

Reflection 1 'He opened wide his arms' - *the welcome of God*

Hymn – to sing or read

My song is love unknown, My Saviour's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown, That they might lovely be.
O who am I, That for my sake My Lord should take
Frail flesh, and die?



Reading:

'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say - "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, *'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'* The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, *'An angel has spoken to him.'* Jesus answered,

'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. Jn 12.27-33

Reflection

Over the years the words we use in public worship have been revised. One of the newer sentences in the communion service has proved more popular than most. Perhaps it is yours too? It is the line, 'He opened wide his arms on the cross.'

When someone opens their arms to you – what do you see?

What is being expressed? What are you about to receive?

And how do you respond? - joy, love, delight, welcome - with open arms in return.

To be unable, or forbidden, to freely offer this in any time or place runs counter to our deepest instincts and feelings. But such has been our context over the past two Good Fridays and the time in between.

In this vigil at the foot of the cross we begin by imagining Jesus on the cross. His arms are opened wide towards us and our world.

Here is love that refuses to keep distance from us.

To imagine love in this place of such dreadful suffering is not easy. The focus is more often placed on judgement, guilt, punishment, debt and sacrifice. And they are all part of this story. But that focus too easily makes the cross a kind of extreme, divine problem solving – one which requires unspeakable suffering and death to deal with our sin.

Well the cross is a place of painful truths but that is not where the story starts. What is original to this world is not our sin or evil. It is divine love.

When we begin with the negatives, focused on the problem, we never get out of the cycles of judgment and condemnation. No repentance is ever enough. No effort will make us acceptable.

It is true that human sin has made God's embrace of us a work of tragic redemption ... but it is love that holds him there. Love is reaching out to us at whatever cost. There is no distancing.

Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity – “now you can love them after all”. Jesus came to change our mind about God.

God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because *God* is good.

This is welcome beyond any language of deserving - good or bad

The cross tells us that nothing we humans can do will ever decrease or increase God's eternal eagerness to love us. Divine love is made visible here - forever.

So let us draw near to this love.

There is somewhere is this separated world where we have no need to keep our distance.

There is offered here an embrace unlike anything we have ever known. It is beyond all imagining or any notions of deserving.

He opened wide his arms on the cross.

Where do you connect with these thoughts?

You might pause and keep silence for a few moments.

Prayer

O God, revealed upon the cross, through the open arms of your Son.

Your love is endless, Your reach is boundless,

Your embrace knows no separation. In wonder and gratitude we turn to you and open our arms to receive your love.

We adore you O Christ and we bless you for by your Holy Cross

You have redeemed the world. Amen

Reflection 2 'The place called the skull'

- the crucified God

Hymn – *to read or sing*

O sacred Head, now wounded, With grief and shame weighed down, Now scornfully surrounded With thorns, Thine only crown; O sacred Head, what glory What bliss til now was Thine Yet though despised and gory I joy to call Thee mine. Bernard of Clairvaux

Reading:

'As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had

crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' Matt 27.32-37

Reflection

Executions always took place outside the city, in places of maximum publicity, by the main routes into the city – as a warning and deterrent. That the sign above the cross of Jesus was in three languages (as we learn elsewhere) makes this clear.

This is a message and a signal.

Around the edge of any growing ancient city would have been quarries, close to the main roads, managing the endless demand for building material.

Occasionally the quarriers would come to a rock that was flawed or cracked – perhaps from earthquakes. They would chisel round and continue cutting back so that, over time, the quarry floor would have lumps and outcrops of damaged rock sticking out, standing alone, rejected by the builders.

One of these had attracted the name 'skull' – because that is what it looked like.

It was a place used for executions. It was by this rock, or upon it, that Jesus was crucified.

We know that for the first years after the death of Jesus, the Jerusalem Christians gathered by this stone on Easter day. That makes sense of the words of Peter,

'Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood. 'The stone that the builders rejected' has become the very head of the corner'. 1Peter 1.1&2.4-7 4

The first Christians were often from among the poor, the marginalised, the socially 'worthless'. To such people comes this unexpected invitation.

Come to Jesus. You too are like stones in the quarry, left behind like so much debris, odd shapes and flawed pieces no one found any use for; discarded after the powers have chosen the best by their measures of value and importance.

But you are, in fact, of great value.

Here at the place of the skull - we too come flawed, unpromising and far behind when judged by the preoccupations and obsessions of this present age.

But listen. All the usual measures of what makes us acceptable, impressive or even useful have been suspended – or rather reversed.

'Come to him', says Peter. Really?

This takes some trusting. We should expect anything built on such a foundation to look foolish, sound irrelevant, and be easy to mock and despise by any normal measure.

We will not be found on 'Grand Designs'.

We will never be impressive building materials. But nor was Jesus. He was a stone the builders rejected. If Jesus, the rejected one, is the foundation stone of life, we are being shown a completely different way of knowing ourselves and of seeing and knowing God. All that has been rejected and left behind as worthless must be seen in a new light. Jesus, the stone the builders rejected, has become the foundation stone for the only building that really matters – the new humanity built upon his love.

Where do you connect with these thoughts?

You might pause and keep silence for a few moments.

Prayer

Christ our victim, rejected and cast aside as of no worth.

May we not turn away from you, but find here, with all this world rejects, a sure foundation for new life and hope.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Janet Morley - adapted)

We adore you O Christ and we bless you, for by your Holy Cross

You have redeemed the world.

Reflection 3 'Why have you abandoned me?'

- the abandoned God

Hymn – *to read or sing*

Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom, Lead thou me on;
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till The night is gone, And with the
morn those angel faces smile, Which I have loved long since, and lost a
while.

Reading

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Matt 27.45-56

Reflection

I have sat with others as their earthly life has drawn to a close. No two stories are alike. But I have come to believe what others have long said - that in a mostly hidden but significant way the last journey of a person's spirit into death begins long before physical death.

We have some glimpses of what Jesus was going through on the cross - though even those near him struggled to make out his words and meaning. The creeds say 'he descended to the dead'. And that, in Christian tradition, was a descent to hell itself.

A television documentary captures the moment when an explorer penetrates remote, deep jungle and comes upon ancient ruins. The breathless voiceover says - 'who knows when human voices were last heard here?'

Jesus descended to the dead. There must always be mystery in the language and imagination here. But Christian faith has understood this to mean that in his incarnation, suffering and death Jesus willingly and fully entered the farthest, deepest, waste places of human spirit and destiny. All that is most lost.

Now, from the cross, an anguished cry rends the lifeless silence.

'My God, my God why have you abandoned me!'

And when was a voice last heard from that abyss?

It is the only time in his earthly life Jesus does not call God 'Father'.

He is there for us ... It is our cry.

It is the cry of the world. It still is.

In that cry is found our hope and salvation - and nowhere else.

In more recent literature and films about the cross the suffering and pain have been presented in overwhelmingly graphic detail. But we will not understand his gift by trying to measure his pain. It is not the quantity of suffering that saves.

It is *who* is suffering and *why* that saves.

Nor is salvation achieved by some kind of transfer of punishment from sinners to an innocent victim. The cry of Jesus is not the agony of pain divinely inflicted, punishment pitilessly exacted, payment claimed in blood. Rather, God takes it upon himself - and it tears him apart.

That cry is the harrowed anguish of divine love.

How are we to express this?

'I want to say it like this', writes the theologian Jane Williams, 'so that we can hear it and feel it. God is torn apart from God. Particularly about the cross, that is the only kind of language that I can find to say what I am trying to say. On the cross, God endures the separation from God that is the world's. As Jesus cries, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', he is the life of God, streaming into our separation. Because Jesus

and his Father are ripped apart, nothing can now separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. God is in our dislocation from God, as in our connectedness.'

Where do you connect with these thoughts?

You might pause and keep silence for a few moments.

Prayer

Christ our victim, Whose beauty was disfigured
whose body torn upon the cross
who willed to enter our abandonment and loss
Open wide your arms, To embrace our tortured world
That we may not turn away our eyes
But abandon ourselves to your mercy. (Janet Morley)

We adore you O Christ and we bless you
For by your Holy Cross You have redeemed the world.

Reflection 4 'It is finished' - the victory of God

Hymn – to sing or read

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Reading

'... standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Jn 19.25b-30

Reflection

And what is finished? The phrase comes twice.

Sin? Evil? Death? Pain? Suffering?

Plainly not

Whatever is finished this world is not yet problem or pain free. Far from it.

'It is finished' completes the earlier cry - 'why have you abandoned me?'

The gospel accounts express this in different ways.

Matthew tells that, at the moment of his death, the curtain of the Temple was torn 'from top to bottom'. Top down. This is God's doing.

That huge heavy curtain hung before the holiest place separating off God's presence. God now rips it apart.

Something is open that was closed.

Something is united that was divided.

Nothing is outside the love of God.

No one and nowhere is beyond reach his crucified embrace.

There is now no division, no separation. It is finished.

The church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is built over the site of the crucifixion and tomb of Jesus. Climb the stairs and there is a crowded chapel where you can reach in and touch the top of the Calvary stone.

But underneath is an unmarked chapel. It is usually empty.

Behind the altar, behind a glass window is the bottom of same fractured rock.

It is called 'Adam's Chapel'. The message is clear - the cross penetrates down to the very beginning. Nowhere and no one is beyond its reach.

The embrace of divine love on the cross reaches it all.

It is finished.

The story can begin again.

In John's account, when all is finished, Jesus simply bowed his head and 'gave up his spirit'. For a few deadly hours Jesus had been willingly surrendered to earthly powers - passive in the hands and will of others.

Now, at the last, Jesus again takes the initiative. He completes his earthly ministry - his total self-offering - in a final act of trusting surrender to the Father's will. 'Bowing his head' is the language with which you might describe someone quietly going to sleep - though here the pain and thirst are acute.

One thing remains - to give up his spirit.

In John's gospel what is offered 'up' is found in the perfect will and purpose of the Father.

The earliest teachers of the faith would teach that if Jesus had not hand over his spirit to the Father at this moment of death the world itself would have ended.

Bowing, laying down, offering up, handing over

....

The final complete, trusting, self-offering of himself.

The sacrifice complete. It is finished

The Father and the Son are one.

This image of the cross was designed by Scilla Verney, an artist, who was herself dying of cancer at the time. The world is portrayed as split apart - painfully, sharply separated. That split can express anything that is fractured, separated and lost. Christ, in his own body, fills that contorted gap.



His arms are thrust into the midst of it all. In his own being he holds it all together. This is our faith. This is where the world is now held In Christ. Nothing is outside of it. That is where all broken and separated things are found - in Christ. Nothing separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

*Where do you connect with these thoughts?
You might pause and keep silence for a few moments.*

Prayer

Look, Father, look on His anointed face,
And only look on us as found in Him;
Look not on our misusings of Thy grace,
Our prayer so languid, and our faith so dim;
For lo! between our sins and their reward,
We set the passion of Thy Son our Lord. (William Bright)
A space to add your own prayers
We adore you O Christ and we bless you
For by your Holy Cross
You have redeemed the world.

Closing worship, reading and prayers

Hymn – to sing or read

O dearly, dearly has he loved , And we must love him too
And trust in his unfailing love , And try his works to do.

Reading

Jesus said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Pause and keep silence for a few moments.

Prayer

Lord upon the cross
Our life giver, pain bearer, love maker
Open wide your arms
to embrace our tortured world
that we may not turn away our eyes
but abandon ourselves to your mercy
and so become life giving, pain bearing
and love making signs of your kingdom,
For your name and glory's sake.

We adore you O Christ and we bless you
For by your Holy Cross You have redeemed the world.

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