stands before us at the Cross, 'pitched past pitch of grief'⁹ Howling, not silent. Rubbing dirt on her hair in mourning, and screaming, "This is my son, my beloved. In him I am well pleased!".

This is a cry that should not be controlled and sentimentalised because in it can be heard the screams of all the anguished mothers and fathers of all the dead babies through the ages from every benighted place where the powerless have been caught in the power games of the mighty. And women have been among those powerless. They still are – in so many places still the property of men. Targets of violence, racism, segregation and discrimination. That is not community. That is not love as Jesus taught. "*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you.*"*

Of course, we need to be careful not to dismiss the comfort the idealised sentimentalised Mary has been to millions of people. But this is not the Mary, partner of God, real woman, who would have been co-founder of Jesus' renewed Judaism and new community. Sadly, 'partner of God' is not a title easily attached in community to women who are marginalised, demeaned, and patronised. 'Real woman' is a title also sadly compromised by the same treatment. Now, staggering towards us here at Calvary, Jesus says, "*Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children*".* But why would we not weep for him? Jesus broke all taboos for women's sake, defending and respecting them. And, we will learn, it will be to a woman, Mary Magdalene, that the Risen Christ will first appear. The disciples will dismiss her, calling hers an idle tale. They will not believe her.

There is a remarkable essay about Jesus and the women by the English theologian and mystery writer Dorothy Sayers. Written in 1946 with the biting title 'The Human-not-quite-Human', it was published in a book tellingly called *Unpopular Opinions*. This is what she wrote:

They had never known a man like this Man ... A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised: who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who ... praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously ... There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature. But we might easily deduce it from His contemporaries, and from His prophets before Him, and from His Church to this day.

Mary's heart fractured that day at Calvary when they crucified her son. Every human community has been fractured by the misuse of power including against women. This is not community as Jesus wanted. "*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them,*" Jesus said, "*and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you*".*

But it is. On Christmas Day Mary gave birth to the hope of the world, the possibility of renewed community as the kingdom of God. But that community, like Mary's heart, lies fractured and in pieces among the skulls and the dry bones on Calvary.

Jewish writer André Schwartz-Bart ended his book on the Holocaust, *The Last of the Just*, with striking words:

It is true one's heart could break in sorrow ... Yesterday, as I stood ... trembling in despair, rooted to the spot, a drop of pity fell from above my face; but there was no breeze in the air, no cloud in the sky ... there was only a presence.¹⁰

While a drop of pity falls from the cross, hope lives and love is real.

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Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, Stabat mater dolorosa, *Stabat Mater**

References

¹ Sara Maitland, 'Ways of Relating', in Loades, A. (ed). *Feminist Theology. A Reader*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1990, pp.148-157. Previously published in *The Way*, 26 February, 1986, pp. 124-133.

² Nerd note: This adjective based on a sentence in McGrath, S.J. *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken*. The Catholic University of American Press, Washington D.C., 2006, p.129: 'The divine is life in the absolute sense, infinite fecundity, overflowing and spilling forth ... Eckhardt expresses the super-fecundity of the divine with the metaphor of the maternity of God ...'

³ As St John of the Cross put it. From a translation of the a poem by St John of the Cross, Romance VIII: 'The Incarnation', vs. 3, also translated as 'the Word lived incarnate in the womb of Mary'.

⁴ Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22, John 1: 31-34.

⁵ Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22.

⁶ Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55-56 refer to James Joses (or Joseph), Jude and Simon as 'brothers' of Jesus. They also mention unnamed sisters. Tradition and doctrine have denied other children as inconsistent with their position on the perpetual virginity of Mary. Mark 3:31-32 refers to Jesus' mother and brothers. Proof positive of other family at the time of the crucifixion cannot be determined.

⁷ 'Paul's originality lies in his conception of the death of Jesus as saving mankind from sin. Instead of seeing Jesus as a messiah of the Jewish type human saviour from political bondage he saw him as a salvation-deity whose atoning death by violence was necessary to release his devotees for immortal life. This view of Jesus' death seems to have come to Paul in his Damascus vision. Its roots lie not in Judaism, but in mystery-religion, with which Paul was acquainted in Tarsus. The violent deaths of Osiris, Attis, Adonis, and Dionysus brought divinization to their initiates. Paul, as founder of the new Christian mystery, initiated the Eucharist, echoing the communion meal of the mystery religions. The awkward insertion of eucharistic material based on I Corinthians 11:23-26 into the Last Supper accounts in the Gospels cannot disguise this, especially as the evidence is that the Jerusalem Church did not practise the Eucharist.' Collier, P.F. 'The Apostle Paul Founder of Christianity', from The Sierra Reference Encyclopedia, http://www.justgivemethetruth.com/founder_of_christianity.htm Last visited 23/1/19.

⁸ This claimed by lexicographer David Astle on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television breakfast show, 5 March 2019.

⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins 'No worst there is none', in *Poems & Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Penguin, 1963, p. 61.

¹⁰ Schwartz-Bart, André. *The Last of the Just*. Trans. by Stephen Becker. Secker & Warburg, London, 1961, p. 409.

IV

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**

On Christmas Day hope was born. On Good Friday we humans tried our best to kill it. Hope now hangs its weary head in the darkening gloom as it fights betrayal.

Jesus hangs on the cross, an abandoned criminal. 'The roar of doom' in his ears.¹ A ridiculed object of disgust. *Despised, rejected, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, struck down by God and afflicted,** says Isaiah in his vision of the servant of God. Where was God? "*Why hast thou forsaken me?*"² It's hard not to hear rage in Jesus' outburst. And a kind of won't-this-ever-end frustration. At the beginning of this torture, there had been a little strength to bear up, but that's all gone. Now each moment's an eternity. And rage erupts, in stark contrast to the quiet acceptance shown to Judas: "*do quickly what you are going to do*".* Or to the long gaze at Peter. Or to the silence which confused and confounded Pilate. Or even to the lack of resistance to the soldiers.

Where was God? *Why hast thou forsaken me?* Psalm 22's opening plea. One scholar suggests the phrase had slipped from liturgical language into the vernacular becoming 'a kind of proverbial saying, expressing religious incomprehension and bewilderment'.³ Which means that, *in extremis*, Jesus resorted to common slang. And these words reek of that kind of authenticity. Of all the last words from the cross attributed to him these seem the most natural, the most wrenched from his soul, the least neat and theologically tidy. The Cry of Dereliction so-called is steeped in a sense of the horror, abandonment and betrayal Jesus must have felt. 'God-haunted' yet 'God-forsaken'.

Betrayal certainly coloured Jesus' last days—and his dying. We think first of Judas. Jesus' friend. Possibly the cleverest of the disciples. Arguably the most complex. Judas who'd left the upper room where Jesus and his friends had celebrated the Last Supper. It is easy to imagine Jesus watching from a window as Judas hurried away along the dark street. Watching with rainy eyes, knowing his friend would betray him. *You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour,** it says in Leviticus but Judas did just that. He betrayed Jesus to the chief priests, accepted their thirty pieces of silver,⁴ came with the crowd, and the soldiers who were to arrest Jesus, and kissed him – who still called him friend. *And, John tells us, it was night.** Darkness descending on Jesus' soul.

It wasn't just Judas. There was Peter too. History has branded Judas the Betrayer but Peter also was guilty. Many would prefer to call Peter coward rather than betrayer but the qualification doesn't really get us far: betrayal is betrayal. Weak and impulsive where Judas was strong and calculating, Peter could only see danger for himself and vociferously rejected accusations at high priest Annas' house that he was an associate of Jesus.⁵ Three times he denied it: "*I do not know what you are talking about!*"⁶ And the cock crew as Jesus had said it would. Only Luke adds the poignant little line, *the Lord turned and looked at Peter.** Did Peter's heart fracture at that moment? Did he blush with shame? He certainly wept.* If he blushed, that's what might make him more attractive to us than Judas is.⁷ I think Jesus probably gazed at him with the same love and pity with which he'd watched Judas leave the upper room the night before.

And there'd been Gethsemane, when Jesus wanted his disciples awake while he prayed – and, not seeing the grief with which he struggled, they slept.⁸ And when the soldiers arrested him – *all the disciples deserted him and fled.** Now at the cross, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee were there. Some other women stood by – the ones who had followed him from Galilee, Matthew says.⁹ Mark adds the name Salome to the group, Luke mentions 'acquaintances including women'. Those gospels say they looked on from a distance. John at least has the Marys near the cross, with the disciple whom he loved standing by his mother. It isn't a lot of detail and, as one scholar notes, 'identifications are easy to conjure but impossible to ascertain'.¹⁰ But it seems a scant few of all the crowds that had flocked around him through the land, and just a few days before hailed him as he entered Jerusalem, "*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!*".¹¹

Betrayal hurts. It's really only someone you love, admire, respect, value greatly – even, sometimes, trust – who can betray you. "*A sword will pierce your own soul,*"* Simeon had told Mary. Now Jesus' soul was pierced – by betrayal's bitter sword.

Where was God? "Et tu, Deus? You too, God? Have you betrayed me too? *Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me,*"* Jesus had prayed at Gethsemane, but it did not, and his plea had echoed in the silence. Nothing left now but loss. "To be aware of this in the depth of one's soul is to experience non-being."¹² And now, here standing with the crowd at the cross, we ask the same question – where was God? – trying to puzzle out once more how this cross eases our souls. Because this is the eternal question of all who have seen the end coming and fretted that their lives have amounted to nothing. Who fear oblivion but still long for recognition. Who stare at themselves and see only non-being. Of all whose end is lonely, or tragic, or filled with horror. The eternal question screamed at God from the heart of isolation, and its answers seemingly melting in the silence. This is the bewilderment of Job about why he was being afflicted. This is the anguish of Mary flung at God here on Calvary, and of all victims of the merciless powerful through the ages. All cries thrown at the silence. Jesus' demand, "*Why hast thou forsaken me?*" gathers those cries to himself, absorbing their human distress, bewilderment and grief. He wraps them round with the compassion and the grace of paradise which is himself.

Here among the crowd at Calvary we are faced with the mysterious things of God and it's often the poets who do better speaking of such things. Studdert Kennedy said:

I look upon that body, writhing, pierced
And torn with nails, and see the battlefields
Of time, the mangled dead, the gaping wounds ...
The widows worn and haggard, still dry-eyed,
Because their weight of sorrow will not lift
And let them weep...
I see ...

All history pass by, and through it all
Still shines that face, the Christ Face, like a star
Which pierces drifting clouds, and tells the Truth.

I said earlier that 'there is no comfort to be had from soft words spoken at a safe distance'¹³ and Studdert Kennedy's words are not comfortable or safe. They bring the cross – and issues of complicity and responsibility – into our own worlds. I imagine there are stories of sin in your country which you would prefer to be forgotten; it is not for me to tell them. I want to tell you a story, a true and terrible story of sin in my country. Nineteenth century Australian writer Dame Mary Gilmore told of unbelievable savagery towards Australian Aborigines. She wrote of her uncle, in the bush one day – the wide open outback wilderness – when he smelt the stench of death:

It was a little girl perhaps ten years old ... She stood with her back to a ... tree, her arms drawn backward from the shoulder-blades round the trunk, her hands tied behind it ... it was so hot she could not have lived more than a few days ... The thirst would be the worst ... [The stockman] who had tied her there had no rope, so he used a whip. And there she had stood—stood in the terror of a virginity regarded under native tribal law so much more strictly than that of white people; stood while the brute who had tied her there had forgotten her in other victims; stood while the ants and the flies had worked their will on her; stood while thirst, torture, and the crows found her.¹⁴

Jesus nailed to a cross, a little girl tied to a tree. How can we stand at Calvary and face such horror, bear such grief?¹⁵ How can we hear Jesus with rainy eyes cry from the cross, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*"* and our hearts not break? Well, break they must, but Jesus went to the cross not just to wound us—to remind us of our wrong-heartedness, to confront us with sin in our world, to gather to himself victims like that little girl—but to heal our wounds.¹⁶ "*It is for this reason that I have come to this hour,*"* Jesus prayed, though he was deeply troubled. In faith he believed, and in faith he trusted, that this was the task God had given him, that he was of God, God was with him in the task, and that he would return to God.¹⁷ This God in the silence.

Rowan Williams calls Jesus 'the one true holy place of the Christian religion'. On this day, he says, Jesus is 'displayed to the world as the public language of our God, placarded on the history of human suffering'.¹⁸ Our God is haunted by us.¹⁹ Haunted by love. For what lesser reason than love would God embrace non-being? For what lesser reason than love would God embrace the cross and the utter desolation of God-forsakenness itself?²⁰

In this God-haunted world, on this day, faced with the mystery of Jesus' and God's work on the cross, perhaps all our words should fade into silence as we hear Jesus cry for all of us, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*". Silent before the compassionate mystery of God, we can only whisper:

I wonder what it was
I wonder what it meant
He seemed to touch on love
But then he touched on death

Better hold my tongue
Better learn my place
Lift my glass of blood
Try to say the Grace.²¹

Hope is blood-stained but full of God's grace – and will not die.

References

¹ Benson, R.H. *Papers of a Pariah*. Longmans, Green, & Co. London, 1913, p. 86.

² Matthew 27:46. Also Mark 15:34.

³ Vermes, G. *The Passion*. Penguin, 2005, p. 75.

⁴ Matthew 26:15. Mark 14:11 and Luke 22:5 refer to Judas' receiving money but not how much.

⁵ John 18: 13: *they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year*. Luke 22:54: *they took him into the high priest's house*. Mark 14:53 agrees with that. Matthew 26:57: *those who arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered* noting in the next verse that *Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest*.

⁶ Luke 22:57-60. Also Matthew 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72, John 18:25-27.

⁷ Rachel Aviv, 'The Philosopher of Feelings', from *The New Yorker*, published in the print edition of July 25, 2016 with the headline 'Captain of Her Soul'. <https://newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/25/martha-nussbaum-moral-philosophies>. Last viewed 23/2/2019. Aviv's essay is about Martha Nussbaum, in response to elements of her childhood, being drawn 'to those who blush'.

⁸ Matthew 26:36-46. Also Mark 14:32-42, Luke 22:39-46.

⁹ Matthew 27:55-56. See also Mark 15:40-41 names Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome and adds other detail. Luke 23:49 is vague, mentioning acquaintances, including women.

¹⁰ Barrett, J. *The Gospel According to St John*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2nd ed 1978, p. 51 in *The New Interpreters' Bible*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, Vol IX, p. 831.

¹¹ John 12:13. See also Matthew 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-10, Luke 19:28-38.

¹² Panichas, G. *Simone Weil Reader*. Wakefield: Moyer Bell, 1977, p. 180, in Pollard, D. *The Continuing Legacy of Simone Weil*. Hamilton Books, Lanham, Maryland, 2015, p. 26.

¹³ Black, S. *All That Remains. A Life In Death*. Doubleday. London 2018, p. 4. Professor Dame Sue Black attributes this statement to Fiona Douglas, University Chaplain, the University of Dundee.

¹⁴ Gilmore, M. 'The Whip' in *More Recollections*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1935, pp.220-222.

¹⁵ Note the words from Vs. 3 of hymn 689 in *Together in Song*: 'How can you stand the torture and pain, hope disappearing, freedom in chains?' by Robin Mann. HarperCollins, 1989.

¹⁶ Based on the last line of Kevin Hart, 'The Companion'.

¹⁷ Based on John 13:3.

¹⁸ Williams, R. *Open to Judgment. Sermons and Addresses*. Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994, p. 57.

¹⁹ In the closing lines of *The Book Thief*, the character Death says (in relation to 'protection' of the main character, Leisel) that God is haunted by humans. Zusak, M. *The Book Thief*. Alfred A. Knopf, Revised Edition, 2007.

²⁰ Moltmann, J. *Experiences of God*. Margaret Kohl trans. Fortress Press Philadelphia, p. 16, in Vieth, R.F. *Holy Power, Human Pain* Meyerstone Books, Bloomington IN, 1988, p. 102.

²¹ Cohen, L. 'It Seemed the Better Way', in *Book of Longing*. Penguin Books, London, 2007, p. 190.

V

After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished,
that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, *I thirst*.*

On Christmas Day hope was born. On Good Friday we humans tried our best to kill it. Hope survived but, used and abused, it yearns for ease and comfort.

If this were a play, Jesus' words "*I thirst*" would mark the intermission. These two simple words, seemingly devoid of emotion, appear like a pause after the emotional and agonised earlier hours of Jesus' hanging on the cross; hours of excruciating pain, ridicule, rejection, humiliation – and before the *dénouement* of this day – his death. But this is not a play. "*I thirst*", for all its apparent simplicity, and temptation into easy interpretation, needs more than dismissal as a mere break in a seven-act play. These two words keep the balance for us between Jesus' humanity and his divinity. Underscoring as they do the horrible physical assault of crucifixion, they remind us not to over-spiritualise Jesus' Passion. We are not to turn away from his human suffering, comforting ourselves with theological niceties about willing victimhood. Or sacrificial suffering for our sake. Though this might all be true. We are not to hide our eyes as if to shield ourselves from the God who said to Moses, "*you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live*".* We must stay. Stand with the crowd at Calvary and go on watching. Watching which is an assault to our souls.

I am weary with crying. My throat is dry. My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws.** The psalmist's words could have been Jesus' words. He needed water. I described his pain just now as excruciating, our description for extreme pain, and it has its origins in crucifixion. No imagination can stretch sufficiently to embrace the pain and suffering the crucified endured. Unable to stop ears against the crowd's shrieking rejection. Unable to hide nakedness. Unable to wipe sweat from eyes. Unable not to see vultures gliding patiently and slowly overhead.¹ Knowing oneself carrion. Heaving up against nails in feet, desperate for a breath of air. And the thirst. The physical shock of horrendous pain causes confusion, a racing heart, sweating, increased thirst.² Jesus on the cross; the little girl tied to the tree; both would become desperate for water. The comfort of water, soothing, life-giving.

Instead the soldiers *offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall*.³ Gall was any bitter substance but Mark says it was myrrh, a sedative.* I doubt the soldiers would have cared about sedating their victims though it would have made their job easier. But it may well have been myrrh. Rome had a hard-line policy about crucifixion: it was an excellent way of warning everybody not to mess with them. Nevertheless, crucifixion did have some Roman critics. Cicero, for example, described it as 'a most cruel and disgusting punishment'.⁴ But in Jerusalem it wasn't just a few critics. It was widely unpopular and there was a group of wealthy Jewish women who provided the drug myrrh to the soldiers to give to the crucified.⁵ This is plausible: myrrh was very expensive, way beyond the pay of Roman soldiers. And such charity had good scriptural backing. *Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress*.* This was among the tasks attributed to women of worth in Proverbs 31. Such women were called *ezer*; meaning helper. A Hebrew word used twenty-one times in the Old Testament, sixteen of them referring to God.⁶ It meant that women – and men, for that matter – were to be saviours, rescuers, protectors of all suffering or in need, as God is saviour, rescuer and protector of all people.

"*I thirst*," said Jesus but when he tasted the drugged wine he wouldn't drink it.⁷ Why not? Jesus was among unknown numbers crucified by Rome which means his crucifixion was far from unique. If it is not to seem to us 'a cross of meaninglessness',⁸ one among many, we have to push further for an answer – at least a plausible answer if not the only one – to that question: why not? Why wouldn't he drink the drugged wine and ease his agony?

A little context. These two words have been taken from John's Gospel. Probably writing very late in the first century, or perhaps early in the second, John had to contend with loud acrimony between two argumentative groups: Jews who thought Jesus the Messiah and those who didn't. The new 'Christian Jews' wanted no truck with any hint of weakness in their Messiah. Rather as, nearly two thousand years later, Simone Weil would say Christian faith offers 'no supernatural remedy for suffering' but it does strive for 'a supernatural use for it'. The new 'Christian Jews' of John's day were used to suffering – inured to it as a fact of their brutal times. They wanted to see purpose to it. Use. They wanted God present. A strong, powerful Messiah – on their side. So John gave them just that. Not make-believe, but a story full of signs and symbols.

"*I thirst*" said Jesus. The fact of human thirst is established. The drugged wine he refused. The vinegar he accepted, says John,* and the suggestion is, first, that he wanted to keep what was left of his mind clear, and, second, that Jesus was referring to holy scripture once more, this time to Psalm 69: *for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink*.* John's Gospel bristles with the symbols of cups and water and life and this is John's way of emphasising Jesus as strong, powerful Messiah, Emmanuel, God-with-us.

There's John's wonderful tale of Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, and her engaging him in theological debate. "*Those who drink of the water that I ... give them will never be thirsty*," he tells her. "*[It] will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life*."* Then he tells of Jesus in Jerusalem for the Festival of Tabernacles – or Booths. *Sukkot*,⁹ the most important of the three annual pilgrimages to the Temple. Thanksgiving for God's rescuing them from their desert wanderings. Thanksgiving for the blessing of a successful harvest. Bowls of water and wine poured upon ground and altar. Dancing and singing the great *Hallel*.¹⁰ *Hosanna!*¹¹ *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*¹²

And on John goes, weaving his symbols of Jesus, water and life. At the end of the festival, he has Jesus crying out to all passing in the street, "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me! Believe in me and drink! The scripture tells you, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water'*."¹³

Of course, it wasn't all sweet clear water as from a pure oasis. Suffering was not forgotten. Least of all by Jesus. He'd known disaster was coming and had tried to prepare his disciples. *He took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*.¹⁴ His blood of a new covenant. But they could not understand. Finally, Gethsemane. Begging. "*Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want*."¹⁵ And there was silence. And then the arrest. And Jesus' dignified acceptance of his fate and gentle rebuke to Peter and those who resisted his arrest: "*Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?*"*

So he drained it to the dregs. On the cross. "*O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water*."¹⁶

"*I thirst*" begins to seem like Jesus' last teaching: life in the kingdom of God is about yearning for God. "*I thirst ... I yearn for my god*." I know I said this is not a play but I didn't mean it isn't a drama. It is, and some two thousand years old. In scene after dramatic scene on Calvary Jesus' focus has been on the great player without a speaking role but whose presence has driven his entire life and ministry. God. Perhaps Jesus took that sip of vinegar simply to allow himself to say just a little more to his God. And to us.

Now Jesus

... looks on us with tears in his eyes,
And wells of mercy, streams of love and pity
Flow from the fountain whence all things arise ...
How often has he called, a careful mother,
And wept for our refusals of his grace,
Wept for a world that, weary with its weeping,
Benumbed and stumbling, turns the other way ...*

Parched and with rainy eyes, Jesus turns his gaze on us. He longs for ease and reunion with his God but he longs for us to keep our eyes on him on the Cross. Turn to God. Accept his gift of living water, renewed life. The gift won by his taking our humanity and brokenness to himself. The heartbreaking thing is that Jesus knows so well how difficult we find it to hold out our hands and accept his gift. Perhaps his last lesson to us is a reminder of Jeremiah's words:

*Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals ...
They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.*

*Blessed are those who trust in the Lord ...
They shall be like a tree planted by water;
sending out its roots by the stream ...**

Hope is weak, but extends a helping hand to us from the cross.

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Tomás Luis de Victoria, *Reproaches**

References

¹ Biblical references to the presence of birds of prey in ancient Palestine/Israel: Job 39:27-30; Micah 1:16; Psalm 103:5; Jeremiah 49:16f; Deuteronomy 32:11; Deuteronomy 14:17f. This last reference continues: *they shall not be eaten. You may eat any clean winged creature. You shall not eat anything that dies of itself; you may give it to aliens residing in your towns for them to eat, or you may sell it to a foreigner. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God.* There are also references in the Talmud. Some birds of prey were not found near settlements; others like the griffon vulture were.

² *International Trauma Life Support for Emergency Care Providers.* (8th ed). Pearson Education Limited, 2018, pp. 172-173. Found via Wikipedia site on shock.

³ Matthew 27:34. See also Psalm 69:21b.

⁴ The quotation continues '[the cross] is the worst extreme of the tortures inflicted upon slaves ... To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him is an abomination; to slay him is almost an act of murder; to crucify him is – what? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe also horrible a deed.' M. Tullius Cicero, *Rabirio Perduellionis Reo* 5.16. A commonly used quotation, for example. in Stott, J. *The Cross of Christ*, IVP Books, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2006, p. 30.

⁵ 'Refusing the Cup' by Rev. Wybren Oord, Pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

⁶ Of the remaining five, two refer to Eve, and three to powerful nations Israel called on for help when they were in strife.

⁷ Matthew 27: 34; Mark 15:23. Luke 23:36 has the soldiers offering sour wine but doesn't say whether he drank it.

⁸ This term from Hughes, T.O. *Finding Meaning and Hope in Suffering.* SPCK, London, 2010, no page found: 'We will always bear the scars of our suffering, the nail-marks of our own crucifixions, but we can still emerge from our darkness transformed and redeemed. We will not, therefore, have been subject to a cross of meaninglessness, but, rather, we will have learnt to affirm life by equating our suffering with the cross of Christ and its promise of resurrection.' He wrote in the context of Simone Weil's saying that the Christian faith offers 'no supernatural remedy for suffering' but does strive for 'a supernatural use for it'.

⁹ Held at some time early in the year after all the harvests are in. De Vaux, R. *Ancient Israel. Its Life and Institutions.* Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1986, p. 498.

¹⁰ Pss 113-118, psalms of praise.

¹¹ Harking back to Ps.118:25: *Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!* This was more a cry of acclamation than a plea for salvation.

¹² Matthew 21:9 harking back to Ps 118:26: *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord.*

¹³ Adapted from John 7:37b-38.

¹⁴ Matthew 26:27-28. See also Mark 14:23-24; Luke 22:17.

¹⁵ Mark 14:32. Similarly Matthew 26:36.

VI

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, *It is finished*: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.*

On Christmas Day hope was born. On Good Friday we humans tried our best to kill it. But hope survived, determined to keep its light steady in sinful hearts to remind us of love.

I have a cross on a wall in my study. It's plain unvarnished wood with a plaster figure on it but not of the dead Jesus. It is the robed, crowned *Christus Rex*, the Resurrected Christ. It's old; it's dirty; some of the points of the crown are broken off and there is a large crack across the breast. Years ago I tried to clean it but I stopped, suddenly realising the whole point of this *Christus Rex* is the dirt. And the crack. And the brokenness. The crack is my sin, your sin, the world's sin. It hangs there a daily reminder of the psalmist's words, "*I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me*".* I'm lucky to have the reminder because in busy lives it's easy to forget.

I wonder if another thing we post-resurrection people sometimes forget is to stop and peer around the corner of our faith, and our beliefs. While we might hold firm convictions we sometimes need the challenge of alternative perspectives about Jesus and the cross to bring us to action. To remind us of Jesus' love for all people and his desire for renewed human community. I spoke a while ago about Jesus crying out to passersby in the street in Jerusalem, "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me! Believe in me and drink!*"* If we were to go outside right now and see and hear someone so proclaiming, as like as not we'd hurry to the other side of the street. Embarrassed. Writing the person off as crazy. It's a huge challenge – but that's the cross.

Things are moving quickly now at Calvary. Jesus' ordeal is nearly over. He speaks again, "*It is finished*". The question is: what was finished? Perhaps we have another challenging alternative perspective to consider at this point. Think of the crowd around us watching at the cross. Look at their eyes. Listen to the shouts. The crowd may be smaller now. Some probably got bored; they've all seen this before. Others may have got here later. Heard the rumours in the streets. "Get to Calvary quickly! They've crucified him! You know the one! Thought he was the son of God. Went round healing people and talking about God's love. What a blowhard! They've got him now. On the cross. Let's go watch him die!"

What do they make of Jesus saying, "*It is finished*"? Admission of defeat? Recognition that he'd been beaten by the might of Rome? That he'd tried to buck the system and paid the price? The Roman soldiers will certainly think that, though one among them, a centurion, can make neither head nor tail of this man. So silent. So accepting. Noble even. The centurion, uncomprehending but awed, sensing difference about Jesus, was heard saying: "*Truly this man was God's Son!*"¹ But most in the crowd will probably not think that. In "*It is finished*" they will hear – and many still will only hear – defeat. The cross a symbol of death. Dream over. Dismissed.

All of which our faith says is the wrong answer to Jesus' definitive "*It is finished*". The wrong answer of a world which could not hear Jesus' whisper floating in the darkness: "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*" And now does not hear in this man's dying words, "*It is finished*", the sign of a task complete.

Achievement. Accomplishment. For him, peace won. God's purpose and Jesus' life vindicated. The dream of the kingdom of God as the community of renewed and faithful people is not dismissed but lives on.

This man had knowingly followed a path of serving God. As Abraham had left home, family and country at God's behest, so Jesus had left his home and gone, first, alone into the wilderness to wrestle with God rather as Jacob had wrestled with the stranger by the river Jabbok.* To learn what God wanted from his life.* Tempted there by thoughts of worldly attractions, of power and glory. Discovering the challenges in a life dedicated to God, to humility, to compassion. Making his choice: for God and God's kingdom. From the wilderness he'd emerged and, Matthew tells us, *went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people*.*

Along the way he'd encountered that wild man, John the Baptist. The kind of none too clean and probably smelly eccentric most of us would turn from – but Jesus did not. He accepted baptism – more, insisted on it. "*It is proper for us to do this thing,*" he said to John.* Note: us. Emphasising baptism as a communal thing. An act of mutual participation within the people's covenant with God. We're all in this together, smelly, eccentric, crazed or not. He saw his task as leading the people back to the god of the covenant – and more, to the God of history who was from the beginning when *the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep*.* Who created the heavens and the earth. Who created humankind, male and female, in God's own image. Who smiled upon this creation and saw that *it was very good*.²

Jesus would not have known to exactly what his monumental task would lead him. The point is he chose it freely. To redeem not just the people, but the world, the whole created order. To restore it to its intended goodness. To achieve atonement for sin. Through himself. He would lead the people back to God and stand between them and God. Remember that strange story of Moses making that bronze serpent? The people had erred. God had sent a plague of snakes among them. Moses prayed for mercy and God relented. On God's instructions, Moses made a bronze serpent and hoist it on a pole. "*Everyone who is bitten shall look at it,*" God said, "*and live.*"* Jesus could not have known that it would be he, armed outstretched, who would be hoisted before the people, who could look upon him and live. He would not have known that his task would lead to that particular end, but he choose it freely.

This freedom is vital. It stares down the image of God as an angry, threatening, coercive bully. Jesus' free choice recalls all the free choices offered to people by God which amount to one message: live harmoniously with each other, love each other as I love you. Be a society of people who admit you are needy and vulnerable. This is not an angry divine tyrant but a God who sees us through rainy eyes, who pleaded through Micah, "*O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me*".* Who anointed Jesus: "*Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased ...in his name the Gentiles will hope.*"* "*Listen to him.*"³

"*It is finished,*" Jesus whispered just before he died.* Task complete. Purpose fulfilled. What was finished on the cross was the dying. What goes on is the life that was born there. Forgiveness. Understanding. Hope. That is the dream and the purpose that make Jesus' cross a 'cross of meaningfulness'.

Jesus has been hoisted before us, armed outstretched. Do we look upon him and live?

If we walk away now with the crowd, our faces turned from the cross, will we not be betraying this great gift of love? If we turn away what claim can we make to be fulfilling Jesus' dream of a kingdom-of-God community bound by love, compassion, mercy and justice?

So easy to turn away. Recently I attended a lecture called 'The Medicalisation of Evil' concerning the role of the medical profession in Nazi Germany.⁴ As you can imagine, many of the photographs shown were confronting. Appalling, and I found myself thinking of Lady Macbeth's admonition to her husband: "These deeds must not be thought After these ways; so, it will make us mad".* Indeed, many in the audience winced, gasped, closed their eyes, turned away. As Christians, we do not have that choice to turn away. If we turn from the horrors in the world around us, dismissing the terrible sin-filled deeds of human beings as not part of our story, we admit ourselves to be deliberate failures in receiving Jesus' gift of life from the cross, and in working towards Jesus' community of love and hope. We will be leaving Jesus and Jesus and all victims of human sin with nothing but the poet's lament:

Lone, lone, and lone I stand,
With none to hear my cry,
As the black feet of the night
Go walking down the sky.

Perhaps we would do well to ponder on a speech Elie Wiesel gave in the East Room of the White House in April 1999. Describing his liberation from Buchenwald, he spoke as the young seventeen-year he had been at the time fifty-four years before, saying,

He was finally free, but there was no joy in his heart ... Liberated ... by American soldiers, he remembers their rage at what they saw. And even if he lives to be a very old man, he will always be grateful to them for that rage, and also for their compassion. Though he did not understand their language, their eyes told him what he needed to know—that they, too, would remember, and bear witness.⁵

What do our eyes say, and to what do we bear witness? "*It is finished,*" said Jesus. His task, yes. Our task, no. Perhaps the last lesson Jesus teaches from the cross is that part of being a community of God's people is to bear witness. Rage, rage against injustice and indifference in our world and we prove ourselves, not failures worthy of pity alone, but people of God worthy of love and compassion ourselves. It is a challenge but Jesus also said, "*Do not be afraid*".*

Drops of pity fall from the sky, and of love, but hope's light still shines brightly for us in the gloom.

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JS Bach, Es ist vollbracht, St John Passion (BWV 245)*

References

¹ Mark 15:39. See also Matthew 27:54b and Luke 23:47. Luke's version is slightly different. He says the centurion praised god and said, "*Certainly this man was innocent*" (NRSV).

² Based on Genesis 1:1-2, 27, 31.

³ The synoptic gospels all add this command: Matthew 17:5, Mark 9:7, Luke 9:35. John does not mention this.

⁴ Delivered by Dr Dean Beaumont at a meeting of the Australian Capital Territory History of Medicine Group (ACTHMG) at the Australian National University (ANU) Medical School on 20 February 2019.

⁵ As part of the Millennium Lecture series hosted by President Clinton and First Lady Hilary Clinton. In Collins, P. *When They Go Low, We Go High. Speeches that Shape the World – And Why We Need Them*. 4th Estate, London, 2018, p. 372.

VII

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, *Father into thy hands I commend my spirit*: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.*

On Christmas Day hope was born. On Good Friday we humans tried our best to kill it. Hope's embattled spirit rallies in the darkness ...

There now hangs that sacred body ... rebaptised in his own tears and sweat, and embalmed in his own blood ... There those glorious eyes grew faint in their light, so as the sun, ashamed to survive them, departed with his light too. And then that Son of God ... gave up his ghost; and as God breathed a soul into the first Adam, so this second Adam breathed his soul into God, into the hands of God.*

Thus spoke one of Anglicanism's greatest priests and poets, John Donne, in a sermon in the year of Our Lord 1631, at St Paul's Cathedral, London.¹ Donne's last sermon, and considered his funeral sermon.

Which is what we reach now: a funeral sermon. A lowering sky broods over Calvary. The Temple curtain is torn in two.² The poet's words tempt:

of comfort no man speak:
Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs;
Make dust our paper and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth ...*

"*It is finished*," Jesus has said, knowing his task in this world to be complete. Rallying himself for one last breath, he cries out, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*".*

It was the Sabbath, and he could take his rest. Κλίνας τὴν κεφαλὴν, John says. He bowed his head. How poignant! Both Matthew and Luke report Jesus saying during his ministry, "*foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*".³ Jesus-the-Messiah had nowhere for his head but the cross.⁴ Jesus-the-Messiah had refused his people's dreams of nationalistic glory, and would not be a warrior-king. Had challenged the complacency, hypocrisy and laxity of his people's faith, and would not be a priest-king trading in glory. Who would only be the servant-king trading in love, hope and humility. "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*." Jesus-the-Messiah is dead.

Jesus began his ordeal by calling God 'father'. He ended it likewise. At the beginning when he was hauled up on his cross he had gazed at the soldiers – and all of us – and had spoken of forgiveness. Now, at the end, he speaks of himself—in total faith, trust and confidence – voluntarily handing his life back to God. Nothing could save him – or comfort him – except God. In total faith, Jesus had protested at a silent God against his abandonment, "*why hast thou forsaken me?*". Now, in total faith, he speaks a last time into that same silence, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*". All his life, all his work, all his hope, cast upon this silent God, perhaps believing with the psalmist that *God does not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted*.⁵ Perhaps the heart of God fractured a little that day – with love – for this son, and for us. Perhaps that divine fracture is what theologian Martin Buber meant by 'the rent in the heart of the world'.⁶

But funeral sermons are also statements of thanksgiving. This is a day of death when we cannot ignore Christ's suffering. As we do not get Jesus the Christ without Judas the Betrayer, we do not get Christ's gift of hope from the cross without the suffering. 'Of comfort no man speak', the poet says, but even on this day of sorrows, in faith we believe comfort and hope and reconciliation with our God have been won on the cross.

That is the message on the far horizon of this day. The message grounded in the hope of this day. Despite ours being a sin-riddled Good Friday world, it is not a Godforsaken world. It is a God-haunted world. Perhaps that is the point of the words of the old man, hidden in a Jewish graveyard in Nazi-occupied Poland, who helped a woman give birth there and who prayed, "Great God, have you finally sent the Messiah, our saviour, to us? For who else but the Messiah can be born in a grave?"⁷

During our time together today I've often used words like 'perhaps', 'maybe', and 'believing in faith'. I've avoided certainties. I don't find it possible to do otherwise for there are only two beings who know with certainty what happened on Calvary two thousand-odd years ago: God and Jesus. It was their work, their achievement, of which we believe 'in faith' we are the beneficiaries. The gift of God for the people of God. God who '[cut] himself off from himself ... right into the desolation of God-forsakenness'.⁸ Perhaps the only certainty about that 'rent in the heart of the world' is the enigmatic mystery of God's holiness.⁹

We need not think this a lonely position. For company in uncertainty we have the early church theologians who wracked their brains trying to understand – and explain – atonement, the meaning of Christ's death on the cross. They have left us with a raft of theological ideas like 'ransom', 'penal substitution', 'propitiation', 'expiation' to try to unravel atonement's mystery. Wisely, they didn't settle on any one doctrine – with certainty. Deeply respectful of God, and with honest imagination, they steered away from black-and-white precision and opted for poetic truth.

But though we might be wise to emulate those early theologians in accepting uncertainty about the meaning of the cross there is one thing about our reaction to it of which we can be certain. As Christians, we can never be indifferent, even when – perhaps especially when – we feel caught between bitterness and hope.

Indifference brings us back to our consideration of community and victims. If we collapse into indifference, we turn Jesus' cross into one of total meaninglessness – of no more interest than the millions of victims of crucifixion, torture, and horrific cruelty throughout history – and, Jesus, the light of the world, would be snuffed out. For indifference is extreme cruelty.

When he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, Elie Wiesel said of indifference and the concentration camp existence:

We felt that to be abandoned by God was worse than to be punished by [God]. Better an unjust God than an indifferent one ... Indifference ... is more dangerous than anger and hatred ... [It] is never creative ... Indifference is not a response ... [it] is not a beginning, it is an end ... the friend of the enemy ... never [of the] victim ... [It denies victims their] humanity, betrays our own ... Indifference, then, is not only a sin, it is a punishment. We are called by Jesus, we people of God, not to punish, but to repent. To turn back to our God. To live as hope-filled people of faith, in a kingdom-of-God community practising love, compassion, mercy, and justice. To say of ourselves, "Father, into your hands we commend our lives". Such a community cannot practise indifference. Rather, we are obliged to pick up Christ's cross and go to the aid of any victims of sinful human behaviour, social injustice, war, prejudice, discrimination or racism. It was Christ's work to point out the need. It is our work—to respond.¹⁰

I have a painting in my study which is an evocative statement about this imperative. It's a large and stark painting by Australian artist Geoff Todd. Its frame is plain black, the canvas white. From the upper edge dangle two bare feet, taut and sinewy, drawn in black with strong vigorous strokes, slightly smudged. At the bottom, beneath the feet, is a large solid black, roughly outlined, circle. It lies there like a gaping wound on the canvas, the opening of a deep well, a gap in the face of the earth, leading to an unknown place of death and darkness. This work is one of a series of protest paintings about the victims of capital punishment but its title has always said Good Friday to me. Written below the black hole are two words: STILL LIFE.

Still life. However we might understand it, or not understand it at all, life – God-haunted, hope-filled, mysterious, beautiful – was what was restored for us by Jesus' death on the cross. In faith, we believe this. How we live that God-haunted, hope-filled, mysterious and beautiful life in order to transform the worlds we live in – in the name of Christ – is the challenge of the cross. But, in these last moments today, standing together with the crowd at the cross, it is a challenge we must accept. On the Cross, Emmanuel, God-with-us, speaks to us. And forgives us our frailty, offering that great gift we all need. Forgiveness, the gift of this day. A life for life. The self-gift of God.

As we stand at Calvary, our eyes on Jesus on the Cross, words from theologian Austin Farrer about God's forgiveness echo round us:

God forgives me with the compassion of his eyes, but my back is turned to him. I have been told that he forgives me, but I will not turn and have the forgiveness, not though I feel the eyes on my back. God forgives me, for he takes my head between his hands and turns my face to his to make me smile at him. And though I struggle and hurt those hands ... they do not let go until he has smiled me into smiling; and that is the forgiveness of God.¹¹

May the God who shakes heaven and earth, whom death could not contain, who lives to disturb and heal us, who reaches wounded hands to us, help us to rest into God's holy embrace, know ourselves forgiven, serve each other with tenderness and love, and remember the whisper of the God of hope in the darkness, "I love you, and am with you always!"

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John Sheppard, *In manus tuas**

References

¹ 'Death's Duel', sermon preached on the 25th February 1631 before King Charles I who, in 1649, would suffer his own humiliation and execution.

² Matthew 27:51; Mark 15: 33 & 38; Luke 23:45.

³ Matthew 8:20. Also Luke 9:58.

⁴ This idea for the use of this passage from Holloway, R. *The Killing*. Morehouse Barlow, Wilton Ct, 1985, p. 74.

⁵ Based on Psalm 22:24a.

⁶ Buber, M. *The Prophet Faith*. Harper & Row, New York, 1949, p. 191.

⁷ Paul Tillich sermon 'Born in the Grave', in *Shaking the Foundations*, Penguin Books, 1962, p. 165.

⁸ Moltmann, J. *Experiences of God*. Trans. Margaret Kohl, Fortress Press Philadelphia, p. 16, in Vieth, R.F. *Holy Power, Human Pain*. Meyerstone Books, Bloomington Indiana, 1988, p. 102.

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