

AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

Meditations for Good Friday

by

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Introduction

I understand that in recent years a poll was conducted in the U.K. amongst those who professed to be Christians. They were asked if they believed in the resurrection of Jesus; well over 90% said that they did. Then they were asked if they believed in the virgin birth; again a very similar proportion said that they did - which may seem surprising in view of the doubts expressed in recent years by senior churchmen. Finally they were asked if they believed that Jesus died in order to forgive their sins. Apparently under 50% believed this. In view of the fact that only those who claimed to be believers were involved, this is astonishing. They were happy to accept the traditional Christian teaching about Easter and Christmas but not Good Friday.

Much of the blame must be laid at the door of those of us responsible for teaching the faith. Jesus ministered for some three and half years, yet Luke devotes a fifth of his gospel to the last week of Christ's life, excluding the resurrection. Matthew and John both give a third of their gospels to it and Mark an incredible 40%. The New Testament majors on the death of Christ yet, today, his followers do not appreciate its significance.

Of course, teaching the great truths of the faith must not be confined to the period around the feasts which celebrate them, but there may well be some significance in the fact that far fewer people attend church services on Good Friday than at Christmas and Easter.

When I was young, Good Friday was not only a holiday but, as the word originally implied, a holy day. Many Anglican Churches held a three hour service from 12 noon to coincide with the final three hours Christ spent on the cross. Usually the service would be divided into nine periods of twenty minutes, each comprising a scripture reading, a hymn, a prayer, a meditation and a time of silence. The theme centred on the cross and often the meditations were based on the seven words which Christ spoke while he was fastened to it.

Things have changed. Today, most shops are open on Good Friday and it seems like any other week day. Churches of various denominations may hold a

united walk of witness and some may have a family service in the morning and a concert of suitable music in the evening. A few still have the three hour service and others will hold 'An Hour at the Cross' from 2 pm., with just three meditations instead of the nine.

In the course of my ministry I have led both three hour and one hour services on Good Friday. I have greatly valued these because they offer a time of quiet meditation for the whole congregation, many of whose members may not be able to find the time to attend a full weekend retreat.

With regard to the Hour at the Cross, it has been my custom to conduct this from a prayer desk rather than the pulpit. Modern sound systems, with a microphone on the desk, enable me to be heard but not watched. I suggest to the congregation that, at the end, they should depart quietly to their homes, so that the effect and emotions of the service will not be rudely dissipated; and for that reason also, I do not say goodbye to people as they leave.

This booklet contains four of the hour-long meditations which I have used over the years. One is based on the seven words from the cross, and others see the events of Good Friday through the eyes and thoughts of those who were there. I deliberately do not announce who the various characters are, but allow the listener to discover who each is as the meditation develops. Hopefully, these scripts will prove helpful to those who have the responsibility of preparing such a Good Friday service over the very busy Easter period. Alternatively, the meditations might be interspersed with music at an evening concert. Apart from such public use, individuals may like to use them in their personal prayer times during Holy Week.

I have also included the script for a three hour service. It is a very personal statement, as a meditation inevitably will be. Anyone planning to use it in public may wish to make such amendments as will make it personal to them.

A: 1

I'm angry,
Oh, I am so angry.

You knew, you knew it would end like this.
I remember now. It was that day at Caesarea Philippi;
you asked us who people thought you were.
We told you... some were saying
you were John the Baptist come to life;
and others, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.
"But you," you asked, "Who do you believe me to be?"
And suddenly, I saw:
"Why, you are the Christ, Son of the living God," I said.
You accepted that to be the truth.
"This wasn't revealed to you by man," you explained,
"but by my Father in heaven."
You agreed you were the Christ of God.
Then, at once, you told us you must come here,
to Jerusalem, where the priests and teachers of the law
would put you to death.
So you knew. All along, you knew.

Why did you ever call me?
I was happy at my work of fisherman, but you called me away.
"So you are Simon:- you will be Peter," you explained.
"From now on, it is men you will catch."
I never asked to come, but once you'd called...
That's the thing about you, you seem to give a man a choice,
but what choice is there really, once he's seen?
You did it again at Capernaum; do you remember,
you who are hanging there? Five thousand you had fed.
The next day, they all came running after you;-
"It's only for the bread," you said,
"Come feed on me."
They wouldn't, and they turned away.

Every man jack of them turned away.
The twelve of us were left alone, with you.
You looked at us and asked, "Will you too, go away?"
But that is it! You gave a choice that was no choice at all.
To whom could we go, once having been with you?
Life was not life until you called me,
I see that now. Nor will it be again.
That's why I am so angry.
Why did you come? Why did you call? -
open my eyes to see what I have seen? when all along,
you knew that it would end like this!

And there's another thing.
That day I understood you were the Christ, you said
that now you would call me Peter, and I would be
the rock on which you'd build your Church.
What Church was that?
What can there be of anything you spoke about,
now that it ends like this?
That's why I'm angry. I'm angry, Lord, with you.
You made so many promises, and all are proving empty.
Had you not called; had you not claimed so much...
And yet you knew, you knew it would end like this.

It need not have done so, Lord, I tried to tell you,
but you called me 'Satan', and turned away.
Had we but stayed in Galilee...
Oh, it was so good - those days with you in Galilee.
The people loved you there. Now there you had a kingdom,
and the sun was shining all the time.
I suppose that wasn't so, but that is how I remember it;
especially standing here in this un-earthly gloom
Why is it so dark, Lord?
It's as though the hatred of all the world
has gathered here, and is laid upon your shoulders.

Look at the priests and Sadducees!
Why, when that soldier ran to fill a sponge
with vinegar and raised it to your lips, they cried,
"Leave him alone; let's see if Elijah comes to save him."
Such cruelty! and they the leaders of the people!
Oh, Lord, I'm sorry; it isn't really you I'm angry with,
it's them. They are the ones who have put you there.
They've always been against you, Lord,
from the very first. Why couldn't they see?
I suppose you challenged them.
They saw you as a threat to their position and authority.
But what have they done, what have they ever done,
to help the sick and poor? and give them hope
and self-respect?
You healed so many, brought them so much good...
and they have now destroyed it all.
Do you wonder that I'm angry, Lord?
so very angry, Lord, with them?

Last night, it all began so happily.
We were to celebrate the Passover with you.
I've always loved that night, Lord, ever since
I was a little boy. But somehow, everything went wrong.
There was that confrontation which you had with Judas:
you dipped that bread and offered it to him;
then told him, "What you are about to do, do quickly,"
- and he went!
He went to betray you, Lord. I didn't know it then,
but you did, Lord. That's the part I do not understand.
You knew! You knew it all along!
How could you be so... so natural, Lord, with him?
When all along you knew he would betray you.
Now, had I known what he planned, I would have acted.
I would have stopped him - by force if necessary.
I do not understand how he could do it.
Why, he had heard you speak and seen you heal,

experienced your love.
How could he let you down in such a way?
I'm angry, Lord, with him.
I do not understand why, if you knew, you let him do it.
But I'm angry, so very angry, Lord, with him.

And then there was that row we had.
Well, it wasn't really a row, but we got pretty heated, didn't we?
"Which one of us was greatest?"
How could we do that, Lord, when you had just before
washed all our feet?
Thinking of that now, and watching you hang there, is agony,
I feel so terribly ashamed.
And then you turned to me, you picked me out,
"Simon," you said, (and it's just occurred to me,
why didn't you call me Peter then? Was it because
you could not trust me to be the rock, after all?)
"Simon, Satan has desired to sift you all as wheat,
but I have prayed for you."
I replied, - this is what I said, the actual words -
"Even if all fall away on account of you,
I never will."
That's laughable now, isn't it? that's laughable!
But you persisted, "This very night, before the cock crows,
you will disown me three times."
You knew, you knew that too.
I do not understand you, I really don't.
Why, if you knew these things, did you not act
to stop them happening?
But I will never learn, will I? I still blundered on.
"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."

Not once, not once, three times! - just as you had said.
The third time, even as I was speaking, the cock crowed.
You turned and looked at me.
I was too far away for you to have heard what I had said,

and yet, you knew.
Never have you looked at me like that.
What was it that I saw? Not anger.
At first, I thought it was dismay -
sadness that I had dealt with you like that:
but it was pity; not for yourself, but me.

Ah, now I see the truth why I am angry.
It is not you, the Sadducees, nor Judas; it's myself.
Yes, you are on the cross, it's all over now.
I know that you have failed to bring
the kingdom you have so longed to see set up;
but at least you die a man.
You have never compromised, never once fallen
from what you set out to be.
But I... I have failed myself, and you.
I see, now, what I am; what I have always been,
although I did not know.
But you knew, didn't you? all along, you knew.
Yet you trusted me, befriended me, and I have let you down;
denied I ever knew you.
I want to say that I am sorry, to ask you to forgive me;
and I think you would.
I want to restore the relationship we've had
from that first day that Andrew brought me to you.
But now I never can.
You die believing that I do not care;
And I must live, knowing I do but unable to say,
"I'm sorry, Lord; I'm sorry that at the end
I failed to be what, in my heart, I longed to be -
one you could rely on."
I must live with my failure; but, Lord, now that I see it,
I am not sure that I can.
With your death, every hope I have is extinguished.

A: 2

Was it for this?
Was it all for this?

When first the angel came and said
I was to have a child - a boy,
and he was to be called "Son of the most high",
he also said you would be great and sit on David's throne,
and your kingdom would never end.

What sort of throne is this?

Your hands, so torn and bleeding!
I remember you would lie upon my lap,
and I would take those hands in each of mine
and gently clap them both together.
You would laugh and, gurgling with delight,
stretch out and touch my face...
Such kind and gentle hands you have, my son, and strong;
but now, stretched out again, they cannot touch.
Those nails...

Was it for this, my son, my son?
Was it all for this?

If this is all, why did the shepherds come
that night in Bethlehem, and bow their knees?
And, following them, the Magi with their gifts -
gold, frankincense and myrrh? The gold is gone.
The frankincense we could have used
to anoint your body for the grave.
And myrrh - could they have known
the soldiers here would offer you a drink of vinegar
laced with myrrh to ease your pain?
"Where is he, born to be King of the Jews," they asked.

Where is the promised kingdom now?
Was it for this?
Was it all for this?

For thirty years we have been much as any family.
O life was hard, especially when dear Joseph died;
but you were there, my son,
to carry on the trade of carpenter.
We were not rich, but never quite in want,
and I was happy then - until three years ago.
(Is that all it is, just three?)
Some power beyond yourself came calling you:
'though I had known that call was there
ever since we found you with the teachers in the temple...
"I must be about my Father's business," you said.
And you were up and gone.

I realise now, the change in our relationship
occurred that day in Cana, at the wedding feast.
The wine ran out; instinctively I thought of you.
"Tell him, tell Jesus. He will know what's to be done."
I see now I had come to depend on you,
for you were always there.
But that day, when I said, "The wine has failed,"
you looked at me in such a way
as you had never looked before.
"Woman," you said, "dear woman,
why bring me into this? My hour has not yet come."
I brushed it off, as though I had not noticed
the fundamental change.
I ordered all the servants, "do what he says;"
and yet I knew that things could never be
the same again in our relationship.
I suppose that every mother thinks her son,
however tall he grows, is still her little boy.
But it was more than that.

Somehow you were no more mine than anyone's;
for you belong to no one... yet to all.

And when you said your time was not yet come,
what time was that? Is this your time?
Is this why you were born?
Or has something gone terribly, horribly wrong?

It was all right to start with:
why, with a mother's pride, I watched the crowds
come eagerly to hear you speak - and bring their sick.
You even raised the dead... huh! raised the dead,
why then are you hanging here?
Is it only others you can raise? why not yourself?
I knew it would end like this;
that was why I tried to stop you preaching.
I hurt you then. But you hurt me,
when you asked, "who is my mother? who my brothers?"
"They are," you said, "all those who hear God's word
and put it into practice." Was I so wrong
to try to spare you this?

All down the years, since that first day
when I was told I would become the mother of a son,
I've hidden many things within my heart
which no one else could know or understand.
I knew you would be different, and I've seen the signs
of your authority as countless people came to you.
I've watched and heard you teach deep things
you did not learn from Joseph or from me.
And, all along, I've heard, deep hidden in my mind,
the voice of ancient Simeon - that day we took you
to the temple to present you to the Lord.
He took you from me, in his arms,
and prophesied of you. Then looked at me and said,
"A sword will pierce your own soul too."

So this is it. This is the sword he meant.
Yes, you were born for this.
This is how it was meant to be.
But it all seems such a waste,
and certainly,
I do not understand.

A: 3

Now I stand here and watch.
Almost two thousand years away.
Yet that is not so very long ago.
Given that man has three score years and ten,
 why, if each in old age touched a new born babe,
 less than thirty men can span that gap.
It is not so very long ago.

Things have not changed since then.
Oh, outward things... the means of travel.
 (By leaving now, before this day is out
 I could be in Jerusalem.)
But deeper, more important, lasting things -
 the people that we are, the nursing of our hurts,
 our selfishness and pride -
 these have not changed at all.
And so I stand with countless others down the years
 around the cross, and watch and wait.

There are more, far more, who gather now
 than gathered then.
Yet we do not sense the shock they knew.
We are so familiar with the cross,
 and wear it as an ornament. How strange!
It is a sign of death, a means of getting rid of those
 society has rejected.
For most of them, of course, the rejection was deserved;
 the thief who hung beside you, Lord, admitted that.
"We are punished justly," he exclaimed,
 "For we are getting what our deeds deserve.
 But this man has done nothing wrong."
And then the words which always have astonished me -
 "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom."
What was it, Lord, that enabled him to see

from all his agony, and watching you in yours,
you were a king?
If he had heard you preach or watched you heal,
or had he seen you feed the multitude on five small loaves,
I could have understood if he had followed then.
What was there in your broken body, bloody pain,
that enabled him to see your glory?
He was so sure; and with his helpless cry,
he gained eternity.

How powerful your cross is!
Two timber beams, that's all.
Yet it draws whole hosts of men and women
from countless nations and makes them one.
No one but you could take an instrument of weakness
and of death, and transform it into such a means of power.
Tell me, Lord, (and I hardly dare to ask this)
what was it like? Oh, I do not mean the pain
that racked your body - I do not even want to think of that;
I don't believe I can -
No, I am thinking of the shock and desolation
when you were cut off from God.
For that I cannot understand. It is such an irony.
I know too well what it is like to feel
that I have cut myself from God by some deliberate sin;
although I know he never has, in fact, deserted me.
But you, who never sinned, and who enjoyed
a unity and deep communion with him which was unique,
and who never had experienced the slightest shadow
on his love for you, you were indeed cut off;
cast into that darkness which surrounded you
and all the land, while you hung there.
That ghastly cry, "My God, My God,
why have you forsaken me?"

I know, Lord, I know why!

I hardly dare to speak it out. I am ashamed,
yet treasure it: - You went through that for me!
That's why I've come today. That as I watch
beneath your cross, I may experience again
the wonder which I sensed that day when first I saw the truth.
You went through that for me!
I stand here with so many others; and yet I stand alone.
Somehow, there's only you upon your cross and me.
I've hardly dared to raise my eyes, but now I do,
and find you looking down at me. It hurts me, Lord,
to hold your eyes with mine. I'd rather turn away.
But if I am to know the wonder of this day
I must not turn too soon. I must wait in silence,
and in awe, and hear you whisper through your parched
and broken lips, "I am doing this for you."

I hurt because I want to cry, "don't do it, Lord, for me.
I don't deserve... I am not good enough...
I do not feel for you the depth of love you have for me."
It hurts me, Lord, it really hurts to know
that you did that for me.

Yet, with the hurt, there is a secret joy
which no one knows but me; and one that lasts.
When I have acted in a way that has made me look a fool,
or worse, when I have said or done
something of which I am ashamed,
and want to shut myself away because I feel
I cannot face myself - let alone the world;
I think of you, and of your hanging there upon the cross,
and hear you say, "To me, you're worth all this."
I find that difficult to understand,
yet I know that it is true.
You went through that for me!

I realise, Lord, of course, that it is not the same

for me as it was for Peter, Mary or the rest
who gathered round the cross at Calvary.
When you cried, "It is finished," they must have thought
you meant it was the end.
They could not understand it was a shout of triumph: -
You had accomplished all the father had set for you to do.
So I cannot possibly enter their despair.
For that I'm grateful, Lord; for I can go from here
with a deep excitement in my heart - I know the end: -
except there is no end, and never will be now.
I leave, anticipating Sunday. So I can only dimly comprehend,
as though I watch some play,
the feelings of all those who loved you then.
Their anguish as they saw your body taken down,
wrapped in a winding sheet and carried to a grave
they did not choose.
They waited then in hopeless sorrow
for the Sabbath day to end, that they might go
to find your lifeless body.
I wait for something totally different.
But that's for Sunday; and I will not allow
the wonder of that day to detract in any way
from the wonder of this.

Today, today, you hang there for me!