

Good Friday Meditations

Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing

Of all the words Jesus spoke from the Cross these are the ones that amaze me the most

The last few days had seen the crowds that worshipped him and sung his praise on Palm Sunday turn against him; they had seen Judas – one of the twelve chosen ones, one of those who had been alongside him from the beginning – betray him and hand him over to the authorities; and they had seen Peter – the one he called the Rock – deny that he even knew him.

And more than that, most of his trusted friends – the disciples – had abandoned him. We are told that only John and the women remained at the cross.

Any normal person would have found it impossible not to have felt angry, hurt and rejected; any normal person would have shouted out and riled against all those who caused him pain.

But Jesus prays for them to be forgiven. He thinks not of himself but of those who are causing him this pain and agony. He prays for them, and says they are doing this and they don't know what they are doing.

This is a prayer for the crowd who had turned against him. A prayer for Judas who had betrayed him; and a prayer for Peter and the others who had deserted him. A prayer acknowledging that their actions were out of ignorance.

How much, I wonder, of the world's suffering is caused by people acting out of ignorance or out of a misjudged sense of right and wrong?

How many times do we cause others to suffer because we think we are right when we are wrong.

Maybe we know we are wrong; perhaps more often we are just deluded. Too wrapped up in our own self importance and our pig headedness to see clearly and objectively.

We fail to see the other persons perspective; we fail to see the whole picture; we fail to entertain the possibility that our long held and tightly held views may not be right. May not even be partly true.

We fail to see where God is acting in the world. We fail to see his truth

And yet Jesus asks God to forgive;

Yes, these words from Jesus are a call for us to forgive – even when that seems too much to ask, but I think they are also a call for us to be more aware of what we do and say. More aware of the effects of our actions and words.

***And Lord, we are the same centuries later.
Day by day, we act without wisdom, without awareness, without compassion.
Half the time we simply don't know what we are doing
as we disconnect from your enduring Light.
Today, may we be humble enough
to recognise our failures and to seek your help.
With our mind and with our heart.***

I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise

Crucifixion – a nasty death for nasty people. Three men on three crosses.

One of them, often described as a common criminal, realises what is happening. What is really happening. Realises that he is somehow part of something bigger. This man hanging next to him is not another common criminal. He really is the Son of God. The criminal makes his request. Remember me.

This is not like the request of James and John made through their mother in happier times when she asks that they can sit with Christ in his kingdom. This comes from a man also about to lose his life. A man whose only expectation now is a lingering death. And he asks only to be remembered.

But Jesus gives more than is asked for, not just remembrance but a place in Paradise. Paradise, that idyllic garden created by God in the beginning, home to Adam and Eve before they disobeyed. Jesus in that reply is confirming that Paradise still exists. It is still possible to get there. Possible to get there today. This is immediate not a future promise that could go wrong, but a promise for now, for today.

The criminal acknowledges that he has deserved his fate unlike Jesus, hanging between the two others.

But despite this he is promised more than he asks for, he is promised it immediately and he is promised to be with God.

And we have that promise too.

All the good things in life that we receive, exceed what we deserve, what we expect, what we could dare to ask for.

In believing, we have God with us every moment of every day. Guiding, guarding, challenging and comforting.

And like the criminal, we have the promise of heaven, that on our earthly death we will be with Jesus. We don't understand what it will be like, but we know that it doesn't matter because whatever heaven is, it will be Paradise.

I tell you today you will be with me in Paradise. A promise made 2000 years ago to a man hanging on a cross by another man hanging on a cross but a promise made also to us.

***Thank you, Lord, for this mind-blowing invitation
which you first offered to the thief hanging beside you on that fateful day –***

*and today offer to us.
May we stop for a moment and
hear again this loving invitation, embedded in God's grace, which draws us close to the
One who understands us all.*

Woman, here is your son. Here is your mother

Poem Sylvia Sands; Darkness Yielding page 155

*People are kind.
Come away, they cry.
No need to put yourself through this.
He'll understand.*

*But I am his mother,
And though nails pierce his body
And a sword sunders my soul,
I must stand with him
I must stand by him
I must stand up in this his hour of dying.*

*And yet, and yet
There is more at stake than that.
From somewhere within
This horror of great darkness,
Gabriel haunted still.
I dream dreams, hear voices, see visions.
I see others.*

*Mothers, sons, brothers, daughters,
Sisters, fathers, friends, lovers,
A vast army who will not turn away.
Clad in the armour of fidelity
And hollow-eyed courage,
They will stand by
Stand with
Stand up,
In those slow, dimming
Dove grey hours of dying*

No one wants a loved one to die alone. We want them to know we are there. However deep the grief is for us.

For many people during the pandemic there is the deep sadness of not being present for the last moments of dying.

In Ukraine too people have died far away from folk who care about them and would want to say goodbye.

We are not surprised that in her own profound misery Mary still stands by her son. Feeling his physical torment and sharing in the humiliation. That's what parents hope to do – to be there in the darkest times – love and support their child in their worst difficulties. Standing in solidarity through life's catastrophes - relationship breakdown, serious illness, redundancy, accident, addiction. In His last hours Jesus has the presence of the woman who brought him comfort as he grew up. Still there, still loving him. Jesus knows the end is near. In his own agony He still has the capacity to care for His beloved mother and his friend He understands how difficult it is to stand helpless, as they watch what seems to be the end of all that was good, just and hopeful. None of his siblings are visible - Is that why he asks the beloved disciple to take Mary into his care? Are they lost in the crowd? We might remember the episode in Matt 12: 48. When Jesus was teaching, and he is told his mother and brothers and sisters are waiting outside. What he replies might be very dismissive of his family. He says 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters? Then he waves his arm over the crowd.' Here is my mother and sisters and brothers – All who do the will of my Father in heaven. We know Jesus – it wasn't a slight on his mother, It was the beginning of a new community of believers. Something bigger, wider than family Now at his dying, a small group are united around His cross. John knows Mary as his mother and the Magdalene and Mary Clopas as his sisters. People who share the experience of Jesus dying share in his new community of faith. Blood ties are not necessary, this is wider than kinship Jesus has given his mother to John for their mutual care, but Mary, who ponders all the events in her son's life will be a mothering influence on the new movement too. Through our baptism and in retelling the events of the Passion, we are part of the community gathered around the cross with brothers and sisters all over the world and with the saints in heaven. We try to live with the love he shows

***You hold the world in your hands,
yet know our human intimacies.
On the cross you thought of your mother and your friends.
You cared for their future.
And right where we are that caring love enfolds us,
tenderly reminding us that in the midst of ordinary living,
your Spirit is with us, sometimes challenging,
always surprising.***

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

As we read through the gospel stories one truth we cannot fail to take with us is that Jesus always lived in the presence of God.

From the time when Mary and Joseph searched all over for him and found him in the Temple – in his father's house; through the temptations in the wilderness; the teaching, preaching and miracle working; the times when he retreated from the crowds so that he might be alone with God; right up to the intense prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane moments before his arrest.

Jesus could not imagine not being in God's presence; life without God for him was simply not possible

But here.

Here he cries out My God my God why have you forsaken me?

What does the cry mean? Has God abandoned him?

There are two schools of thought.

Many interpret these words as a quote from Psalm 22, and therefore to be taken along with the rest of the psalm – a psalm which tells of the sufferer's assurance of God's continued protection and final vindication. A psalm too which many say could be interpreted as being about this very moment – Jesus' suffering. Read through the psalm and see what you think.

So instead of it being a desperate cry, it can be seen as an affirmation of God being alongside him in his suffering. The psalm of course moves on with confidence to say

*For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.*

But others prefer to take these words of Jesus in their more literal meaning. That Jesus did indeed feel abandoned at this moment of supreme suffering.

Here Jesus penetrates the abyss of human suffering and lostness, where it seems all worldly support; all those things that we can rely upon, have gone. And yet his cry is not *where is God in this suffering?* It is rather a prayer as he clings to his Father in the face of the horror around him *My God my God, why have you abandoned me?*

So these few words plumb the depths of evil and suffering and loss and doubt, and yet at the same time scale the heights of faith and trust in a God who never leaves us. It is a cry that gives hope to all who feel they cannot go on. It is a cry of supreme faith.

Many people ask me – and perhaps especially over these past few years and months – where is God in all of this?

Where is God in Covid? – where was God when people could not attend loved ones funerals; when care homes suffered death after death; when fit young people died of the virus?

And perhaps more recently where is God in Ukraine? In Kyiv? In Mariupol? In Luhansk? In Kramatorsk. In the other cities being bombed and sieged? Or In Ethiopia? In Sudan? Where is God in the hate and violence?

Perhaps what we can take from Jesus' words are that God is still here; he has not abandoned us; he is still the one who hears our prayers and our cries.

Because God, in Jesus, has been there. In the pain. In the hurt. In the lostness. He knows how we feel

***We struggle, we fall,
we fail, we cry out
and often ask this question ourselves.
God help us in some small way to understand that when we believe you are silent or far
off, or have ditched us completely,
that there still remains a simple truth: that we are not abandoned,
but held.***

I am thirsty

Just three words, but within them a wealth of meaning.

In his thirst we see the two sides of Jesus. The thirst of the man, dying out in the hot sun. But also there is the thirst of the Son of God fulfilling the scripture by asking for a drink and being given poor quality wine.

Back at the start of Jesus ministry he went with the disciples to a wedding at Cana, and when the wine ran out, he turned jars of water into jars of wine. Wine of a quality far better than the guests expected at that point of the feast. But now the wine the soldiers offer is sour, the cheap wine of the barrack room. His ministry is held between the two incidents and the wine of two very different qualities. Wine given and wine taken.

We are told that drinking the wine is to fulfil the scriptures – in Psalm 69 the psalmist says, 'They gave me vinegar'. How often do we use that description for poor wine even now – vinegar.

Jesus was about to end his human life, so what was the point of a drink? I have been wondering whether the presence of the sponge shows that it was usual for the victims of crucifixion to ask for a drink. It was a slow process and the sun was hot. Or was the wine there just as a taunt by the Roman soldiers? Renowned after all for their cruelty. It isn't hard to imagine their jeers, their language as they soak the sponge, the wavering of the sponge towards the lips of the dying man, even then the taunting.

However exactly it was this is a pivotal moment. Jesus the man feels the moisture on his lips and knows that it was be his last action, before in his dying and returning to his Father.

Jesus, in your agony you asked for a drink.

And today

we know that you walk with all who hunger and thirst in our divided world.

Help us to walk with them too, taking risks for love,

being passionate for justice, abandoning, even for a moment,

our endless need for comfort, for security, for things.

It is finished

In some translations – ‘It is done – complete’.

Meditation

‘He was silent’. *By Nick Fawcett abridged.*

He was silent, quite still,

His body limp and lifeless, like a rag doll

like a broken puppet.

And I thanked God that at last it was over, his ordeal finally ended.

But it wasn’t, not quite.

He moved again,

Just the faintest of twitches,

He was still breathing, still suffering.

We watched wretchedly, torn by conflicting desires-

The longing to see him come down and prove his enemies wrong.

The longing to see him find peace in the cold embrace of death.

But suddenly his eyes were open,

Wide

bright

triumphant.

His lips were moving,

eager

excited,

exultant,

and his voice rang out; ‘It is finished!’

An acknowledgement of defeat, some said afterwards,

A last despairing cry of sorrow.

But it wasn’t

Not for those that heard it,

Not for those with ears to hear.

It was altogether different –

Like sunshine after storm,

Like rain after drought,

Like laughter after tears –
Gloriously unexpected!
Wonderfully surprising.
He had stooped and conquered,
Staked all and won.
Defeat was victory
Darkness was light
Death was life.
I didn't see it then, mind you, I can't pretend that.
It was just a glimpse at the time,
A glimmer barely understood.
But what I did see, with sudden staggering clarity,
Was that until that moment,
Until that last victorious shout,
He had lived with the awful burden of holding the world's fate in his own and wondering
whether he could see it through.
At last it was done –
He had honoured his calling'
Fulfilled his mission,
Walked the way of the cross.
It was finished,
the task complete – done.

***Lord, through this day may we experience
that inner strength which bears and believes and hopes and endures all things.
For yours is the goodness
that makes sense of this day,
and brings calm to our souls.***

Father into your hands I commend my spirit

These are the last words Luke recorded Jesus saying before he died

Once again we have Jesus quoting from a psalm – this time Psalm 31. How often do we find this in Jesus. Scripture is always there. His life is soaked in it. From the temptations right through to his crucifixion his knowledge of scripture shines through. So often he used scripture as he tried to explain who he was and what he had come to accomplish. Perhaps we too need to be more aware of the promises of God contained in scripture. Promises which can help us in our daily lives, promises that remind us of God's presence and his love.

But these words also show us something else too. Here, at the very end of his life, Jesus was in control. It was Jesus who commended himself into God's care.

Last week some of us were at the Baptist Church for the Passion drama from the LAMPS drama company. It was a very moving and thought provoking evening, taking a look at Jesus' last week from three perspectives – Mary Magdalene, Peter and a Roman centurion.

It was the centurion's viewpoint that struck me – probably because it was one we don't often see or think about. This soldier – known as Marcus – was present throughout those last days and he shared his thoughts with us.

He saw Jesus ride into Jerusalem on the donkey. He was in the temple courts as Jesus overturned the money changers' tables. He was in the party that arrested Jesus in the garden and took him for trial. He was at the trial and then stood guard at the crucifixion. He was even a guard at the tomb (as he said – the strangest command he had ever received to guard a tomb).

The thing that stood out for him was the fact that in all of these situations Jesus was in control. He noticed it particularly in the temple courts and at the trial. Others may have thought they had authority, but it was clear to this centurion – who knew plenty about power and authority - where the true authority lay. Pilate thought he had the power, but in the end he was powerless – not willing or not able to decide for himself what to do.

And Jesus' authority was present even at the cross, it was as a response to Jesus' authority and control that Marcus uttered the words “truly this man was the Son of God”.

And I think that these thoughts of control remind us again that no matter what things might look like on the surface, God is in control. We were reminded earlier this afternoon of God always being with us; these thoughts take that a little further and make a good place to end our meditations this afternoon. Not only is he with us, but ultimately he is in control.

And this means that no matter how bad things appear

Good will triumph over evil
Easter Morning will come after Good Friday

***We pause: we are still: we listen: we hear;
we pause again: we look around, we move on – refreshed and ready again
to celebrate the miracle of life. Your life in us.***