

HOLY WEEK St MICHAEL AND St GEORGE ST LOUIS 2018

Only God knows what has led each of us to be here this evening. Maybe this is your Lenten ritual, your pilgrimage of faith, to take stock, to be renewed in faith and hope.

Maybe something has happened in your life – bad or good- that leaves you groping for some meaning, even for faith for the first time.

Whatever leads you or drives you to be here, you are welcome.

I hope and pray that you will find God's love in the depths of whatever you might be going through.

Some years ago I was preaching at an evening service and began the sermon by saying that if people had come just to hear the bishop preaching then they were likely to go away disappointed; but that if they had come expecting to hear God speaking to them then that just might happen. As I stood at the door shaking hands at the end of the service I was conscious of someone holding back in the shadows. When everyone had gone he emerged. I have his permission to tell this, it was one of our Country's oldest and most famous comedians. He took my hand in both of his and said how that night he had come into church and knelt down and begged, 'O God speak to me'. He went on, when you stood up and said what you did if the heavens had opened and angels had appeared I would have believed it!

I am tempted to say the same this evening and pray that in this coming Holy Week you will have some sense of God speaking to you as you lay your life open before him.

As through this week we draw ever closer to the Cross of Christ it's as if God says to each one of us, "I have been waiting for this moment, for you, for the whole of your life."

FORSAKEN

PSALM 22; 1 – 8

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

And are so far from my salvation,

From the words of my distress?

O my God, I cry in the daytime,

But you do not answer;

And by night also, but I find no rest.

Yet you are the Holy One,

Enthroned upon the praises of Israel.

Our forebears trusted in you;

They trusted, and you delivered them.

They cried out to you and were delivered;

They put their trust in you and were not confounded.

But as for me, I am a worm and no man,

Scorned by all and despised by the people.

All who see me laugh me to scorn;

They curl their lips and wag their heads , saying,

‘He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him;

Let him deliver him, if he delights in him.”

REFLECTION

Here is a classic expression of low self-esteem. Most of us, perhaps all of us, at some time or other can feel alone, abandoned and unloved and interpret these experiences as the result of our own unworthiness especially when tragedy strikes. We're made to feel we don't deserve to be happy and even that we deserve the misfortune that has befallen us.

God feels a million miles away.

I was asked to investigate a major disaster in which 96 people were unlawfully killed at the Hillsborough football stadium in Sheffield. Over the years I had many heart-rending conversations with the bereaved families who had suffered such a terrifying tragedy. One conversation stands out. A father who had lost his son told me he had also lost his faith through the tragedy and echoed the opening cry of this psalm, 'Why has God forsaken me?'

You too might be here because you feel alone, abandoned, unloved and forsaken. Life feels so unfair to you. Why do bad things happen to good people? Tonight and for each night of Holy Week we will turn our focus onto Jesus and the Cross. Any objective reading of the Gospels has us asking the question as to why a person who spent his short life doing good should end up by being crucified. It all seems so unfair. And Jesus, turning on God his Father, gives voice to that felt injustice by crying out from the depth of his being, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Every recorded prayer of Jesus begins with him calling upon God as 'Father'. For example, in John 17 he calls on him in this way six times, 'Father....Father....Holy Father...Father....Father....Righteous Father'.

But the only time he doesn't call him 'Father' is here when he's on the cross. Yet how he must have longed for that voice from Heaven

that greeted him at the Transfiguration and at his Baptism, "This is my beloved Child". But nothing. No voice. Just silence.

There on the Cross he experiences the physical and spiritual alienation as he becomes the Lamb of God that takes upon himself and takes away the sins of the world. In that moment it's as if sin, our sin owned by him, comes between God the Father and God the Son. Desolation. He feels forsaken.

As he cries out 'My God, my God' it's as if he is denying himself the right to call God 'Father' so that we who, for our sin have no right, may say when we pray, "Our Father...".

Many years ago when our children were small I had a serious spell in hospital. I remember how they used to change the drip in the early hours of the morning. I would lie there longing to sense God close to me but feeling that he was more than a million miles away.

Some months later when I was convalescing I was walking past the school at the end of our road. I could hear children playing and laughing behind the tall wall. It was a lovely sound. But soon I heard a child crying and piercing the happy noise. Then I was stopped in my tracks when I realised that the child that was crying was my own daughter! Part of me wanted to vault over the wall and take her in my arms and tell her that it was all right, that Daddy was here, that it was going to be ok. The other part of me knew I could do no such thing. If every time she got hurt I catapulted myself into her life how would she ever learn to trust other people, ever find the resources within herself to cope with the world, the strength to live as an adult.

So with a very heavy heart did I walk on by trusting her to the care of others. Did I love her less? No, I loved her the more. Even though there was a wall between us. I had forsaken her. But I loved her with all my heart.

You too might feel a wall between you and God. You too might be deafened by the silence from Heaven. You too might feel abandoned and forsaken. You too might find it impossible to call God your Father.

If that is so, then as we clothe ourselves in silence allow such thoughts to come to the surface of your heart. Don't censor them. Be honest. Like Christ, tell God you feel forsaken. And cry with him, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

MARK 15; 34

And Jesus said, "Why have you forsaken me?"

SILENCE

POEM Clasp of Hands from The Temple

Lord, thou art mine, and I am thine,
If mine I am: and thine much more,
Than I or ought, or can be mine.
Yet to be thine, doth me restore;
So that again I now am mine,
And with advantage mine the more,
since this being mine, brings with it thine,
and thou with me dost thee restore.

 If I without thee would be mine

 I neither should be mine nor thine.

Lord, I am thine, and thou art mine:
So mine thou art, that something more
I may presume thee mine, then thine.
For thou didst suffer to restore
Not thee, but me, and to be mine,
And with advantage mine the more
Since thou in death wast none of thine,
Yet then as mine didst me restore.

O be mine still! Still make me thine!

Or rather make no Thine and Mine!

George Herbert

HYMN

O the deep, deep, love of Jesus!
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free;
Rolling as a mighty ocean
In its fullness over me.
Underneath me, all around me,
Is the current of thy love;
Leading onward, leading homeward,
To my glorious rest above.

BELOVED

PSALM 22; 9 – 11

“But it is you that took me out of the womb
And laid me safe upon my mother’s breast.
On you was I cast ever since I was born;
You are my God even from my mother’s womb
Be not far from me, for trouble is near at hand
And there is none to help.”

REFLECTION

On the cross Jesus is embraced by a triangle, by a Trinity, of love
although each is apparently silent.

The Good Father at the apex of the triangle is silent.

His good Mother at the base of the triangle is silent.

The beloved friend and disciple at the other end is silent.

A silent Trinity.

Throughout his life he was sustained by these three loves.

His Mother ministered to him at the nativity. She was the first to feed the Body of Christ. A priestly ministry if ever there was one.

His Good Father broke the silence of Heaven at his Baptism and Transfiguration with words that every child craves to hear from their parent, "My beloved child in whom I delight".

His beloved friend the warmth of whose body he felt as he lay against him at the last supper.

These loves sustained him though they said not a word at the foot of the cross.

In the Old Testament in Deuteronomy the children of Israel wondered why God had set his love upon them. After all they were not the greatest of peoples. The answer was given them that the Lord had set his love upon them because the Lord had set his love upon them. In other words, why does the Lord love you? Because he loves you! Why? Because he loves you!

Love is a mystery. Especially when we know the truth about ourselves and wonder why anybody should love us let alone God. But the moment you find a reason for loving someone it is no longer love. Otherwise love is a means to an end. To true love there is no rhyme nor reason. It is a mystery. As is the love of God.

If you asked many people what the Bible says they would probably tell you that its central message is that 'God is love'. But that statement occurs in the Bible only twice. Never on the lips of Jesus, never in the Gospels and only twice in the letters of John. The Gospels and the Bible are full of stories about how God loves us and often in the most surprising ways.

Here at the cross Jesus does something extraordinary. Under the watchful eye of God his Father he gives the two people who have loved and sustained him through his earthly life to each other.

The love between Jesus and the Beloved is as intimate as the love between David and Jonathan. We're told that the beloved lay against Jesus' breast/bosom. That word occurs only on one other occasion namely to describe the relationship between God the Father and God the Son 'who is in the bosom of the Father'.

The Beloved is the one whose love fuels his energy to arrive first at the tomb of Jesus. This love between Jesus and the Beloved and between Jesus and his Mother is cemented in the giving of the one to the other in a quasi-in-law relationship. With the mutual giving the Beloved then took his beloved's Mother into his own home to care for her. It is a beautiful story.

But however much we are loved, when it comes to that moment of departure, when we take that final step to move from the land of the dying to the world of the truly alive we travel alone. Just as Jesus did.

From the cross he left a legacy of love.

As we contemplate our own mortality what legacy of love shall we be leaving?

JOHN 19; 26 -27

And Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple whom he loved "Here is your mother."

SILENCE

POEM Jesu from The Temple

JESU is in my heart , his sacred name
Is deeply carved there: but th'other week
A great affliction broke the little frame,
Ev'n all to pieces: which I went to seek:
After first I found the corner; where was J,
After, where ES, and next where U was graved.
When I had got these parcels, instantly
I sat me down to spell them, and perceived
That to my broken heart he was I EASE YOU,
And to the whole is JESU.

George Herbert

HYMN

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.
O joy that sleekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not in vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

DRAINED

PSALM 22; 14 – 15

“I am poured out like water;
All my bones are out of joint;
My heart has become like wax
Melting in the depths of my body.
My mouth is dried up like a potsherd;
My tongue cleaves to my gums;
You have laid me in the dust of death.”

REFLECTION

Jesus is at the end of himself. He'd already said 'My heart is shipwrecked'. His humanity is at the fore. He is no superman. He gets tired, thirsty, hungry like the rest of us. He sweats and bleeds. He weeps. If this is the manifestation of God on earth then we should add it to the Creed that we believe in a God who weeps.

Here is a true human being. One of the great ironies of the Gospel of John is when Pilate asks Jesus 'what is truth?' and the answer is staring back at him! God gives Jesus as the answer to the human quest for truth. Down the ages philosophers and teachers and poets and songwriters have sought the truth. John Lennon of the Beatles sang, 'All I want is the truth. Just gimme some truth'.

He was one of us 'from the womb to the tomb'. He's gone through all that we go through – to the depths and through the valley of the shadow of death.

There's a painting by Van der Weyder of the 'Descent from the Cross'. The contour of Mary's body, the mourning mother, mirrors the shape of Jesus' twisted body. Or, the bent body of Christ aches symmetrically with the bitter bereavement of his mother. Truly 'a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief'. We do believe in a God who weeps.

In Nicholas Wolterstorff's book *Lament for a Son* he writes about the tragic death of his son and meditates on the verse that 'no-one can look upon the face of God and live'. Up until that moment he interprets it as meaning that no-one could see the face of God in glory and live beyond that point. But then he grasps the idea that no-one could bear to see the face of God in tears and possibly live beyond such a traumatic sight.

Jesus hangs on the cross and cries 'I thirst'. He is utterly spent. It's a vision of the spentness of God himself. CH Vanstone in a book called 'Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense' recalls a surgeon who spent hours in painstaking surgery and then had to be led out of the theatre like a little child he was so exhausted.

Jesus used the image of thirst as a metaphor for the spiritual life.

Suffering acts upon us like a piston – at times propelling us upward and at times dragging us downward; driving us into the arms of God and bargaining; drawing us away in despair and doubt.

Another psalm puts it poetically, 'Like as a hart desireth the water brook so longeth my soul after thee, O Lord'.

In the silence now feel your own thirst for God. That is why we are here. And repeat simply these words:

JOHN 19; 28

And Jesus said, "I thirst".

SILENCE

POEM Longing from The Temple

With sick and famished eyes,

With doubling knees and weary bones,

To thee my cries,

To thee my groans,

To thee my sighs, my tears ascend;

No end?

My throat, my soul is hoarse;

My heart is withered like a ground

Which thou dost curse.

My thoughts turn round,

And make me giddy; Lord, I fall,

Yet call.

Lord Jesu, thou didst bow

The dying head upon the tree:

O be not now

More dead to me!

Lord, hear! Shall he that made the ear

Not hear?

Behold, thy dust doth stir,
It moves, it creeps, it aims at thee:
 Wilt thou defer
 To succour me,
Thy pile of dust, wherein each crumb
 Says, come?
Thou tarriest, while I die,
And fall to nothing: thou dost reign,
 And rule on high,
 While I remain
In bitter grief: yet I am styled
 Thy child.

HYMN

O Sacred head, sore wounded,
Defiled and put to scorn;
O kingly head, surrounded
With mocking crown of thorn:
What sorrow mars thy grandeur?
Can death thy bloom deflower?
O countenance whose splendour
The hosts of heaven adore.

FORGIVEN

PSALM 22; 16 – 18

“For the hounds are all about me,
The pack of evildoers close in on me;
They pierce my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones;
They stand staring and looking upon me.
They divide my garments among them;
They cast lots for my clothing.”

REFLECTION

There are times when we get hurt that the pain is so piercing, the animosity so angry we simply cannot with integrity say, ‘I forgive you’.

Neither does Jesus say, ‘I forgive you’. Rather, he pleads, ‘Father, forgive them’.

When I was Bishop to Prisons I made a series of programmes for BBC Radio 4 called the ‘The Bishop and the Prisoner’. I listened to a woman who’d been raped and assaulted within an inch of her life. She was determined to forgive the man who had nearly murdered her but confessed to me that ‘forgiveness is fluid’. And so it is.

The Bible has three words for what requires forgiveness.

‘Trespass’ as in trespassers who cross a line, a boundary will be prosecuted.

‘Iniquity’ as in a piece of wood that is warped.

‘Sin’ as in falling short of the mark.

In the Passion Narrative all three are on display.

The religious leaders fabricate false charges – they cross the line and transgress the imperative to tell the truth.

The crowd, a malleable and fickle creature throughout history, is warped and caught up in a frenzy of hounding an innocent.

Pilate senses that he is trapped and, lacking moral courage, falls short of the standard of justice.

On the cross Jesus prays that the Father forgives them and us and all humanity for our transgressions, our iniquity and our sin.

In the Book of Revelation we are told that the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the whole world ‘was slain before the foundation of the world’. This is an extraordinary truth – before we were made, not just before we sinned God made provision for our forgiveness. That is amazing grace!

You may be familiar with the Rublev Icon. It is seen as an image of the Holy Trinity seated around a table at the centre of which is a ram/lamb’s head. The icon conjures up many thoughts. It made me wonder whether in timeless eternity there was a moment when the three persons of the Trinity discussed which of them would become the Lamb

Jesus took it upon himself to empty himself and divest himself of all heavenly majesty and become one of us and take upon himself the sins of the world.

As we now enter a silence together let us hear Jesus whisper into our hearts, “Father, forgive” and place our name.

And if you feel like saying, ‘Oh, but I’ve been here too many times, I’ve asked you to forgive my sins too often’, then hear him say to you with compassion and authority, ‘What sin is that? For the last time I forgave you I promised to remember it no more’.

And if you imagine that your sin is too great to be forgiven, I doubt it on your behalf for why else would you be here tonight.

LUKE 23; 34,35

Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’. And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching. But the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the messiah of God, his chosen one!’

POEM A Hymn to God the Father by John Donne

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,

 Which was my sin, though it were done before?

Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,

 And do run still: though still I do deplore?

 When thou hast done, thou hast not done,

 For I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won

 Others to sin, and made my sin their door?

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun

 A year or two; but wallowed in, a score?

 When thou hast done, thou hast not done,

 For I have more.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun

 My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;

But swear by thyself, that at my death thy son

 Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;

 And, having done that, thou hast done;

 I fear no more.

HYMN

There is a green hill far away ...

He died that we might be forgiven.

RESCUED

PSALM 22; 19 – 24

“Be not far from me, O lord;

You are my strength; hasten to help me.

Deliver my soul from the sword,

My poor life from the power of the dog.

Save me from the lion’s mouth,

From the horns of wild oxen.

You have answered me!

I will tell of your name to my people;

In the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

Praise the Lord, you that fear him;

O seed of Jacob, glorify him;

Stand in awe of him, O seed of Israel.

For he has not despised nor abhorred the suffering of the poor;

Neither has he hidden his face from them;

But when they cried to him he heard them.”

REFLECTION

If ever you have stood beside a potter's wheel you'll have seen the potter at work. Just when you think the potter's finished their creation suddenly the great thumbs reduce the clay to nothing as the work of moulding and shaping continues. So it is with us in the hands of the Creator. If ever we thought that we were the finished product something happens to show that we are still very much work in progress. As the Bible tells us we are forever on this earth clay in the hands of the Potter.

Life is neither a perpetual Good Friday nor is it a perpetual Easter Sunday. It is a continual to-ing and fro-ing between the two until one day we are finally rescued and delivered.

Through out our sojourn God is at work both in the world and in us individually and personally, blending Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom.

Imagine a master painter at work. The vision in his mind through brush and paint translating onto the canvass. Not only is he a painter he's also a grandfather and surrounding his easel are lots of adorable but mischievous grand children each with their own designs on the canvass. While he is at work the children are dabbing their fingers on the palette of paints and daubing the canvass. Yet so patient a grandfather and so brilliant an artist instead of shooing the grand children away he painstakingly incorporates all their smudging into the image that he is creating so that in the end their actions freely chosen add to the depth and the texture of the vision.

That is how God is at work both in the world and in us personally and individually. Even the betrayal of Judas which was an action freely chosen by him was woven by God in is Sovereignty for the salvation of the world.

For Jesus his own death was the ultimate deliverance and rescue. To our generation that is such a counter cultural view. Death is seen as a failure of medical science.

Have you ever wondered why it is called Good Friday? Surely there was nothing good about a perfectly innocent man being condemned to death? It is because through the death of Christ we too are delivered and rescued from death.

At the heart of the Temple stood the Holy of Holies. Once a year on the Feast of Atonement the High Priest would go beyond the veil of the curtain to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people. No one else was ever allowed to enter. When Christ died we're told that the Temple Curtain tore from top to bottom. It was a sign that the way to God was now forever open, that our sins, now forgiven, were no longer a barrier to being in the presence of God. The Lamb of God has taken them away.

"He has opened the Gate of Glory". I love the poem by John Donne that begins, ' Since I am coming to that Holy Room

Where with thy choir of saints for ever more

I shall be made thy music ...'

WB Yeats wrote, 'An aged man is but a paltry thing ,

A tattered coat upon a stick, unless

Soul claps its hands and sing.'

We should follow the example of Jeremy Taylor and practice 'the art of Holy Dying'.

When our children were very small we would drive the length of England to visit their grand parents in Scotland. Try as they would to stay awake they would fall into a deep asleep so that when we arrived I would carry them to their beds. The following morning they would wake with the dawn and with views across the water ... with their grandparents. They were in paradise!

So we too wearied by the journey here on earth seek to remain awake and alive as long as possible but in the end are overwhelmed by fatigue and succumb to sleep ...

LUKE 23; 45

And Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

SILENCE

POEM Hymn to God my God, in my sickness

Since I am coming to that Holy Room,

Where with thy choir of saints for evermore,

I shall be made thy music; as I come

I tune the instrument here at the door

And what I must do then, think here before.

We think that Paradise and Calvary,

Christ's cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one place;

Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;

As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,

May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.

So, in this purple wrapped, receive me, Lord;
By these his thorns, give me his other crown;
And as to others' souls I preached Thy word,
Be this my text, my sermon to mine own:
Therefore that he may raise, the Lord throws down.

John Donne

HYMN

When I survey the wondrous Cross,
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.
Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ my God.
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.
See from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown.

REMEMBER

PSALM 22; 25 – 31

“From you comes my praise in the great congregation;

I will perform my vows

In the presence of those who fear you.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;

Those who seek the Lord shall praise hi;

Their hearts shall live forever:

All the ends of the earth

Shall remember and turn to the Lord,

And all the families of the nations shall bow before him.

They shall come and make known his salvation,

To a people yet unborn,

Declaring that he, the Lord, has done it.”

REFLECTION

This is the psalm in which we find ourselves for we are the 'people yet unborn'. We are the beneficiaries of his salvation.

Shortly after I became a vicar and within six weeks my father died and then my uncle and then my aunt. Three of the most significant adults of my childhood. I was asked to take each of their funerals. It was an honour but also a strain.

The chapel at my uncle's funeral was packed with hundreds of mourners. As the service began so a red admiral butterfly began to circle the rafters so much so that it caught the attention of the whole congregation. As I began to say the prayers it landed on my prayer book. I prefaced the prayers by saying that just as this creature was once a caterpillar but its body had changed into a butterfly, the same being but a different body, so we too at death change from one body into another, a spiritual body; we are after death are the same being but with a different body. The following day I took a phone call from my aunt, 'you'll never guess what has just happened: we were all sitting together with the doors open to the garden when in flew a red admiral butterfly; it circled the room three times hovering over the sympathy cards and flew out.' She paused, 'Do you think that was a sign?'

The natural world is full of signs of life following death.

As we look to Easter Sunday with its promise of forgiveness and life eternal we find signs that salvation is not just individual and personal but involves the whole earth, to 'the ends of the earth'.

We know that the Temple Curtain tore from top to bottom but we often overlook the fact that the earth quaked – twice. Once at the crucifixion and once at the resurrection.

The central petition of the Lord's Prayer is for the earthing of heaven. The grand plan of God is to fuse heaven and earth and to answer the prayer which he taught us to pray, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.

The bodily resurrection of Jesus shows that God has a plan not just for the spiritual dimension but for the material and physical dimensions of his Creation. Why? Two reasons, firstly, because it is good, originally good and, secondly, because all things have come into being through and for Christ. To destroy creation is ultimately a blasphemy for it is to undo God's creative work in Christ.

Death cannot destroy Creation. If that were so, death would have the last word on God's creation. As John Donne put it, 'Death, be not proud, Death, thou shalt die.'

In Revelation Chapter 21 we are given a kaleidoscopic image of the union of heaven and earth; there will be no more dying, no more crying; God himself not an angel will wipe away the tears from our eyes, the Deacon God. If you've ever wiped away tears you'll know it's a very delicate and gentle thing to do.

It is into such hands that Jesus committed himself, and we too. The hands of the Creator and the Comforter who redeems and restores us and the whole of Creation.

LUKE 23; 46

And Jesus said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit,'.

SILENCE

POEM

From Divine Meditations

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me;
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

John Donne

HYMN

There is a Redeemer ...
When I stand in glory
I will see his face

Melody Green