

# AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

Meditations for Good Friday

by

Ken Gardiner

## 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 fewer than 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.

B: 1

And sitting down, they kept watch over him there.  
(Matt. 27:36)

HIM THERE!

Words are strange things;  
for their size they carry so much meaning,  
especially when they are put together,  
as in the present case:- HIM THERE!  
Why, there isn't even a verb,  
and yet those two little words  
using only eight letters in all,  
contain the greatest mystery this world has ever known.  
Him There. HIM! ... THERE!  
It's putting them together, of course,  
that gives the wealth of meaning.  
If we spoke only of 'HIM', there would be no surprise,  
for he could be anywhere;  
All things were made by him,  
and without him was not anything made  
that was made.  
It is his world, he made it, and so  
he might be anywhere within it.  
And if we spoke only of 'THERE',  
that would be no surprise.  
It wasn't an every-day occurrence,  
but common enough; after all  
two others were THERE, on their own crosses;  
one on either side of him.  
What causes the astonishment is that it should be  
HIM, THERE!

And what about in heaven? Were the angels watching?

They came and sang at his birth,  
were they there at his death also?  
There was one angel, of course, who knew of it.  
Luke records that he came to the garden of Gethsemane  
to strengthen Christ as he prayed in agony.  
But did the hosts of heaven know?  
If so, they must have been in dread and awe  
to see their Lord, their King, upon the cross.  
To see HIM, THERE!

And what of Satan? Had he ever really believed  
that he would triumph, as he thought,  
and put HIM - THERE?

The soldiers did not know, of course.  
They were foreigners and they were far from home.  
So they made what sport they could -  
to pass the time.  
Religious festivals meant little enough to them.  
Most criminals with whom they had to do  
were, no doubt, tough and surly men;  
like the other two that day, who cursed and swore  
as the nails were driven in.  
But HE was different; claiming to be a king.  
So they made a crown of thorns,  
and dressed him in a purple robe,  
and knelt before him.  
If only they had known...  
they would have knelt indeed,  
not in mockery, but awe.  
But as it was they did not know;  
and so, when they had sorted out  
who would have what of his clothes  
(for those were their perks at crucifixions)  
they sat down to start their watch over HIM THERE.

They were not surprised, why should they be?

Because for that you have to understand

who he was, and very few knew that.

It is the same today.

If you and I were to stop some passers-by

along the street and say, "Today's the day

they put Jesus on a cross," what would they do?

Perhaps they'd be embarrassed, and so would we;

because they do not know,

anymore than the soldiers,

who he was, who he is,

who was there.

But we do know; and we have come together

to keep our watch over HIM THERE:

to remind ourselves

what it was he did - and why.

And as we do - with all our wonder that HE should be

THERE,

remember this; it was no surprise to him.

All though his life, or certainly

from his baptism and testing in the wilderness,

he had known. Imagine; all the time he taught,

and healed the sick, and drew the crowds,

he knew how it was to end.

He had carried that thought with him all the time.

In heaven, it had been planned

from before the world was made.

For there was a cross in the heart of God

long before it stood on Calvary.

"What shall I say, 'Father save me from this hour'?"

No, for it was for this hour I came."

For him this was the culmination of his coming;

what it was for.

It is this alone gives meaning to creation: HIM! - THERE!



B: 2

HIM THERE!

Him! As we think of him,

let us try to picture for a moment,

how he would seem to them -

the ones with whom he'd shared himself.

You see, for us, our minds are coloured before we start.

We are told from the outset, "This is God."

And whilst we may not go as far

as to picture him a stained-glass saint

with a halo round his head,

we feel we must approach him with a sense of awe.

He is the 'Son of God'; not really one of us.

But to those who lived in Israel then,

who knew Joseph as the carpenter

and Mary as his wife, and young Jesus as their son;

to them he would be nothing special.

They would have no sense of awe.

It seems most likely he would follow

his father's trade, and learned

to fashion things from wood;

a yoke, the handle of a plough,

a table or a chair.

But no one would have asked him for a cross;

you do not need much skill for that,

although it's made of wood.

It's strange to think that wood and nails

were such familiar things to him

all through his life. And, in the end,

it was wood and nails that took that life from him.

But to return to those who watched him grow.

To them he would have been simply another boy.

Even as a man, he would have been nothing very special;

at least, not until he reached the age of thirty.  
No, all eyes 'til then  
would have been upon his cousin, John.  
Now there's the 'holy' one.  
Living in the wilderness;  
eating locusts and wild honey;  
preaching judgement, fire and brimstone.  
The wild-man prophet; he's the holy one.  
But Jesus, a little quiet perhaps -  
thoughtful, rather - until his baptism.  
Then he began to teach, but not in the fiery tones  
of John. With strength and power indeed,  
but not the brash, judgmental tones of some.  
Rather, the deep intensity of feeling,  
and the truth of what he said, drew people to him.  
But nothing to make them think he was anything  
except another man, with passion in his bones  
to see the ways of God proclaimed.  
Proclaimed and then lived out by men.

Of course, there were the signs, the miracles.  
They cause a stir. And later, in Jerusalem,  
the way he answered learned men,  
the scholars and the priests;  
these caused surprise.

But that very fact - the fact they did -  
shows how the people then regarded him:  
"Isn't this Joseph's son?  
Joseph, you know, the carpenter;  
so where did he gain this learning?  
and where this power to heal?"

Andrew saw it first, apparently;  
for it was he who drew his brother to the Lord  
with the words, "We have found the Messiah."

Even so, it does not seem he realised what that meant.  
Then Peter, up in the hills at Caesarea Philippi,  
suddenly saw: "You are the Christ,  
the Son of the living God!"  
But this was a revelation given him,  
it did not come from his own understanding.  
The Messiah, to him, was still to be  
a very earthly man.  
No wonder that to him and the others of the twelve,  
the crucifixion was the end of all their hopes.  
The one who was to conquer, and to restore Israel,  
so that nations would bow down  
and honour the God of the Jews,  
was hanging on a cross.  
He, the Messiah, was there. HIM , THERE!  
All hope was gone.

It was only later, at the empty tomb,  
that the understanding first began to dawn,  
and that on John alone.  
He saw and believed. But what did he believe?  
Simply that Jesus was alive?  
Or was there some deeper understanding  
of who he was?  
Then Thomas who, with all his doubt,  
Was the first to cry, "My Lord; my God!"

They came to the truth slowly.  
This man, with whom they'd walked and talked,  
eaten, joked and learned to preach and heal,  
this man was God.  
But we start there.  
If, for them, it was difficult to see  
this man was God; for us, its difficult  
to see this God was man.

He had to fight temptation, and for him  
that meant a greater trial than we can know.  
We have never experienced  
the full, relentless power of the tempter.  
We all have given in, some way, long before.  
In him the desire to disobey, avoid the cross,  
became such agony, he sweated blood.  
And, because he was a man, he longed for company.  
"Couldn't you watch with me, even for an hour?"  
And then they ran away; and left him.  
Why, one of them - one of the twelve -  
betrayed him. "My own, familiar friend."  
And Peter denied he knew him.  
Jesus had known rejection before;  
he had wept over Jerusalem;  
and the rich young ruler had walked away.  
But Peter; Peter!...  
I wonder, did it help to know beforehand  
it would be so? When it happened  
had it helped to know?  
And as he felt the whip with knotted thongs,  
the crown of thorns,  
and as they hammered the nails  
into his very human hands,  
had it helped to know, "I am their God"?  
I doubt it.  
Surely, the deepest experience of his full humanity  
came that moment when he was cut off  
from every sense of God.  
To be despised and rejected by men brings loneliness;  
but to find that God had cast him off  
brought such terror -  
more than anything we can understand -  
that he cried out in pain far greater  
than the nails could bring.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

No, he was fully man. Yet God as well.

How essential this should be.

For if he was not God, we are not saved.

If he was only man, however wonderful,  
the gap is still not bridged.

The rope to which we cling -  
the other end is not secured  
within the heart of God.

No, it must be God himself who reaches down  
to draw us back to him.

That is why it had to be him there.

If, to those of his time,  
the crucifixion was the end of all their hopes,  
it is the very beginning of ours.

B: 3

HIM THERE!

Who put him there?

To answer that literally, we must say, "The soldiers"; the army of occupation. Technically they were Romans, and the centurion in charge would most probably indeed have come from Rome. But the soldiers themselves may have come from anywhere in the empire.

It was the custom, on conquering a country, for Rome to transport the young men of that nation to serve in another. In that way there was less chance of rebellion.

So, for the soldiers, far from home, this was just another duty.

"Number five platoon, you're on crucifixion today. Fall in; quick march!"

All they knew was that there were three; two robbers and a man accused of treason. He claimed to be a king, and you can't do that and live, with Caesar on the throne.

He must be mad; and madmen were always good for sport. So they had their fun.

The purple robe, a bulrush in his hand, and for a crown - a ring of thorns. "Your majesty!"

They'll bow before him again one day.

Then out to the site, bang in the nails and heave the cross-bar into position. But he was different - "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

So literally, yes, it was the soldiers who put HIM, THERE!

But they were simply obeying orders.

So was it Pilate? after all, he was in charge.

No execution could be carried out  
except on his authority.

Here we see the issue stark and clear.

He had examined Christ and found no fault in him.

Justice demanded he be set free.

But what was expedient? Ah, expediency!

Pilate knew complaints about himself

had already gone to Rome,

and he was anxious to avoid adding any more.

If it should reach the ears of Caesar

that the Jews had found a man claiming to be king,

and, bringing him to Pilate,

had demanded he be put to death,

and Pilate had set him free...!

Justice and expediency... and expediency had won.

So Pilate too, as surely as the soldiers,

put HIM, THERE!

But what of the Jewish rulers; the priests, the Sadducees?

It was they who pushed Pilate into it against his will.

Christ was too great a challenge to their position.

They knew the law, but not the God whose law it was;

so when he came, how could they recognise

him they did not know?

And so the high priest spoke;

"Better one should die than that a people perish."

And when that one is God himself...

The high priest spoke more wisdom than he knew.

But still he bore the guilt,

so he and they who stood with him,

also put HIM, THERE!

And Judas played his part.  
The Jewish rulers knew they did not dare arrest Christ  
with the crowds who loved him standing by.  
It had to be a time when he was quiet, apart;  
and they could take him without fuss.  
But when was that? where would he be?  
Then they had a stroke of luck;  
Judas, one of his own, came to them  
and offered to let them know the time and place.  
Why? what was it made him do it?  
Had Jesus ever let him down?  
Judas had experienced the kingdom;  
he had preached and healed.  
Where did his frustration lie?  
Was it, as some have said,  
he believed that Christ was letting go the opportunity?  
And if he, Judas, forced his hand,  
he would reveal himself, and then and there  
bring in the kingdom?  
Others, down the ages, have also thought  
they understood the kingdom and its ways,  
better than its King.  
But if that were so, why the money?  
why accept the bribe?  
O Judas, Judas, what was in your mind?  
for surely it was you who put HIM THERE!

But there is more to be said than that;  
for Judas did not act alone.  
Oh, he must bear the full responsibility  
for what he did. But there was a greater power  
seeking to break into the world of men,  
as once before he'd broken in, through Eve.



Satan, like a roaring lion, was prowling round  
seeking whom he might devour.  
Finding deceit in Judas and waiting  
for the moment of resolve,  
as he took the piece of bread which Jesus offered,  
then Satan entered into him.

There is a mystery here. For, moving  
in the heavenly realm, Satan was aware  
of issues unknown to men.  
He knew the origin of Christ and recognised  
that he had come to win the world;  
that part of the created order which belonged to him.  
Yet, was the detail of the plan hidden from him?  
For if Satan knew; if he had understood  
that death upon the cross  
was God's plan for his Son, not his,  
would he have sent the Son to the very place  
where his own defeat was to be accomplished?  
As they nailed Jesus to the cross  
did Satan gloat in triumph?  
Boasting before his demons, "I have won!"?  
There is no doubt that Satan put HIM, THERE!

And yet, and yet! it was God's plan.  
When the Greeks came seeking Jesus, he remarked,  
"This is the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified.  
What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'?  
No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."  
The Father sent the Son into the world to die.  
In Gethsemane he had prayed, "Your will, Father,  
your will be done, not mine."  
It was the Father's will that Christ  
should hang upon the cross.  
When we see such utter goodness laid upon the cross,

so racked with pain, we can only whisper  
the dreadful truth - "The Father put HIM, THERE."

And why? because by that he could win you.  
If he had spared his Son, then you would surely die -  
eternally!

The death Christ died was rightly yours - and mine.

Had it been US, THERE

there could have been no resurrection.

There is no righteousness in us

to set us free from Satan's claim.

But when that glorious shout went up from Christ,

"It's done, I've finished it -

accomplished all I came to do."

Did Satan see it then? realise that what he thought  
was his great victory, was his defeat?

That the keys of death and Hades passed to Christ,  
and his captives were released?

That's why, that's why the Father put HIM, THERE.

But there is an even greater truth.

It was not the soldiers, nor Pilate,

nor the Sadducees and priests, put Jesus there.

Not Judas, nor Satan, and finally not even God.

For Christ was free to choose.

In the moment he was arrested and Peter drew his sword,

Jesus said to him, "Put your sword away.

Do you think I cannot call upon my Father,

and he will at once put at my disposal

more than twelve legions of angels?"

Jesus was free to choose. It was not inevitable.

He explained it very clearly,

"No one takes my life from me;

I lay it down by my own choice."

No one put HIM THERE but himself.

It was not nails that held Christ to the cross,  
but love; and that was love of you.