

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 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.

C: 1

So, Lord, I have come.

As countless others have come,
down the years, to watch you die.

I'm not sure that I really want to be here -
it's too painful; yet it has a fascination
that draws me.

I suppose that is not so very different
from the attitude of those who gathered
at Golgotha that day.

For the soldiers, it was a job to be done!

Is that what they said at Auschwitz
when other Jews were executed,
herded into the gas-ovens -
it was another job that had to be done?

In the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem,
there is recorded how the Nazi executioners
held family parties or listened to Beethoven,
between their spells of duty putting men to death.

How could they not see what they were doing?

To their families, no doubt, they were kindly men;
husbands and fathers.

Perhaps the men who hounded you to death
were also family men - good to their families;
and in putting you to death just didn't know
what they were doing.

Is there some area of my life where I am blind,
and do not know what I am doing?

Not putting men to death,
but something else of which I will be so ashamed
when, one day, I stand before you, crucified Lord?

I wonder, was there a Jew in Auschwitz who,

as the door was banged behind him, prayed
as you prayed when the nails were banged into your hands,
"Father forgive them, they know not what they do?"

So the soldiers had to be there.

I cannot really identify myself with them.
But there was a crowd of ordinary people
who had come to watch another execution.
I wonder, had I lived then,
would I have been amongst them?

I would like to believe not.

I would not like to think I am the sort of man
who gains pleasure from watching another suffer.
Yet it was not so very long ago
that people of this nation
gathered at public executions;
and why should I imagine I am better than they?

Given the situation, time and culture,

I must face the fact that very likely
I also would have gathered there at Calvary
to watch you die. Not really understanding who you were.
It is different now; I do know, I do understand.
So again, I cannot really identify myself
with the crowd who gathered then.

But the disciples:

they knew, they understood something of who you were.
Yet again, it is different for me.
Terrible and frightening as it is to see you
hanging there. I know that this is not the end.
I know of Easter day but, as they stood beneath the cross,
they did not know.
This was the end of all their hopes.
Many had welcomed you and received rich blessing;
but for the twelve, this was the end.

So they were stunned and aimless,
not knowing what to do because
there was not anything that could be done
except stand helpless by.

We can identify with that, some of us,
for we have watched a loved one suffer, even die,
with nothing we could do
except be there and, perhaps, hold their hand.

No one could hold your hands, Lord;
they were held - but by nails!

Then there were the thieves, one either side.
They didn't know, but simply swore at you
as, in their agony, they would swear at anyone.
"Aren't you supposed to be the Christ?
then save yourself, and us."

But, in a blinding flash of some illumination,
one of them saw who you are, and in that light
he saw himself as he had never seen before.

At that moment of horrific understanding,
he found an honesty he had never known.
"This is what I am, and I am being punished
justly for my sin."

How nearly, nearly he had passed into the flames of hell.
"Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."
And in that moment, in that cry,
eternity was changed for him.

For, Lord, you answered him, "I tell you the truth,
today you will be with me in paradise."

Now, there, Lord, I can identify;
for it was in your light I also saw myself as I am.
I, too cried out to you;
and that very day you drew me to yourself,
to be with you eternally.

C: 2

So, Lord, as I watch beneath your cross,
I have heard you speak twice; once for the soldiers
who banged the nails into your hands,
and once to the thief who cried to you.
Who else stood there with whom I might identify?

Your mother? What were her thoughts
as she watched you, whose life she felt
first move within her womb, nailed immovable;
and that same life, now drain away?

I cannot identify with that, not as a man,
that is something I can never know.

And yet, I've known the joy of holding
a baby in my arms and, in wonder, said,
"This is part of me,"

and pondered what the future held.

Of course, it was different for Mary;
she was warned at the very beginning
about the sword that would pierce her soul
because of you. But did that help
now that it had happened?

I doubt it; it never does when someone says,
"I told you so."

So I cannot really identify with her.

I have never been in quite that situation.

Not many people have, thank God.

And yet the wonder of it is not
that we identify with you, but you with us.

It began in the womb, of course.

You became man; took human flesh;
were one with us: but that continued
all your earthly life, and continues now.

In all your pain, your thought was for your mother;
her agony, not yours. What would her future be?
It is hard for widows now, and harder then.
The word you spoke sounds stark and cold in English,
"Woman, behold your son," yet I am sure
the tone in which you spoke would carry
your compassion, and she would sense
your deep concern for her.
So it is today; the poor, the homeless,
destitute and refugee;
it is with them you are to be found - as then.

And to the disciple whom you loved,
"Behold your mother." In those words
you committed her to his care.
Lord, I am the disciple whom you love;
is there someone you are committing to my care,
but I am not standing sufficiently near to your cross
to hear what you are saying?

The soldiers who did not know what they were doing;
the thief who cried to you for help when,
to those who watched,
you seemed in need of help yourself;
Your mother and her future care;
all these you thought of first.
Only then did you consider yourself;
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
Didn't you know, Lord? Didn't you know?
Of course you did. Always you had understood
that God is of purer eyes than to look on sin.
There was this barrier between God and humankind,
ever since the first man and woman
decided they knew better than their God,
and disobeyed that clear command.

That barrier of sin has ever stood between us;
every human being has known
separation from our God.
But not you, Lord, not you.
You lived in close companionship with your Father;
you and he were one.
Your heart was his and his was yours - always.
And always, he was there.
Even when the way was tough;
when everyone else opposed or failed you,
he was there; his confirmation of your every move:
"You are my Son, and I delight in you."

That day, as the sin of the entire world
was gathered into one, its darkness was so great
it overflowed into the world of sight,
and blotted out the sun.
But that was nothing when set beside
the darkness of your soul.
There must have been some doubt within your mind
that, after all, were you mistaken?
For you are light, and had always walked
within that light. But now, the darkness
was so great that even you could not see the way.
And so you called, as you had always done,
for confirmation from your Father.
"I am right, Father? this is the way
that you have chosen for me?"

For the first and only time
in the whole of your experience
there was no answer; no, "Yes, my Son,
I still delight in you." Only silence!
You were utterly alone.
When you most needed him, your God deserted you.

It was this moment you had foreseen
from the beginning: to avoid it
was the temptation you had faced and overcome
first in the wilderness; and this that caused
the sweat of blood in the garden of Gethsemane.
But nothing you imagined had prepared you
for the reality. You were cut off from every hope,
and in that darkness of complete despair
you won my salvation.

I heard once of a man who could not permit himself
to think that you did that for him!
He loved you far too much to contemplate
the horror you would know if that were true.
And so, to make it bearable for him,
he said that, in the darkness, the bystanders
mistook the direction of that cry, which came, in fact,
from a thief beside you, upon a different cross.
But were that true, then I am still not saved.
Your God forsook you indeed,
so that he might not forsake me.

C: 3

You spoke seven times, Lord, from the cross,
and that fourth word, the central one,
about your God forsaking you,
was, indeed, the very heart of it all.

It was then that our salvation was accomplished.

The Father, having placed our sin on you,
then separated himself; he cut you off,
for one dreadful moment, from the living;
and in casting you away, cast also our sin.

The work that you had come into this world to do,
had been completed.

Yet it seems that, for a moment, you did not realise this.

The horror of that separation from your Father,
his abandonment of you,
was so terrible that it was like someone
knocked unconscious by a heavy blow,
and, coming round, asks painfully,
"Where am I?"

Conscious of your body once again,
racked by pain and searing thirst,
you said simply, "I'm so thirsty."

Once before you had begged a drink of water,
by a well. Then, it was a woman of Samaria you asked;
a people who had no dealings with the Jews.

Now, it is a Roman soldier who runs to you
and, opening up his bottle which contains
his ration of cheap wine for the day,
pours it on a sponge and lifts it to your lips.

A Samaritan and a Roman! Truly you came to save the
world;

and people of every race may minister to you.

Then it was, as your mind recovered

from that greater pain of separation from your Father,
you realised you had won. The deed was done.
And with that realisation, such a cry of victory -
"It is finished - I have done it!"

What terror did that strike in the camp
of Satan and his minions? But what joy
in the hearts of those who call you, "Lord."
Never again will you be separated from your Father;
but now, no more shall we! For nothing is able
to separate us from the love of God in you.
Your act of love has welded us to him eternally.
Oh, great and mighty conqueror,
it is here I am identified with you,
because your arms, outstretched upon your cross,
have drawn me to yourself, and I am yours.

Now all is done. That precious relationship
you had from all eternity with your Father
has been restored, and you have peace again
within your soul.

The time has come for you to leave this earth
and carry your victory into heaven.
You had already taught that no man
took your life from you, but of your own free will
you laid it down.

So now, with clear deliberation and for all to hear,
you speak from your cross one final word;
"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

They are not new, but from the psalms;
and those who study these things tell us
these are words taught by every Jewish mother
to her child as she lays him down to sleep each night.
No doubt you heard them first from the lips of Mary;
and then so many times, that it would be as natural

as to breathe, for you to say them with her,
"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."
It is said that a man will die as he has lived.
For you, trust in your Father was the way of life;
no, life itself! And so, with total confidence in him,
You end your life by act of will.
A word, and you are gone

* * *

So, Lord, I have watched with you one hour.
The cross by which I kneel, is empty now.
That night, your disciples and the women
went to their homes in tears,
believing all their hopes were dashed
and they would never see you again.
I, too, am sad and shaken by this hour,
but I cannot identify with them;
not fully, for I know what they could not -

I have heard about the Sunday morning!