



HOLY WEEK DEVOTION

Written for the congregations of Bellville & Durbanville Presbyterian and
Somerset West & Stellenbosch United.

Good Friends in Christ

Is it a tomb? Is it the belly of a whale? This experience of Covid19 isolation is so strange, so peculiar – one doesn't know what to call it. Whatever it is, it feels like separation, the opposite of “fellowship” and “meeting together” as envisaged by Acts 2: 42ff. The writer to the Hebrews is even more forthright in his encouragement to the Church: “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another ...” (10:24 & 25). But we can't meet together! At least not physically.

The hardest thing is not being able to see you or shake your hand on Sundays, to exchange a hug or to sympathise (in person) with what all of you are going through. The four of us are trying to do what we can to reach out to our church families by all means possible. The daily devotional we have written is an attempt to exchange the spoken word for the written word, just for this short season. Easter is the highlight of our faith and the climax of our Christian year. This year is different. Even the oldest (Rod) cannot remember Easter services not being held. This little booklet comes with our love, poured into words, from our hearts to yours. We hope that it will be a source of comfort and inspiration to you as we make our journey with Jesus from Bethany to Jerusalem, from the Palm branches to the empty tomb, and from shouts of praise to whispers of wonder.

There is a devotion for every day starting on Palm Sunday and ending on Easter Sunday. Also a prayer to pray if you'd like to. Walk with Jesus. Walk with us – we may be in separate places but we will make this journey together.

Holy week 2020



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PALM SUNDAY, 5 April 2020

John 12: 12 - 19:

The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the king of Israel!"

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him. Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

The story of Holy week begins with what was probably the most significant public display of Jesus' claim to be Messiah. Jesus rode into Jerusalem, a poor man's version of the return of the king – as David and Joab might have come in after a battle won. Who was there to greet him? John tells us that some of the people who saw Jesus raise Lazarus were there, as were their friends. What was pretty evident is that they were all doing a courageous thing, defying the Roman governors and the Jewish religious leaders.

Michael Battle, in his commentary on this passage, says that it is really about love. Not so much Jesus' love but the love of the crowds. He says, the closest analogy he can find for the experience of people who come to faith for the first time is falling in love. Did you ever feel something like this for Jesus?

When we find Jesus, when we find that we believe in Jesus, it is like falling in love. It is a pity, though, that most often, this is the most profound religious experience many people are likely to have. "To fall in love is to project the most notable part of one's being onto another human being." Walter Wangerin describes it as follows in his book on marriage: "Love lies a little. Love, the desire to like and be liked, feels so good when it is satisfied that it never wants to stop. Therefore, love edits the facts in order to continue to feel good."

Did this crowd really love Jesus? Did they deeply love him?

It is impossible for us to know. My best guess is that there were those gathered there on Palm Sunday who felt so much more than just a shallow falling in love. They were the ones whose lives he had changed, the sinners set free and the disabled now able to work and live. I suspect that there was a genuineness in their worship as he came riding into Jerusalem. But I have been a minister of the Gospel too long not to notice that some of the worship is just "Raa Raa". I've seen too many groupies dressed up for Jesus' rock concert, throwing themselves in abandon at the stage but before long the energy is burnt out and they fall back into the crowds never to be seen again.

Falling in love with Jesus is easy. Following Jesus is hard. I guess there are far more people who fall in love than people who stick around and get down to the tough business of loving deeply.

Jesus wants you for the long haul.

"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him." (1John 4: 16b)

In many ways, God's love scares me because it reveals that love is not a longing to seize and hold another

person but rather, in freedom and in hardship, to place one's trust in another even when you don't fully trust yourself.

Palm Sunday is a display of God's love for you. "So Jesus gets onto the back of a jackass" writes Michael Battle, "and parades among the palms toward Jerusalem". "This is carnival, this is lampooning, this is street theatre" writes New Testament Scholar Charles Campbell. It's a parody of power. It makes Pilate and Herod and all the others look so silly. This is real love. This is Jesus showing us what his kingdom is going to be like: no violence, only love.

PRAYER

Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
We worship and adore you.
Thank you for the gift of our emotions – all of them, Lord.
Our laughter, our anger, our shouts of happiness and our tears.

Lord Jesus, your emotions on this day seem to have been like ours often are. Up one moment and down, down, down the next. The crowds lift you with their spontaneous joy but the leaders of your people tried to slap you down fast.

They tried to steal from you the praise due to you.

And when you were alone, tired at the end of the day (as happens also to us), and you looked at the city, you started to cry. And (like us) you said "if only ..."

Oh Lord, when we look at our loved ones and at the world we live in, we also cry with many "if onlys".
Holy Father, fill us again with your Spirit that we might have a heart full of thanksgiving and a mouth full of praise every day for You, together with the Spirit and your Son, our Lord. Amen.

MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK, 6 April 2020

John 12: 1 - 11:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages" He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

There are only eleven verses in this passage but they are crowded with drama and darkness, intrigue and terrible wickedness ... but also loveliness where the goodness of God shines brightly, inviting us to look up and hope again.

On the dark side, John portrays Judas as sickeningly self-righteous and corrupt in that while he would later betray Jesus, he was stealing money from Jesus and the other disciples (and probably from the poor). The Chief Priests wanted to kill Jesus and Lazarus, and made plans to do so! They simply would not celebrate that someone had been raised from the dead.

On this dark side is the "UNGOOD NEWS" – the inclination to deny the poor any kindness and kill off any hope of resurrection. The dark side is the opposite of the Good News in Christ Jesus.

On the bright side, John records a dinner party for friends. Jesus is the guest of honour in the home of his close friends - Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Mary and Martha display their personalities in how they show hospitality. Martha serves everyone while Mary uses expensive perfume to bless the guest of honour and, in the process, fills the house with the pleasing fragrance of her tender love. Jesus tells Judas to "leave Mary alone" and in 3 words affirms Mary and puts Judas in his place. Jesus speaks easily of his death, of the poor always being with us, but also of the significance in his being with us too.

On this "bright side" is the acknowledgement of the poor, of the value of serving others and the power of the coming resurrection at work already, after all – there sat Lazarus raised from the dead!

Go slowly through this holy week. Cherish the opportunity to once again walk with Jesus and the disciples. Try to feel the wind of the Spirit, to hear Jesus and the others speaking, to smell the smells and see the things that happened. Try to be there yourself, in the story with Jesus.

Go slowly.

And the Holy Spirit will let you experience the Good News: Christ is risen, death is defeated, we too will be raised from the dead. And there is work of great dignity for each of us, every day – helping the poor and, with each act of kindness in Jesus' name, we make the world smell nicer.

PRAYER

Almighty God, God of the poor, God of the living and the dead,
we worship and adore you.

Thank you that you defend the poor, thank you that you are Good news for the marginalized.

Thank you that when we were so poor in spirit as to be dead in our sins, You sent your son Jesus to bring life and immortality to life.

Thank you that he became poor so that we could become rich: Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven ... for ever and ever.

Make us like you, Lord. Mould us and fill us with your nature so that we can become friends of sinners and good neighbours to the poor.

Help us live now, in and with the power of the Resurrection, so that we would never withhold forgiveness from anyone and never tire of doing good.

For Jesus sake. Amen.

TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK, 7 April 2020

John 12: 20 - 36

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince 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 show the kind of death he was going to die.

The crowd spoke up, "We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?"

Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light." When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.

Dr. Dan Ariely is Professor of Psychology and Behavioural Economics at Duke University, North Carolina, USA. Following a life-changing accident where he was severely burned, he began to research the human response to short, and long-term pain and reward. His research focuses on a thesis he calls "predictable irrationality". This suggests that we humans will settle for short term gain over long term significantly higher gain despite our knowing better. So, no matter how unwise they know it is, people would rather buy a fancy SUV now, than retire comfortably.

Something similar is happening in this passage. Some "Greeks", who were probably gentiles converting to Judaism, wanted to see Jesus. His response seems odd if not obtuse, because he says neither "yes" nor "no". Instead he begins to talk about a seed, saying "if it dies it produces many seeds". He is, of course, referring to his own death and the fact that the crucifixion-resurrection event will plant seeds across the world bringing Greeks and many others to the Kingdom. Then they will truly "see" Him.

It is this single-minded focus on the long-term goal which becomes the lesson to the disciples and to us in the sermon Jesus preaches. It is, for Jesus and for us, a matter of life and death. For "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (vs 25).

The word that is used for "life" here is one of the three Biblical words. One means physical life (bios), the other means a God-infused life (zōē), while this one (psuchē) refers to the personality and character of a person. One scholar calls it the "ego" or that which makes us who we are. It can also refer to the whole person, much like the word "Soul" in Genesis 2 in the Old Testament.

For Jesus, unless He faced the death before Him, none would truly live. We may be called to give up our lives, but for us, unless we are prepared to give up *all we are* and be utterly transformed into a new person in Christ

Jesus, it will be as if we are lost or dead. To be of true use, to bear seeds for Jesus Christ, we are to be prepared to lose *who we are* to become like Christ. To be “transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” 2 Cor 3:18.

PRAYER

Dear Father

We would like to hear your voice audibly and clearly but we have a lot of trouble, Father, hearing your voice most days.

So we ask, gracious Lord, for eyes to see **Your glory**:

in creation;

in human kindness every day;

in the regular ‘ordinariness’ of the sun rising and setting, season after season;

in the Church, “your Body”, women and men of every kind, all across the world and throughout history who chose to believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting;

in the scriptures and in Psalms, hymns and songs that tell us of you and your love.

And, dear Lord, we ask that our little lives, with so much confusion, doubt and unfaithfulness, would still reflect **your glory** and that that reflection would help others want to see Jesus, and then want to meet him.

For your glory we ask all of this. Amen.

SPY WEDNESDAY, 8 April 2020

John 13: 21 - 32:



After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me."

His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means."

Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.

So Jesus told him, "What you are about to do, do quickly." But no

one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

Betrayal is such a terrible word, isn't it? To be betrayed is so much worse than being lied to or being deceived in some way, because betrayal has elements of both lying and deception built in. To betray someone, you first need a relationship of deep trust, even love. You can only be betrayed by someone you really know, trust, and even love. That is bad enough. What if you know that someone is going to betray you, and you choose to know, trust, and even love them despite what you know they are going to do to you?

Jesus was aware of what Judas was about to do, yet he shares a meal with his betrayer. If you have ever been betrayed by a trusted confidante or a close friend, you will remember the pain, which probably still lingers, even though the event may have taken place a long time ago. Sometimes the pain of betrayal never eases, it stabs like a shard of glass embedded in your soul. What does this account of Jesus sharing a meal with his betrayer mean to you?

Can you imagine what Jesus must have felt as Judas left, knowing as he did where Judas was going and what Judas was about to do? Yet Jesus says a very unusual thing in response to his departure. He speaks about his own 'glory'. At a time when his betrayal, arrest, torture and death are imminent, he speaks about his 'glory', and about being glorified. How are we to make sense of this?

In John's Gospel, when Jesus speaks of his glory, it usually refers to his suffering and death. In Jesus' references to 'glory' in John, therefore, we must not see triumph, but the apparent defeat of the cross. Jesus understood that his death was the necessary event by which sin was to be defeated and death overcome.

Jesus anticipates his own death not with a sense of fatalism or resignation, but with the assurance that in his death, his mission would be accomplished. Although we mourn the death of Christ on Good Friday, let us never forget that Christ on the cross is the one who reveals, in his broken and bloody body, the glory of God. Good Friday is not good because of what happened to Jesus. It is good because of its consequences for us. The ultimate enemy has been defeated and victory has been won because of the death on the cross of the sinless one.

PRAYER

Holy Father,

Your son, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus, was betrayed by one of the twelve disciples while they were eating and drinking together. And with a kiss!

Forgive me, dear Father, and forgive my sisters and brothers, for every time we have tried to turn an intimate moment with you into a moment of self advantage.

Forgive me, and forgive my sisters and brothers, for every instance where our worship of you suddenly became self centred; where we wanted our way, **our** wishes, and where we had the sheer audacity to measure the quality of our worship by how much pleasure we got out of that worship time.

Father and Son, please send your Spirit into us again, that the Spirit may warn us of when we want to turn intimacy with anyone, especially you, into self indulgence.

Turn us again, Holy Spirit, to loving others and God, with heart and soul and mind and strength.
In Jesus name. Amen.

MAUNDY THURSDAY, 9 April 2020

John 13: 1 - 17:

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

As a child, regular Sundays included worship, a Sunday roast, and an afternoon nap. Evenings usually included pancakes or cheese toasties and a service of contemporary worship. The routine was calming. A day at the beach or a cousin's birthday party broke the routine and might make the weekend seem incomplete.

Jesus' disciples were in Jerusalem for the Passover festival routine. There were two days of preparation with delicious kitchen aromas, a hotel-load full of family at home, and strolls around the City to see who had come to the great pilgrimage feast. Jesus sent the pair of disciples ahead to prepare for the Passover. That was normal. They knew the drill and sharing it with their Rabbi was a treat. Thursday was the preparation day and Friday was the actual Passover. Get ready... but then Jesus began to share the actual Passover that night, on Thursday. Wait a minute!

John doesn't mention the bread and the cup but the event he does record will live on in the memory of the disciples way after the Passover Lamb's blood has had its full impact on their lives.

Washing of hands (*Netilat Hadayim*) always starts the Passover meal. A child takes the bowl of water and allows each family member to wash and dry. A full immersion washing was done before the feast, in preparation for the Passover, as a ritual cleansing. All of the disciples would have undergone such a *Tevilah*, or in Greek, *Baptismos* (Baptism), perhaps in the Jordan. But now, at the meal, one washed the body part most likely to have come into contact with impurity - the hands. So why did Jesus wash their feet? People washed feet. More wealthy people had servants to do it but in the Hebrew culture, feet had long been a euphemism for the private parts of a person, metaphorically relating to the shame many experience at this point, a deep sense of impurity.

Jesus stooped in humility at this point to the position of a child, the lowest ranking. He also stooped to cleanse

the most private thoughts of the disciples' hearts , those places of impurity in which they probably had not forgiven themselves. They would not understand at that point, but later would know that every place, even the most secret and shameful, has been met not with judgement, but with the gentle, humble cleansing of the Saviour.

May you know that Jesus has cleansed even those places in you where you never thought you'd be clean.

PRAYER

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
We worship and adore you,
One God forever and ever,
Trinity always, bound in mutual love, service and submission.

Dear Lord, we have no equivalent to the washing of feet,
which seems to have been common in your days on earth.
Perhaps that is a major flaw in our kind of faith.
We want to bless. We want to receive a blessing.
We measure our prosperity as a sign of being blessed.
But we cannot escape this day, Lord Jesus:
that on the night you were arrested, you washed the feet of your disciples.
We cannot imagine a School Principal washing the feet of school prefects but this is what you did!
Gracious God, you have said all your "you-ness", the fullness of who you are, was in Jesus in bodily form. And so, gracious, gracious God, we know that to be like you, we have to serve others.
Help us today, even with what may be left of today, to "wash someone's feet".

Holy Spirit help us discover that serving contains a seed, which when allowed to grow, becomes a blessed life.
Help us experience that to be like Jesus is to practice that the way up is down.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

GOOD FRIDAY, 10 April 2020

John 19: 1– 30:

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they slapped him in the face.

Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!" But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him."

The Jewish leaders insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."

When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon.

"Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle. Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews." Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written."

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. "Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it."

This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, "They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment." So this is what the soldiers did. Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the



disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Crucifixion was designed to be one of the most horrible, cruel, slow and painful way to die. It was developed by the Romans as the ultimate deterrent. Initially reserved for foreign slaves who ran away, it became the preferred method of execution when the Roman authorities wanted to send a message to the people of the lands which they occupied, that dissent would not be tolerated. No Roman citizen could be executed this way, so when you were crucified, you were clearly foreign, an alien, and a danger to the State. The State needed to make a public statement, so, most crucifixions were done on hills close to cities where the crucified could be seen dying slowly for days while the people watched their agony.

The Romans prided themselves on the *Pax Romana*, the relative peace and compliance that prevailed across the empire. Politicians would often hail it as the crowning accomplishment of the Roman style of government which showed the superiority of their system over others. What they failed to point out, usually, is that this peace was gained through brutal military operations and maintained by public executions.

Crucifixion was not uncommon in the time of Jesus and Jews would have been familiar with the sight of criminals and political opponents hanging on crosses suffering unimaginable torment. So, when Jesus starts telling his disciples not only that he is to be crucified, but that, in order to be his follower, you must be willing to suffer the same fate, it is not surprising that his disciples do not want to understand what he is saying to them.

Now, the moment has come, and Jesus is before Pilate. For Pilate, who has sentenced many to die by crucifixion and various other means, this is by no means a common interaction with a condemned man. All through the trial, Pilate – who represents the military and savage political power of the empire – seems to be on the back foot. Jesus, the penniless itinerant Rabbi from the backwaters of occupied Palestine, whose followers have all scattered, seems to be in control. Pilate vacillates between wanting to release Jesus and succumbing to the pressure from the Jewish authorities. Eventually, unable to withstand the pressure any longer, he caves in and orders Jesus to be crucified, with a notice specifying Jesus' "crime".

PRAYER

As so often happens in the Gospels, and especially in the Passion narratives, the disciples have almost all dispersed, but the women are there, standing at the foot of the cross as the loyal companions of Christ. When Jesus breathes his last and says "It is finished", this is not a cry of defeat, but the moment of victory: sin, death, the devil's power and influence are all finished, once and for all.

Holy Father,

How did you feel when you heard the crowds shout: "We have no king but Caesar"?

No wonder John later wrote that Jesus, our Saviour, "came to his own but his own did not receive him".

We know now, Holy Father, that it was not just Jewish people but all people, including us, who did not receive Jesus. Forgive us, Holy Father, for every time we still wriggle away from you, declaring: "we have no king but myself!" King of kings and Lord of lords, we worship you. There is no authority above you and no true authority on this earth that you have not allowed. So, Lord God, King Almighty, help us in all the places where we may have authority (at home, in the workplace, in the recreational clubs we may belong to and at Church) to honour you and point to you. As you gave up yourself on this day, Lord Jesus, as a ransom for many, to bring "many sons and daughters home to glory", help us give up our pettiness, our fussiness and our self pretence of being number one and superior to others.

Glory be to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

HOLY SATURDAY, 11 April 2020

John 19: 32 – 42:

The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

The Saturday of Holy Week must be the saddest day of the year - a dead Jesus.

And John doesn't hide this fact: Jesus died! John tells us, "He was already dead". Three times John refers to the body of Jesus, reminds us "He was crucified" and ends the passage with the solemn but devastating truth "they laid Jesus in a tomb".

A dead Jesus.

One of our ministers, now in heaven himself, used to nag us to slow down, to pause, to stop and to lament on Easter Saturday with the dead Jesus. This day is sometimes known as "Low Saturday" and our colleague kept reminding us that for many people, their reality, their life experience is a constant lament with dead dreams, dead hopes, dead hearts that no longer have the ability to rejoice and feel good. He was right. People of all shapes and sizes, poor, middle class and rich, sick or buoyantly healthy, young, midlife or ancient - people the world over live a life of UNGOOD NEWS. A world where the only Jesus is a dead Jesus.

Be kind to them.

Be gentle with them.

Be patient with them.

Grief is a slow journey.

I smile as I write this love letter for you to use on "low Saturday" because that colleague I mentioned, who taught us much about being compassionate to those who grieve, is in heaven himself enjoying the fullness of LIFE!

Grief may be a slow journey but it does not end with a dead Jesus. We are allowed to grieve. We MUST grieve and we must help others to grieve. But grief's journey ends up at Resurrection and with Jesus' glorious return.

The church always proclaims, boldly and unashamedly the Good News:

Christ has died

Christ has risen

Christ will come again

John reminds us “these things have happened so that Scripture would be fulfilled and we will look on the one we have pierced”. We will look on Jesus and remember that “Christ has died”. This will help us to see that Christ has died for us, that Christ is risen for us, Christ will come again for us, and we too will be raised.

And so today – Go be with those who grieve. Don’t rush them but invite them to join you on the rest of the journey... to joy in the Risen Jesus.

PRAYER

*Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways.
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.*

And so, we bring to you today all who sit in grief:
For those who have lost loved ones and ache still for them;
For those whose marriages have died, love turned to hate or to indifference;
For those whose hope has died, they have no hope for anything but go through life bumping into the next thing to do as if they were blind and alone;
For those whose faith in you, Risen Lord Jesus, has died and who have withdrawn from all forms of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and who avoid all graces and aids – scriptures, hymns and songs, even the service of others;
For those whose love has not been returned, whose service remains unacknowledged, and whose efforts, in spite of great hardship, has remained ignored.
God of the dead, bless all these and use us to bring life to them as you bring them into our circle of life.
In Jesus’ name, Come work your resurrection life through us. Amen.

IN STILLNESS
EARTH AWAITS
THE RESURRECTION



EASTER SUNDAY, 12 April 2020

John 20: 1 – 18:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Over the whole of this week (and the one that preceded it), people have got a little taste of what it feels like to get trapped in a tomb. For we who are 'self isolating' in the midst of a national (perhaps even a world-wide) 'lock down', the experience of isolation is a window into the ultimate isolation, death.

After the devastating events of this weekend, the great symbol of Easter Sunday is the empty tomb and for Mary, the emptiness was almost overwhelming. She experiences trauma and in trauma, we either fight or flee, freeze or submit. Mary flees ... and she tells the disciples what she sees.

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him!"

The author Henri Nouwen once wrote: “Emptiness and fullness seem like complete opposites. But in the spiritual life, they are not. In the spiritual life we find the fulfilment of our deepest desires by becoming empty for God. We must empty the cups of our lives completely to receive fullness from God. Jesus lived this on the cross. The moment of complete emptiness and complete fullness became the same”. (Bread for the Journey, pg 153)

The Empty tomb of Easter is full of meaning for us who believe. A symbol of death and defeat is now a symbol of life and victory. What will we believe when we look into that empty tomb? Will we, like Mary, look in and become terrified, will we run for help? Will we expect the worst? “They have taken the Lord and we don’t know where they have put him.” Or will we like John, go into this empty tomb – see and believe? It is a matter of belief.

If the grave is empty, then the cross is also now empty – because the one who died on it is now alive. The grave clothes are empty and you and I have the opportunity to experience the fullness of God in Christ. The empty tomb is full of meaning but belief is what enables us to see the tomb empty. Have you looked in and fled or did you look in and believe?

For the first time, humankind experiences a transformation at the graveside. For the first time, the mourning of death is overtaken by the celebration of resurrection. Jesus was dead and now he is alive again ... as the funeral liturgy reminds us, “He holds the keys to death and Hades”. “For surely”, writes St Paul, “if we only have hope for this life in Christ – then we are to be pitied more than all people. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. Each in his turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, all who belong to him.” The funeral liturgy then has us commit the person to the “sure and certain hope of resurrection”.

A dear friend sent me a postcard some years ago. I still have it. The front had what looked like a lighthouse on it, but it was not a lighthouse. It turned out to be the telescope at Sutherland. He writes that at Sutherland’s famous observatory is a memorial plaque dedicated to a scientist who “so believed in the stars that he was completely unafraid of the dark.”

What a gift – because of Easter Sunday, you and I need never be afraid of the dark.

PRAYER

Thine be the glory, Risen, conquering Lord Jesus,
together with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
One God, ever to be worshipped and adored.
Up from the grave you arose,
Risen by the power of the Holy Spirit,
a mighty triumph over all the foes: death, disease, hopelessness and cynicism.

God raised the Lord Jesus from the dead and he will raise us also (1 Cor 6: 14).

Lord Jesus, as you stood in the cemetery near your empty tomb and called out, “Mary”, please let us hear you call out our names ... over and over again as we doubt, when we have to bury loved ones, when we might hear our illness is terminal and when we have failed others and want to die of embarrassment and shame.

And let us have a mighty triumph over our foes, especially those of our own making.

And, Risen Lord, when we enter the valley of the shadow of death on our lonely walk, let us hear the music of heaven and feel the same Spirit who raised you from the dead take our hand and lead us into the everlasting joy of the Resurrection. All glory, laud and honour to you Holy Trinity for ever. Amen.