

Recordings of these reflections can be found here: <https://soundcloud.com/user-55101847/sets/good-friday-2020>

*Please do use these reflections to help you in your prayer. You may like to follow with the spoken word using the link above. Between each reflection there you will find some music to help you pause.*

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,  
because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.



A reading from the Gospel according to Mark.

*After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. [Mark 15:20]*

The soldiers allow Jesus no dignity in this hour of his death. Jesus, who, throughout Mark's Gospel, has amazed the crowds by his displays of power, is powerless, dressed in a purple robe and crown of thorns in a grotesque parody of kingship. Jesus, who, throughout Mark's Gospel, has healed the sick, welcomed the outcast, cast out demons, is outcast himself, the object of scorn and violence. Jesus, who, throughout Mark's Gospel, has been the leader with unquestionable authority, is now led, led in to be mocked, led out to be crucified, carrying his own cross.

"Imagine having to carry an object that you know is about to kill you" says Philip North, reflecting upon this passage. Imagine the agony of bearing the weight of that huge wooden cross-beam, knowing that,

very soon, your own hands, your own feet, were to be nailed to it. Imagine having to do this at a point at which you are already weakened, by a sleepless night, by flogging, by the emotional pain of seeing your closest friends run away and leave you. The soldiers allow Jesus no dignity in this hour of his death. And yet, even as he is stripped of his purple cloak and forced to take up the painful instrument of torture, even as he is mocked, even as he is led in and out more like an animal than a human, Jesus retains his dignity. The humility of Jesus is, says Jane Winter in her book "The Merciful Humility of God" "a dynamic and forceful quality, with no suggestion of passivity or weakness." "God," she says, "is not forced to be humble because he has no power to be anything else," but he chooses the way of humility, "because this humility changes the balance of power altogether."

As Jesus lifts the heavy wooden cross onto his back, he deliberately rejects the violence of the world's structures of power. He refuses to fight the soldiers' crude display of their power over him with his own display of greater power, even though he knows that, at his request, God would send "more than twelve legions of angels" to come to his aid. Instead, he chooses the path of pain, of self-emptying, of apparent failure and of sacrifice. He chooses to carry the object he knows is about to kill him, knowing that this way alone, the way of humility and weakness, has the power to change the world.

And what of us, Jesus' followers? How do we react to our Lord's choice of the way of humility and powerlessness over the world's choice to jostle and fight for power and pre-eminence? The Rev'd Giles Fraser has said that the original sin of the Church is the temptation to power. Yet, as Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi, our attitude "should be the same as that of Christ Jesus".

In this season of COVID-19, we think of those who, day by day, put on their heavy and uncomfortable PPE equipment to go into hospital wards and care for the sick and dying, knowing that they are walking daily into situations where their own health could be gravely endangered, choosing the path of sacrifice for the sake of others. And all of us, in this lockdown situation, have seen our power to live and to do as we choose greatly curtailed. We are not used to being prevented from seeing family and friends; we are not used to being told to "stay at home"; we are not used to being banned from our place of worship; we are not used to limitations being placed on our shopping, our exercise, our leisure activities. Do we choose the path of the world, bargaining for as much freedom as we can grasp for ourselves, fighting to retain control? Or can we, following the example of our Lord, choose the path of humility, the path which accepts the limitation of our freedom, in order to free others?

Jesus carried on his back the instrument that was to kill him. As his followers, we are called to that same path of humility, to take up our cross and follow him.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, you carried the cross through the rough streets of Jerusalem:

be with those who are loaded with burdens beyond their strength.

You bore the weight of our sins when you carried the cross:

help us to realise the extent and the cost of your love for us.

To you, Jesus, bearing a cross not your own,

be honour and glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit,

now and for ever.

Amen.

Holy God,

holy and strong,

holy and immortal,

have mercy on us

We adore you O Christ and we bless you  
because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.



A reading from the Gospel according to Mark

*And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take. (Mark 15. 24)*

They crucified him. Metal hitting metal, driving pain and anxiety and fear into his hands and feet. No respect, indiscriminate. Driving nails into flesh. Bones breaking, blood pouring. Agony endured. Undeserving, unnecessary. An innocent man suffering unimaginable torture.

And then left there, hanging on a cross above the crowd. Above the soldiers. Above the city.

The God of all creation. The one whom angels worship. The Lord of the universe. The Saviour of the World. The one in whom hopes were placed. Healer. Miracle worker. Fulfiller of prophecies. Teacher of the Kingdom. The one for whom so many had waited and longed for – or thought they had.

But look at him now. Look at him. Hanging there. Bloody. Broken. Naked. Shamed and humiliated.

And here is a crowd below – watching. Some wailing. Some mocking. Laughing. Soldiers playing dice over his clothes.

Jesus has lost everything. His friends have run away. His possessions have been taken from him. His clothes gambled and won. What else is there? He literally has nothing. And, in the eyes of those who have crucified him he is nothing.

Worthless. Useless. Not what he said he was, or promised. Nothing.

He is naked. And here in this moment he symbolises something profoundly disturbing about what it means to be human. None of us has anything. We enter the world naked, and we leave it naked. In that sense we are nothing – anything we have – any wealth or possessions or position or power, all of it is worth nothing.

It is hard to consider that in this way we too are nothing. Yet understanding that, in this moment, means that here God shared in that nothingness. God shares in our nothingness.

And here God does a miraculous thing: for here God makes our nothingness into something.

He is God. He is everything. As he shares in the human condition that condition is charged with the glory of the divine life.

We are invited to participate in the divine life just as the divine life has participated with us. It is a great mystery. All the glory and honour, all the mercy and love, all the compassion, all the grace – offered to us, as an invitation from the God who knows.

Bishop Philip North retells a story: “One, at a Eucharist for young people, the priest made a cross of body glitter on the forehead of every teenager and said the words ‘remember you are dust, destined for glory.’” He goes on, “That describes exactly what Jesus is doing in this terrible hour. He has come to share the nothingness of our lives in order to scoop us up to the presence of God in whose eyes we are everything. This this act of self-annihilation, God has raised up human life from pointlessness to glory.”

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, you bled in pain as the nails were driven into your flesh:

Transform through the mystery of your love the pain of those who suffer.

To you Jesus, our crucified Lord, be honour and glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

Amen.

Holy God

Holy and strong

Holy and immortal

Have mercy upon us

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,  
because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.



A reading from the Gospel according to Mark.

*At three o'clock, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. [Mark 15:34-37]*

Jesus' last words are a cry of abandonment: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" On the cross, despite those who stand around watching, Jesus is entirely alone. The crowds who "pressed in" upon him throughout his ministry have dispersed, looking for the next excitement. The political and religious authorities who condemned him to death are safely at home, distant from the awful consequences of their decision. His closest friends have deserted him and fled. Even God seems absent. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But God is not absent, for, in this, the moment of his death, a Roman centurion is on duty by the cross. This centurion would be familiar with death in all its most horrific and gruesome forms. He was not, probably, a man of faith, simply the person tasked, that day, with supervising the crucifixions. But this centurion, when he looks up, does not see a man abandoned by God. "Truly," he says, "this man was God's son."

At the moment of his death, Jesus' last words are words taken from scripture, the opening words of Psalm 22. The Psalms, the Jewish people's hymn- and prayer-book, the language of their praise, their petition and their lament, these are the words on Jesus' lips as he breathes his last. The centurion may not have known this but, in the words of Jane Williams, he would have seen "a man willing to die for the reality that he called God and, even in death, to call out to God".

In death, Jesus does not curse God; he cries out in lament and prayer, seeking a response, trusting to the last that his God will act. The last words on the lips of a dying person are often the name of the person they love the most. In death, Jesus cries out the name of the Father whom he has trusted throughout

his life, to whom he has submitted in loving obedience, and whom he continues to trust even at his death.

From childhood, Jesus would have learnt to memorise the Psalms, and these opening words of Psalm 22 evoke a deeper reality still. For Psalm 22 is a lament, in which the psalmist offers his pain, his abandonment, his terror to God and cries out to God to save him. And yet, lament and prayer lead to a turning point, a moment of hope, an assurance of rescue, an affirmation that future generations will proclaim God's salvation. In Jesus, God has penetrated to the depths of human suffering. Jesus dies in solidarity with those who die alone and friendless, those whose closest family are barred from their hospital bed, those who have no one to sit beside them and hold their hands as they gasp their final breath. Even in this moment of deepest suffering, even in this moment of being utterly forsaken, God is in fact not absent. Even in the very darkest of human experiences; even in the places of most profound suffering, perhaps especially in these places, the God who had not in fact forsaken Jesus is still present, still reaching out to the outcast, still offering his love.

And so we can offer, with the Psalmist and with Christians throughout the ages, our honest questions and lament to God, knowing that, as he did not forsake Jesus, so he has not forsaken us. We can offer the experiences and the pain of those who are currently in the darkest of places knowing that God is present from the highest heights to the lowest depths, knowing that, in the words of Psalm 22, verse 24, "he [does] not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he [does] not hide his face from [us], but [hears] when [we] call to him."

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, you died on the cross  
and entered the bleakest of all circumstances:  
give courage to those who die at the hands of others.  
In death, you entered into the darkest place of all:  
illumine our darkness with your glorious presence.  
To you, Jesus, your lifeless body hanging on the tree of shame,  
be honour and glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit,  
now and for ever.  
Amen.

Holy God,  
holy and strong,  
holy and immortal,  
have mercy upon us.

We adore you O Christ and we bless you  
because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.



A reading from the Gospel according to Mark

*Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. (Mark 15.46)*

The disciples now wait. Jesus has died. He is laid in a tomb. And there is nothing more. They wait.

Whether they know why they are waiting is unknown. The women certainly are waiting for an opportunity to anoint and dress the body, which they can only do once the Sabbath is over. Perhaps the others too wait with them. The Sabbath stops their work and their endeavours and instead they pause in this in between moment.

Perhaps in this waiting time they think their own pain might diminish. Perhaps they wait for their own sense of loss to emerge, to powerfully rock them, only to wait for it to become more bearable. For grief does that over time. But maybe these hours will be heavy and leaden and time will all but stand still as the enormity of what is lost begins to become clear.

In this moment, Jesus' followers share with all who have lost those they have loved.

And what about Jesus? What is he doing in this strange twilight moment between this dark Good Friday and the Resurrection Sunday that we know is yet to come? Bishop Philip North suggests that rather than this being a dark tomb, it is in fact a dark womb. Ready itself for the bringing forth of new life. And that needs time to develop. This strange lull nonetheless leaves us bereft, leaves the disciples bereft – wondering why the all powerful God does not raise Jesus immediately from the dead. Surely if he has the power over life, surely if he wants to hold on to the beloved Son he would make this moment pass quickly. There need be no lull...

But this waiting, this pause, serves to confirm that Jesus is dead. It does not, as Jane Williams says in her book, suggest Jesus merely 'temporarily faints' and revives a few hours later. Here he is lying in a grave. Dead.

And this is a reality that the disciples are called to face. Whatever they had previously thought was going to happen, the reality now looks very different. He is dead.

Thomas Merton, the 20<sup>th</sup> century mystic says that it is in reality that we see God. And so perhaps in this moment, this waiting, this is where we seek and indeed see God.

By the time the disciples get to meet the risen Jesus they are transformed and changed people. They have mourned something of themselves along with the seeming loss of their Messiah. However important or integral they may have considered themselves before this moment, they now sit with nothing. Because it is now beyond their power or influence for this situation to change. They can only depend upon God... if they still even have faith in God.

The events of the last day might have shown them how wrong they can get things. The events of the last day might have shown them how wrong their expectations might have been – of themselves, and of Jesus too.

Jane Williams says that when they do finally meet with Jesus they seem a quieter, more sober group of people.

This then, this waiting, with the tomb sealed shut, is a time to allow reality to settle.

As we wait in our own isolation for this time to pass, we too might embrace the reality of what is around us. It is, after all, so often the case only when we are presented with a situation where there is nothing else to do other than wait that we realise how incredibly hard it is.

Waiting in a hospital, waiting for test results, waiting to see if treatment works...

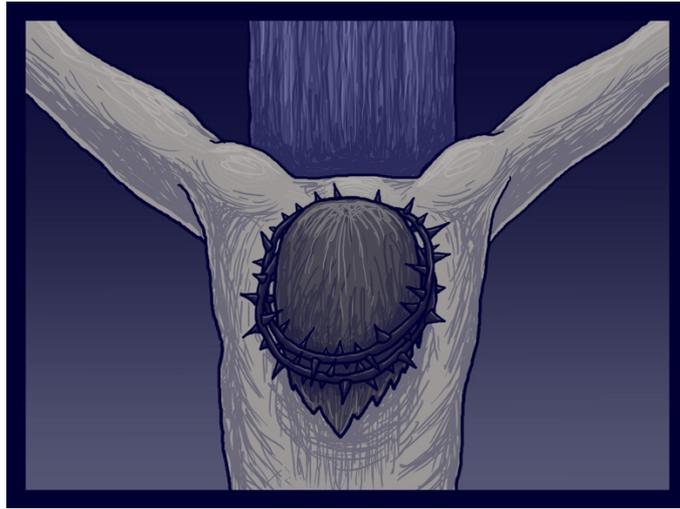
Waiting when choice is taken away can be unbearable. Waiting when we ourselves cannot influence the outcome of the moment is beyond painful. This is a hard lesson in reality.

This is where God is. The reality of waiting. And participating in that waiting is the only thing we can offer. An offering to reality. To ourselves. And to God.

'I believe I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!' (Psalm 27. 13-14).

Lord Jesus, Lord of life, you became as nothing for us;  
be with those who feel worthless and as nothing in the world's eyes.  
You were laid in a cold, dark tomb and hidden from sight;  
be with all who suffer and die in secret,  
hidden from the eyes of the world.  
To you Jesus, your rigid body imprisoned in a tomb,  
be honour and glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit,  
Now and forever.  
Amen.

Holy God  
Holy and strong  
Holy and immortal  
Have mercy upon us



Let us pray for the coming of God's kingdom  
in the words our Saviour taught us.

Our Father in heaven...

Most merciful God,  
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ  
delivered and saved the world:  
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross  
we may triumph in the power of his victory;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.  
Amen.

May God bless us,  
that in us may be found love and humility,  
obedience and thanksgiving,  
discipline, gentleness and peace.  
**All Amen.**