

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.

D: 1

Explanation

In Jerusalem, not far from the ancient City of David, stands the church of St. Peter Gallicantu. 'Gallicantu' means 'cockcrow', commemorating Peter's denial of his Lord which was followed immediately by the cock crowing. It is almost certainly the site of the house of the high priest. The steps leading up to the building are the ones that were there when Christ walked the earth. In the depths of the building there is a circular room of stone which is shaped like a potter's jar. It has no door. In the curved roof of the cell, for that is what it is, there is a hole through which a prisoner would be lowered to the floor below and then the rope would be drawn up. There was nothing in the cell, only darkness.

It is believed that after Christ was arrested and tried before the hastily gathered Sanhedrin, he was placed in that cell until he could be taken before Pilate at daybreak.

Alone, I am alone at last.

It is so black that I can almost touch the darkness.

I can no longer hear the footsteps of the guards;

even they have gone. I am alone indeed.

Peter, what of Peter?

He will be feeling alone, even if he is with the others.

When I turned and looked at him

he caught my eye, just as the cock crew.

The horror of his act would dawn upon him then.

He had done the very thing he had believed himself totally incapable of doing; denying three times

he ever knew me.

By now he will be swallowed up in his remorse,
totally inconsolable.
No one but I can ease his pain, but I am here
and he? where will he be now?

Oh, Peter, all those times we've shared
a laugh, a sorrow, a confidence, a meal.
You were the one who dared to think
you might walk on the water - and you did!
It was you who wanted to build a home for me
upon the mountain.
And now, after that, all that,
you say you do not know me!

I wonder, is he but the first of many who,
in the years ahead, when pressure comes,
will pretend they do not know me?
And if they do, will I hurt, every time,
as much as I hurt now?
I know it is the work of Satan who desires
to sift them all like wheat; I know...
but it is dark, and I am cold, and there is no one near.

Oh, Father, I do not know whether it is easier
to stand before the Sanhedrin,
see their hatred and listen to their twisted reasoning;
to be beaten, punched and mocked
by the rough, casual soldiers of the temple guard,
or to be left alone to think.
Father, I am afraid - is that wrong?
So many times I've said to those who followed me,
"Fear Not." For what is there to fear
if I have put myself into your hands?
Never have I been afraid before;
what is it I fear now?

The spite, the wrath of man?
but why should that come now?
It caused me hurt, but never fear.
There was that day at Nazareth
when they thought to throw me from the cliff and kill me.
I did not fear, but walked straight through their midst.
And in that fishing boat out on the sea of Galilee,
when the storm caused my little band
to fear that they would drown -
I was asleep, with my head upon the cushion
in the stern. I did not fear the storm.

Is it the pain that I will feel,
is that what I fear?
I do not welcome that, of course,
but I do not really think it is that
which makes me so afraid.
For it will not last, and others down the years
have faced great pain rather than deny
the truth they know.
There is a deeper apprehension;
I have the fear that this time,
when I place myself into your hands,
those hands will not be there;
and for the first time in eternity
I shall be utterly alone.
Far more alone than I am even now,
within this cell.
The thought of that terrifies me.
That is what I fear! That you will not be there
to comfort and to strengthen me.

It was that I feared in the garden,
that was the agony.
And when was that? four hours?

five hours ago? It seems an age.

Soon, soon they will come.

I decided then, within that garden, that oasis
which always in the past had been a place of peace,
I decided there to go the way you had chosen for me -
"Your will not mine be done."

There is no going back; not now.

But, Father, keep me through these next, long hours.

Having come all these years with you,

I do not want to fail you now.

D: 2

Never will I forget that day, it is etched
too deeply in my memory.
I had timed it well. Living out in the country
I had left it until the first day of the Passover
to arrive in Jerusalem. That way,
I did not need to find lodgings for an extra night.

It was early in the morning when I arrived,
but everyone was up
Not so surprising, I suppose, in view
of all there was to do that day.
I had expected crowds, of course, but somehow
I found that I was trapped.
There was some commotion down the street;
but in the city, that must be often so.
Some Roman soldiers were shouting out,
"Make way! Make way!" That was their officer I think.
But then some coarse voice cried, "Make way for the King."
I turned, for I had never seen the king before,
expecting Herod on a horse;
but no such thing.
Then I saw him; and a poor thing he was -
Some king! His body looked fit enough;
this was not some weakling.
Yet as he drew level to where I stood, he fell.
I saw great weals upon his back and,
rammed down upon his head, a crown of vicious thorns
He was carrying a timber, and its weight,
in his weakness, caused him to fall.
I had no idea who he was, nor what he'd done.
I remember thinking it must be
some particularly evil deed to be punished in this way.
I would have moved and left, had there been room,

Instead, I looked away, at the centurion on his horse.
For a moment my eyes met his, and that was it;
I saw the thought form in his mind:
"He's black, he'll do!"
"Your name?," he snapped. "It's Simon."
"And your town?" - "Cyrene."
"That's far enough away."
He tapped me on the shoulder with his staff.
"Pick up that wood and follow us."

It didn't dawn on me at first, just what it was
that I was carrying; but, as we drew near a hill,
I understood; it was the cross-bar for a crucifixion.
Then the full impact hit me, in a flash:
this was an instrument of death upon my back,
by touching it I had become unclean,
as surely as if I'd brushed against
some white-washed tomb.
I would be excluded from the feast
that I had come so far, so longingly, to join.
My journey wasted; no Passover for me!
And all because some wretch, some criminal,
had not the strength to carry his own cross.

I was so frustrated, so helpless to do anything
to set things right, I would gladly curse the man
whose cross it was.
But then I noticed something of the crowd on either side;
they were not mocking, jeering, but in tears.
Then he spoke; "Daughters, daughters,
do not weep for me but for yourselves."
There was such compassion in that voice.
I looked across and, just as I had met the eye
of the centurion, so for a moment his eye met mine.
I cannot be sure, for he did not speak,

but I sensed it was a glance of gratitude.
For what? for carrying the wood
that was to torture him to death?
Who was this man?
And for the next few weeks and months
that question continually returned.
"Who was this man? Who was this man?"
I'm not the first, nor will I be the last to ask:
"Who was this man?"

We passed through a gate in the city wall
and began to climb the hill.
The beam was heavy, even for me,
no wonder the poor wretch could not carry it
after what they'd done to him.
They told me it was Golgotha, the place of a skull,
and there they did it - banged in the nails,
just where the wrist meets the palm.
Feet together, and another nail.
I could not watch and turned my head away;
and as I did, someone spoke -
"Forgive them, Father, for they do not understand
what they are doing."
I looked to see whose voice it was,
and do you know? do you know?
it was he, the man they'd crucified.
Who was this man? such a man as this?

He hung there for a while. I wanted to go -
but where? I could attend no Passover.
So I lingered, half fascinated to see
what would happen.
There were two others there, also crucified.
But they looked villains, and I had eyes only for him,
the one whose cross I'd borne

The rulers, the ones who'd put him there,
scoffed at him: "He saved others, now let him save himself,
if he the Christ of God, the chosen one!"
The thought went through my mind
that somehow things had been reversed;
he seemed so regal, hanging there.
It was they who were the scum.

It was some time before I realised
that a little band of women standing near
was somehow involved with him.
This was no place for them! he must have thought
the same (though how he could think of anything but pain
I do not know), for suddenly he spoke:
"Dear woman, here is your son."
Then, looking at a young man at her side,
"Here is your mother."
They passed right by me and, because I did not understand,
I suppose I had a question on my face.
The young man quietly murmured
in my ear, "His mother."
Oh God, I never want to see that sight again!

I cannot say how long it took, but suddenly
I noticed it was dark. It could not be the evening;
could not be. I later found it was mid-day.
Yet it was dark with an eeriness I'd not known before.
For three hours it went on, then suddenly
there was the most awful scream that I have ever heard:
"My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?"

It was so terrible, I found myself trembling
with the shock, and all the crowd fell silent,
dumb with awe.
Then another shout; but this time different,

Oh quite different. More like a cry of triumph,
victory - "It's done!"

And then he died.

D: 3

Lord, the soldiers nailed you to the cross,
divided your clothes, and then sat down to watch you.
I know they were tough and used to many tasks,
but was this really just something
in the line of duty? nothing more?

Could I do that? Suppose it was a murderer,
a child molester; could I sit and watch him die?
I like to think that I could not, but,
given the right circumstances, and careful preparation
by the media to make me feel
this man was particularly evil,
I have the suspicion that I might.
The dark motives which even yet lie deep within me
may be more powerful than I would like to believe.
But, however it was, they sat and watched you there;
and, for a while, Lord, I have come to sit and watch.
Oh, nothing like the six long hours it took for you to die;
but, for this little while, help me to keep my gaze
on you, as you hang upon the cross.
What does it mean for me?
For I suspect I have not really understood, even yet.

I know, of course, that there you took my sin;
that you hung on the cross for me:
that there you took my place, and won for me eternity,
and offered me forgiveness of every wrong
that I have ever done. I know that Lord;
and even if I have not plumbed the depths
of all that means, I may still receive
the benefits that you won for me.
But what I have not learned is what your hanging there
teaches me about myself and how I live my life.

I have to remind myself,
as I look at you on the cross, that this is GOD!
This is what God is like - totally self-giving.
It did not count with you what we were like.
We were not good, attractive - quite the reverse;
we had spoiled your beautiful creation
by our selfish ways.
Now, now that we have responded to you, some of us,
maybe there is some faint spark of love in us
which might be worth encouraging;
but then, we were your enemies:
yet still you died for us.

I am just not like that, Lord, I pick and choose;
only the nice people appeal to me.
Not, of course, that I would be willing to die for them,
but these are the ones I like.
It is the unattractive ones, the scroungers,
the ones who push me to one side,
or try to take advantage; the rude ones
or the ones who smell; that's where I draw the line.
On the cross, between two thieves,
you did not draw it anywhere.
The thing is, Lord, I find it easier to sit
and picture you upon the cross, and think
how you did that for me, than to look at myself,
at what I am, how I behave.
But what's the good of that if, coming here,
I go home unchanged?

If this is the heart of God revealed,
and you have created me in your image,
I am to be like you; loving everyone.
And love, to you, means giving all.

This is not comfortable, Lord.
It was all right trying to picture you alone
in that dungeon-cell, waiting for morning.
I could cope with that.
It was interesting, also, imagining
how Simon might have thought;
excited on his journey by the joy of celebrating
Passover that year actually in Jerusalem;
only to be excluded because he had touched your cross.
I can think of that with no difficulty at all.
It is when I think of what it means for me...

And there's another thing , Lord;
you did not worry in the least about your reputation.
People totally misunderstood, they mocked you,
taunted you: "He saved others; himself he cannot save."
In a way that was true. If you were to save us,
you could not save yourself.
But it was a willing sacrifice: it was not
the nails that held you there, but love.
You let them misunderstand and did not say a word.
With me, if I am misunderstood, I must explain;
I have to tell them why I did just what I did,
so that they will understand and will not think badly of me.
You were content to leave your reputation
in the hands of God.

Lord, a frightening thought is forming in my mind.
I know your cross is empty now,
and in two days time we will be rejoicing
in the wonder of Easter morning;
but have you left your cross empty for me?
As you laid down your life so willingly for me,
are you inviting me, without any compulsion,

to lay down my life for you,
and for anyone and everyone I meet,
the unlovely as well as the lovely?
Inviting me not to worry about my reputation,
but leave that with you?

If I refuse that invitation, Lord;
if after watching at your cross, I refuse,
must you again turn to your Father, with the words,
"Forgive them, they know not what they do"?