

AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

Meditations for Good Friday

by

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This script is 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.

Nine Meditations for a three hour service.

One

As we begin these three hours of meditation, I ask you to picture in your mind a garden; the most beautiful garden you can imagine. Not an English garden, but something far more exotic; plants with giant and luxurious leaves with highly coloured flowers - almost tropical, and with wonderful and delicate scents.

In the garden there are animals, all kinds of animals. Not simply the domestic ones such as dogs and cats, or even sheep and goats, but lions and leopards, zebra and giraffe. The astonishing thing is that they live together: the lion and the lamb lie side by side.

As well as the animals, there are human beings. To us they would seem very strange and uncivilised. They would not have manners like ours; certainly they would not observe the niceties of society. You would not be able to take them out to dinner anywhere - they would not know how to behave; and they would know so little about things. They are quite uneducated and do not know even how to read. If we were to meet them the contrast between them and us would be greater than between Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday. Oh, we would have to teach them so much.

Yet, I believe that after a while; after we had decided where to begin in order to improve them; we would be on our knees before them, begging them to teach us. For they have a grace and a joy which we do not know. There is no sense of strain or frustration with them; no hint of nervous breakdown; no sickness, anxiety or anger. They are able to be totally open and self giving. There is a gentleness and love, a sense of peace and joy; a oneness with all creation. The lions push their muzzles against them, the leopards rub their sides against their legs, just

as domestic cats will do with us when they are content; no rudeness, no ruthless competition to get on, to succeed; just perfect trust, harmony, peace and joy.

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I am not decided quite what I believe about Adam and Eve; how literally God intends us to take them. I am sure he intends us to take literally the facts contained within this picture - life as he planned for it to be; where everything so perfectly fulfils its function and task that life is all joy. The greatest joy, of course, was to be the perfect fellowship God had with man and man with him.

This is something I cannot describe, for I hardly know it myself; this fellowship between man and God, as it was meant to be. Occasionally - just very occasionally - I have lived for a moment on some mountain top of knowing God's presence, and it has been a joy too intense to last. But in those moments, so rare for me, I have known that God is everything - nothing else is important or of value, compared with knowing God. But then I come down from the mountain top into the world and fall prey again to all the pressures and temptations which that brings.

Scripture teaches that originally mankind did live continually in this joy. Man and woman walked every moment in fellowship with God, and everything was good and right and fine and lovely; for they depended for all things on God alone, and he gave them everything they needed.

Then, however, it was pointed out to them that they had the opportunity to rule themselves; to be independent. They could become like God and know all things. No longer just to be within God's plan, but free to plan things for themselves. It was as if they had come upon an open door - they had only to step through it to be free.

I wonder how long they thought before they acted; for God had said, "Not that - if you go through that door, you will die." But what was death? Mankind did not know what it would mean to die. God had warned most forcefully against that course, so they must think well before they took that step. But I wonder if they did. Did they consider and then act carefully and fearfully as, for the first time, they disobeyed? Or did they do it lightly, with hardly a thought? I do not know. But they went through and, as they went, the door banged shut behind them and was barred. Oh, not with iron, but by the word of God and (whatever this may mean), "He placed the cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life." - so that mankind might not eat of it and live!

In that moment, man and woman saw what they had done for they now had the knowledge of good and evil which, previously, they had not had. Scripture makes everything hang on that act of disobedience. It spends no time on tracing links between that act and the evils it has brought; it simply states the fact that mankind's disobedience affected not only themselves, but the whole created order. The inhumanity of man to man in Ireland, Bosnia or Ethiopia where millions starve; the ravages of cancer and disease; and fear and death itself, all these came in because mankind chose to try to be independent, instead of being dependent upon their Creator. The whole creation is now in bondage to decay. Of course, the world cannot see this. To them it is too fantastic to be true that some act of mankind towards a God they do not believe in anyway, affected all creation. But so it is and that is what faith believes.

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Now, will you imagine another garden? This one is much smaller because it is by a city, and space is precious there. I doubt if there are many flowers - certainly no exotic blooms - but

it is a haven, a retreat; set so close to the busy city that a man may go there for peace and to think, away from the busy-ness of people in the town. It is so very different from that first garden; for this is in the world of stress and hate. There are no animals here; for they have learnt, the hard way, that they must not trust mankind. Yet the scene is similar: another man is in this garden. A man who, like the first, also walks in perfect fellowship with God and all creation. He has the same affinity with animals. Three years before, he had spent forty days alone in the wilderness with the wild beasts, yet they had not harmed him; and, only 6 days ago he had ridden into the city on a donkey which had never before had anyone on its back, yet it had not bucked or resisted in any way.

The wretched and unlovely people sought him out - they loved his company. But now, he is alone. It is true a little group of men have come to the garden with him, but he has moved away from them and is pouring out his heart in prayer to God his Father. Before him there is an open door. He, too, is told, "If you go through this door you will die." But, unlike that first man, he knows what death will mean. He knows the consequence; that cutting off of fellowship, the severing of joy; and utter darkness, loneliness and desolation beyond endurance. When that first man and woman went through that door of disobedience they dragged with them all creation, to pain and suffering, sin and death. For this man, the door is marked 'obedience'; and if he passes through, he will drag with him, not sin but sinners - to be saved, to live! The first man and woman thought they were choosing freedom and life- but brought death. This second man is being asked to choose death - to bring freedom and life: life for others, not for himself. He has eternal life already; he need not die. But before him there is that open door and, knowing what it means, he draws back. "No, Father, no, not that; must I go through?"

"You need not, my Son; you need not go. But if you do not, all these must die and the world must perish without hope."

"But if I go through, Father?"

"Then there is hope and life."

"Life for whom, Father?"

"Life for people who, like the first, have turned their backs on us, preferring not to have us rule over them. Men and women who are selfish and greedy, petty and bad tempered, demanding their own way:- these are the people who may have life if you will die."

We do not know how long it took that man to decide; willingly to sever that perfect harmony and relationship which he had with his Father. He saw himself in perfect love and fellowship with God, and he saw you - you as you are. He saw death through that door, with all its pain and separation; and he saw you. And, for love of you, he got up off his knees and walked through that door.

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Two

Thinking, as we were, of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, we were examining the effect of his obedience even to death, upon the whole of creation and, in particular, upon us. I know that we have met here for this service, to spend it round the cross; yet we have spent it, so far, in the garden. But this is because the battle came to a head in the garden. It was there that Christ made the final decision to die for us. It was in the garden that our redemption was decided; it was on the cross that it was accomplished.

From the moment Jesus decided to go forward and die, he surrendered himself into the hands of his enemies. From then on, he was bound to die - unless he denied all for which he had lived. From the moment he delivered himself into the hands of his enemies, even if he said nothing, he would die. The moment of decision was in the garden.

We often think, as we should, about the suffering of Christ upon the cross; but before we turn to the cross itself, I want to draw your attention to many other sufferings of Christ along the way from the garden to Calvary. It was Satan's hour; Jesus himself described it as that, and the prince of darkness made sure that every step of the way that Christ had chosen should be painful.

First there was the betrayal. Jesus had known from the beginning who it was who would betray him; but, even so, now that the moment had come, how much it must have hurt. How often had Judas been in that garden with Jesus? He knew how precious it was to our Lord:- to step aside from the pressures that he was always under when he was in Jerusalem, into the tranquillity of that garden. How much of the teaching handed down to us in Scripture was first given to the disciples in that garden? When Judas left the last supper, he knew that Jesus would make for Gethsemane that night. It was not even a clean, decent betrayal, with Judas standing with the soldiers, pointing and saying, "There's your man!" Jesus was presumably expecting that; but, no, Judas comes and kisses him as though he is his greatest friend. I wonder if, for a moment, Jesus was tempted to turn away, a spontaneous reaction, as Judas stepped forward to embrace him. How that kiss must have hurt. Something of that added pain escapes the lips of our Lord, "Judas, would you betray the Son of man with a kiss?"

So the soldiers advance to take him. He offers no resistance. In fact, he calmly addresses them, "Whom do you seek?" And when they reply, "Jesus of Nazareth," he answers, "I am he." They had swords and clubs; obviously they were expecting a fight. When Jesus says simply, "I am he," they were nonplussed. He was in charge of the situation, not they. Perhaps, had nothing else happened, he would have had to lead them to the high priest's house; but, as it was, Peter rushes in, as usual, without thinking and, drawing his sword, cuts off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's slave. Although Jesus heals it at once and tells Peter to put his sword away, the damage has been done. Resistance has been offered, so the spell of Christ's calm authority is broken. The soldiers bind Jesus and take him off as a common captive. Judas had betrayed Jesus and now Peter failed him. Maybe his motive was love, but the consequence was that Jesus was taken from his disciples with the last action they had performed showing that they had completely misunderstood all of his teaching over three years about the nature of his kingdom. Christ's overwhelming personal authority had been totally undermined by Peter's act of violence. It is true that the Holy Spirit would teach them the truth - but that lay in the future. Jesus was led away at the moment when he saw that he had failed to get his teaching over to the few men on whom everything depended, and knowing that he would have no further chance to be with them to set things right. He was taken into captivity knowing that he had failed.

Then, having discovered a few minutes earlier that while he had been battling out his decision to die, his disciples had been asleep when he thought they were praying for him; now, as the soldiers lead him away, the disciples abandon him and run for their lives. It is easy enough for us to say that Jesus knew the Scriptures that the shepherd would be smitten and the flock scattered; but it is one thing to read Scripture in the quiet of the hills overlooking the Sea of Galilee and quite another to experience its fulfilment in the hostility of Jerusalem. As Jesus

was taken from the garden there was, on his face, the sensation of the kiss of Judas; in his mind, the knowledge that his disciples had totally failed to grasp his teaching about the kingdom; and, before his eyes, the sight of his closest friends running away to put the greatest possible distance between them and himself. This was but the beginning of the road to the cross.

He was taken first to Annas and then to Caiaphas. They searched for evidence to convict him; but for what? For caring? For loving? For healing? There was just nothing on which they could hope to gain a conviction. Then one fellow gets up to testify - falsely! Did Jesus think, "It is for you and others like you, that I am standing here"? Another also gave false evidence; but that was awkward because the two contradicted themselves. So they asked him, the accused, to condemn himself! "Are you the Christ; the Son of the Blessed?" and Jesus said, "I am." And that was enough. Have you realised that Jesus was condemned not only for telling the truth, but for being it? A murderer may confess his crime; he may tell the truth and be condemned because he has admitted he is evil. Jesus told the truth and was condemned because he admitted he was good.

So they take the King of all creation, blindfold him and take it in turns to hit him saying, "Go on, prophesy - which of us struck you?" as though they are playing a children's party game of blind man's bluff. But winning eternal life for you and for me, was no party game for Christ.

At some point during that long night and as dawn was breaking, Peter, who had crept back to see what was happening, denied twice that he knew Christ. As he denied it for the third time, Christ knew. We often think of Peter's feelings as we read the words, "And the Lord turned and looked at Peter." But what about Christ's feelings? How evil of Satan to make that last bitter twist of the knife in the wound. There was pain enough for Peter to remember the Lord's prophecy that he would deny him three

times before the cock crew twice; there was no need for the Lord to be reminded of it on top of all the other torment he had to bear. As the cock crew, and the Lord turned to look at Peter, and Peter's heart smote him as he realised what he had done, think of our Lord, in his human nature, looking at Peter and realising, "He has just said for the third time tonight that he does not know me at all." In that moment did there flash into his mind the memory of the day when Andrew had first introduced Peter - "This is my brother, Simon."? Or the scene by the sea when Peter had made that great and miraculous catch and had knelt and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." The moment when Peter had seen the truth at Caesarea Philippi - "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." On the mountain when Peter had wanted to set up three tents and dwell there for ever with his Lord. As Jesus was led off to Pilate, it was with the knowledge that Peter, his Peter, the Simon whom he had turned into Peter, had just sworn solemnly - "I do not know the man."

I do not want to drag in a false emotionalism, but do notice the refinement of torture. It is not simply that Jesus suffered incredible physical pain as he died on the cross; Satan ensured that Christ drained the cup of bitterness to the very dregs. Not only was Christ to die for the world as an outcast, with the world not understanding; he went to the cross knowing he was a failure. Of the whole of his ministry, not one thing was standing. He could not point to one thing he had done in his life where he had succeeded and the success would stand. It is true that he had healed people. Perhaps the greatest miracle was the raising of Lazarus, who had been dead three days; but that was only temporary, he would die again. Everyone would die eventually. As Jesus went to the cross, there wasn't anything he could point to and say, "Well, that at least survives." At the end he was left with only the twelve. One of those had betrayed him, the rest had not understood what his teaching was all about and they had all ran off and left him. Finally, the one he had chosen

as the rock on whom he would build his church had just said, "I swear I do not know that man."

Of course, we know the end of the story. We know about Easter Sunday and Pentecost. But do not let that lessen your understanding of Good Friday. It was the human Jesus, the man Jesus (albeit that he could never cease to be what he was in his essence, very God of very God) who went through that Thursday night and that Friday morning. To the human Jesus, where was Sunday? This was Friday and he was tired, he was alone and he was a failure.

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Three

Jesus spoke seven times from the cross. We have come to spend three hours in meditation; had we arrived at Calvary for the last three hours of our Lord's agony, we would have missed three of his exclamations. The first came as the nails were hammered into his hands, "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing."

As we begin our attempt to understand the significance of this, we must stand back in astonishment. There is the immediate, human understanding, and that is wonder enough. Here is a man concerned more for the people who are causing him agony than for himself who suffers that agony; and at the very moment that that agony is being caused. That, in itself, is astonishing; but think: - this is the Creator, the one who gave life to his torturers, having his own life taken away by those he created. Man has reached the final stage of his rebellion. Having rejected his Creator, he now kills him. Do not miss the wonder by saying, "Oh, Jesus could forgive because he was God." The whole point is that he who was and who could never cease to be God, became man; and, as man, forgave his fellow men who caused

him pain - more, not only did he forgive them, he was pleading with his Father to forgive them also.

Now let us hold that for a moment while I set before you another issue. In his description of the crucifixion, St. Matthew tells us that after they had fastened Christ to the cross and divided his clothes amongst them by throwing dice, the soldiers sat down and kept watch over him. It was not that the crucified man could release himself, but maybe some friend or sympathiser might try to do so. But the great majority of the crowd had come for the spectacle, it was entertainment. It was the eve of a Festival, Passover, holiday time, as it is for us today. The religious festivities would begin that evening, but meanwhile... "Why not stroll over to Calvary? I hear they are crucifying three men."

They sat and watched him there. What a lesson can be drawn from those two words alone; "HIM - THERE". I am not, for one moment, suggesting that you have come to keep watch today to be entertained; but what have you come for? Is it to remind yourself of what happened that first Good Friday; to think more specifically of Christ's passion? That is good, but let me encourage you as you watch HIM - THERE, to think of yourself. As you hear him say of those who cause him pain, "Father forgive them... "what is your attitude to those who cause you pain?"

Is there someone you do not forgive? Some member of the family you do not speak to - or not more than a reasonably polite but distant conversation. Perhaps there was dispute about a will; they had more than their fair share - or they think you did. Or someone looked after an elderly relative and the others think it was to get their hands on his property. Or a friend or neighbour once said or did something which upset you - so you have cut yourself off from them. "Oh but that is different. In my case this person really meant to hurt me." So what about those who drove the nails into Jesus? Do you think that they hoped it would not

hurt? - "Father, these people who are in the very act of causing me excruciating pain; please, you will forgive them, won't you?"

Are you planning to come to Holy Communion on Sunday? If, as I have been speaking, the Holy Spirit has reminded you of someone with whom you are out of fellowship; someone you have not forgiven, what will you do between now and then? There is time to telephone or to put a letter in the post before Sunday. Yes, maybe it was their fault and you are in the right, but so was Jesus on the cross. He was utterly right and those who put him there were utterly wrong; but Jesus took the wrong, absorbed it, transformed it and gave it back as love. Will you do all you can from your side to set right what has caused that breakdown of relationship, so that you can come with a clear conscience to Holy Communion; or have you come here, only to watch Him There?

One more thing, before we leave these words. Those who nailed Jesus to the cross were guilty of a terrible sin; they were crucifying their Creator. What possible way could be found for them to be forgiven for such an act as that? Only the death of a Redeemer in their place. By crucifying Christ they were consigning themselves to eternal death: by allowing them to do it he was offering them the opportunity of eternal life.

I do not know how it can be that Jesus, dying on a cross almost two thousand years ago can cancel your sin of today. But God says it is so and in the wonder of eternity, I accept it. Nor would I wish to imply that every sin you commit now, added to the pain that Christ suffered then. That sort of remark is not helpful and I do not think it works like that. Nevertheless, as you sit and watch him there, you see what sin does to God. Christ still suffers. Scripture shows that, for when Saul (who would become St. Paul) persecuted the church Jesus asked him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" That clever, cutting remark you made; the way you spoke to that shop assistant, your husband, your wife,

father, mother, daughter, son; the sharp tongue, the selfish act - you are doing it to Christ, because you are doing it to someone he made, someone he loves.

"Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing because, if they did, they would not do it... would they?"

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Four

The second time that Jesus spoke from the cross was to the thief:-

"I promise you that today you will be in Paradise with me."

There is so much for us to learn from this incident; where are we to begin? Think of the humility of Jesus. That wonderful, free will offering of his life, was not some tremendous, spectacular event. It was simply one of three executions carried out that day. There had been others before and there would be more in the future. It is like reading the lists of men and women sent to the gas chamber in a concentration camp and suddenly you come upon the name - 'Jesus Christ'.

Make no mistake about those two thieves either side of Jesus. They were evil, rotten men. Even the Romans did not lightly sentence men to that sort of death, to crucifixion. Think of some particularly evil criminal of today; the sort who will assault some frail and elderly woman in her home, steal a pound or two from her handbag and leave her dying on the floor. Or a man who abducts some happy little school girl on her way home to her birthday party, abuses her and leaves her body on some rubbish tip. It was such men, robbers and murderers, who were crucified either side of Christ.

At first, so the report goes, they both reviled Jesus. In passing, think how that must have added to Christ's loneliness and pain. You would have thought their common fate and agony would have united these two with Christ; but no, they are against him too. In that awful pain, one of the thieves turns on Christ. "Aren't you supposed to be the Messiah? - then save yourself and us." Notice that Christ makes no answer. If someone says something hurtful or unkind to you, are you not usually provoked into answering back? But he says nothing.

You see, that is the irony of the situation. Because Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God, he could have come down from the cross. He made that plain in the garden of Gethsemane when he told Peter to put away his sword. "I have only to ask my Father," he said, "and he will send his angels to save me." Jesus, the Messiah, could have asked his Father to save him; but, because he was the Messiah, he must not ask that; for if he saved himself, he could save no one else. But if he did not save himself he would be able to offer salvation to everyone else.

It is said that most men die as they have lived. I cannot tell if that is generally true. Certainly it seems to be true of that first thief and of Jesus. The thief died swearing, complaining, and trying to force others to do as he demanded. Christ also died as he had lived; thinking of others and putting them before himself. However, with the other thief, something astonishing happened. Have you ever considered just how astonishing it was? If this man had been amongst the crowd when Christ had healed a paralysed or blind man, we might have expected him to respect Christ, though possibly not recognise him as the Messiah; but what was it that enabled him, as he was trying to cope with his own agony and half blinded by pain, to look across at another broken body hanging in similar anguish and recognise that this was the eternal King of all creation?

Perhaps, for the very first time in his life, he was willing to admit to the person he was. "We are getting what we deserve for what we did." He was passing judgement on himself. He was saying, in effect, "I have failed to live up to what even I know I should be, let alone what God requires."

Allow me, for a moment, to hold to this point; for I would not have anyone here to be in any doubt on this. What are you trusting in for your salvation? Is there anyone who thinks that he or she has lived a reasonably good life and so God will accept him or her? I do hope not. Have you so misunderstood the gospel? Do you think that God will, as it were, weigh up your good and evil deeds, and if the good outweigh the bad you will gain heaven, and if the bad outweigh the good you will not? No, no, no; if you believe that, you do not understand what Christ was doing on the cross, nor how he could accept that thief. If the child abuser, serial killer or multiple rapist ever gets to the place of that thief alongside Jesus on the cross; is overwhelmed by his sin, repents and begs Jesus to have mercy, forgive and receive him, he will have eternal life. And if you have never got to that place and made the same plea but, rather, you are trusting in what you believe to be your own reasonably righteous life - you will not. That is why Jesus said that harlots and dishonest tax-collectors were getting into heaven ahead of the self-righteous Pharisees. You cannot earn your own way into heaven, no one has ever done that. You must tread the same path, exactly the same path as that thief. "I deserve death; Jesus remember me."

Notice that he made no plea of anything. There was no reason he could find in his life why Jesus should accept him. His only hope was that Jesus might find it in his heart to have him. The insults of the one thief could bring no word from the lips of Jesus. The cry for help from the other did. Somehow he had recognised Jesus as the King and made him his King, and Jesus accepted that submission. The cross made a strange throne for Jesus and a strange cradle for the new born thief; but such it was.

Jesus accepted the thief's worship and gave him eternal life - not for some time in the future, but then: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

(Optional)

I hope you have received this life already; but if you have not, if you have not understood that you can offer nothing but, like everyone else, you must confess that you have failed to be the person God created you to be and, without any excuses, you must ask Jesus Christ to forgive you, and you must make him your Lord, your King: then you can do that now in the silence - just between yourself and him. If you do, then in that moment you can pass from the world into the realm of the Kingdom of Heaven. In a word, here and now you will receive eternal life.

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Five

Jesus spoke again: to Mary, "Behold your son," to the disciple, "Behold your mother."

The relationship between Jesus and Mary, his mother, is interesting. When he was young he would have been dependent upon her for all his needs, just like any other baby. Probably, as with all Jewish households, it would have been his mother who would have taught him the Scriptures, and from her he would have learned of the promised coming of the Messiah. However, although she was his mother, she needed a Saviour as much as anyone else. Scripture does not teach that Mary's own conception was immaculate; she was not sinless. So the relationship of mother and son was also one of sinner and Saviour.

Perhaps one of the burdens Christ had to bear was that his mother did not understand his mission. On one occasion she tried to stop him preaching. You will remember that she said, "He is beside himself." We would say, "Out of his mind." The crowd had gathered around Jesus in a house, and he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are outside calling for you." He asked, "Who is my mother, who are my brothers?" and went on to explain that he regarded as his true brothers all who did the will of his heavenly Father. It is understandable that Mary should be concerned and try to stop him preaching; it would get him into trouble. But it shows she did not comprehend just what he had come to do. Imagine how much that must have hurt Jesus. Maybe the rest of the world did not understand, but to find your own mother does not understand either and is seeking to stop you...

You who are parents, have you released your children to the Lord? They are not yours, you know. They have been lent to you for a little while; you, as stewards, are to care for them on God's behalf. Finally they are his, not yours. How many young men or women have heard the call of God to some service, perhaps overseas, and a father or mother has said - oh, from motives of love - "Why? Why waste all your education going to Africa, India, El Salvador or wherever." If that child knows it is indeed the call of Christ, then he or she must obey and must leave that parent. But how much more difficult, how much greater the burden, if they have to go knowing that someone they love just does not understand, and imagines it is a slight that you should leave them

Maybe some similar thought went through the mind of Christ as he hung there. It is as though he forgets himself utterly. He looks down and sees a mother suffering because she sees that her son is in pain and she can do nothing to help him. How many mothers have sat by a hospital bed, waiting and watching for her child to regain consciousness after some accident or in some

illness; unable to do anything - which makes it worse? This scene is even more painful; for she has to watch her son, fully conscious, suffer torture and die by stages. More, there is the shame as other people mock and taunt him; dying as a criminal between two other criminals. What must that do to a mother's heart? So, Christ looks down and sees this mother suffering because her son is being crucified. His heart goes out to her in such compassion that it is as though it is incidental that he is the son this mother is watching; that it is his pain, his tortured body that is involved. Who will care for her? Who will ensure that she is provided for? Widows had a tough time of it in those days - tougher even than in ours. He sees his friend, his beloved disciple, John, and with what lovely words he commits his mother to his care, "Woman, behold your son." And to John, "Behold your mother." For us, maybe we might expect a plea like, "John, take care of my mother for me." But this is more: "Mother you have a new son; John, you have a new mother."

The record states that, "From that time the disciple took her to live in his own home." Some commentators point out that the wording in the original is specific, "From that very moment," implying that John led Mary away immediately so that she was spared the agony of the last hours of watching Jesus die. I do not know; no one can be certain.

Again Christ falls silent. There is nothing more he can do for anyone. He has asked forgiveness for his torturers; he has assured the thief of a place in his eternal kingdom; he has provided for his mother. Now he must use all his remaining strength in yielding himself deliberately to die, as a free will offering for your sin and mine.

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Six

"About the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli lama sabach-thani,' that is:- 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"

This is the fourth statement spoken from the cross. The fourth of the seven; the one in the very middle. But it is also the very centre of the atonement. In our introduction I said that our salvation was decided in the garden and accomplished on the cross, and this, in my belief, was the moment of its accomplishment.

We have so little realisation of the horror of sin. We are so used to it. The farm hand who has spent all day in the pig sty is unaware of the smell that accompanies him which causes others to recoil. We are so used to living in a sinful world that we forget that God is of purer eyes than to look on iniquity.

In the Old Testament there is a full description of the tabernacle. Probably, if you have read the description at all, you have found the detailed measurements dry and meaningless. However, if you take the trouble to work them out, you will discover some interesting truths. It was there, in the tabernacle, that God had promised to dwell with his people. As they pitched their tents, there in the middle of the camp was God's tent too. It was there in their midst, but it was surrounded by a tall fence, so tall that no one could see over it. However, the tabernacle was higher still, so the top of it could be seen rising above the height of the fence. What a wonderful visual aid! God was saying, "I am here, but you may not approach me; your sin is a barrier between us. But there was, in the fence, just one entrance; at the far end of the compound from the tabernacle-tent. Those who wanted to draw near to God had to come through that one doorway. As they did so, ahead of them but at the far end, was the tent where God had promised to meet with them; but between them and the tent, directly in their line of sight and almost hiding the tent from view, was a giant altar. Before they could reach the tent where God dwelt they had to bring a sacrifice.

There were various types of offering for different purposes. One required a lamb. The person making the offering would bring his lamb, lay his hands upon it and confess his sin over it. In this way he proclaimed in symbolism, "I am transferring my sin to this lamb; this lamb is representing me, it is taking my place.." Then he took a knife and himself killed the lamb. After which the priest took its blood and threw it on the altar. However, even after all that, the man himself could not enter either the Holy Place nor the Most Holy Place of the tent; he needed a priest to enter on his behalf. Indeed, with regard to the Most Holy Place, it was only the high priest who could enter and that on only one day a year - the Day of Atonement, when he would make atonement for the sins of all the people, including himself. Between the Holy and the Most Holy Place, there was a curtain. Again, the clear visual teaching; God was saying, "I am here in your midst, but you cannot approach me because of your sin: like the curtain, it bars the way into my presence."

There is no time to examine in full the rich symbolism of all this, but let me touch on the most obvious aspects. There was only one gate or door in the fence into the place where God dwelt. Jesus said, "I am the door." He also said, "I am the Way... No one comes to the Father but by me." The sinner brought a lamb as a sacrifice. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." Only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place where God dwelt. Jesus is the great high priest who takes with him not the blood of bulls or goats or sheep, but his own blood." There is one more dramatic event we must consider, and for this we must jump ahead to the moment that Christ died. There was an earthquake and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Now the temple in Jerusalem was modelled exactly on the tabernacle, except that it was not a tent but a permanent building and was twice the size of the tabernacle. Still a curtain hung between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. As Christ died, that curtain was torn in two.

What clearer message could God give that the way to his presence was open for all who would enter? the barrier of sin had been destroyed! Remember that this teaching and symbolism of the tabernacle was given to Moses hundreds of years before Christ fulfilled its teaching so exactly - and many people claim that the bible is nothing more than the creation of mankind!

If you hear this teaching and picture a man seeking to enter the tabernacle compound to meet with God, and the first thing he sees, barring his way, is the great altar stained with so much blood from so many animals, perhaps you would ask, "What sort of God is this that delights in so much blood?" I would suggest that God asks another question, "What is man that it costs so much to redeem him?"

Sometimes we men wear lapel badges of a neat little cross, and women spend time in a jeweller's selecting the prettiest cross to suit their neck-line. I would not say that we ought not to wear such things, but let us be aware what we do. The cross is neither neat nor pretty, it is an instrument of torture, a bloody thing, a gallows on which men died. With that background, let us return to Christ's cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me."

I said earlier that Christ went to the cross a failure. Nothing he had done in his life survived. The people he had healed would die one day; as would Jairus's daughter, the widow of Nain's son and Lazarus who, all three, had been raised from death once. His mother had not understood him, one of his disciples had betrayed him; at the time he needed them most they had all run off and left him, and the one on whom he had planned to build his church had denied three times that he had ever known him. But Jesus had one over-riding comfort; he knew he was perfectly fulfilling his Father's will. His Father approved of what he was doing. Always, in eternity, Jesus had had an unbroken relationship with his Father.

From the sixth to the ninth hour there was darkness. Despite the unwise translations of some of the modern versions of the Bible, it could not have been a natural eclipse of the sun. The date of the Passover was fixed according to the position of the moon and an eclipse, when it was in that position, would be impossible. Somehow, and here we enter a mystery, the sin of all the world for all time was laid on the Lamb of God. It was so intense that it spilled over from the spiritual realm into the natural, and the barrier of darkness actually hovered over the whole land, centred upon the figure on the middle cross of the three. As the darkness intensified, Christ found to his horror that whereas until then with the barrier set up by mankind's sin between mankind and God, he had always been on the same side as the Father, now he was on the other side. The one comfort he had had in the midst of all the opposition, all the hurt and failure, the one comfort of knowing that he was fulfilling his Father's will, was taken away. Even his Father rejected him!

Now, it is true that in fact Christ has never pleased his Father more than at that moment; but because in that moment he was made sin for us, the Father (who cannot even look at sin) had to cut himself off from his Son who then experienced the most horrifying loneliness and desolation of all time. The frightening cry was wrung from him, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The answer is this:- God could save either you or Jesus; he chose you!

* * * * *

Seven

"After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said, 'I thirst'"

Let us understand one thing clearly; that middle statement from the cross when Christ felt himself cut off from God, was the crisis point. Yes, Jesus had still to die, there was no question about that, it was inevitable, the death blow had been struck. But in that awful cry of desolation, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus was cut off from his Father by your sin and mine. It was not a question of how long that separation lasted. Scientists tell us that static electricity passes through a wire in an instant if that wire but makes contact with the ground. It was the act of separation, the putting away of sin, that was important. In that cry from the Son to his Father, it happened. From then onwards the crisis was over. As we shall see, from that moment the relationship was restored, and Christ knew it. This is borne out by the words of Scripture, "Jesus, knowing that all was now finished or accomplished... said, 'I thirst.'"

Only now, after pleading for his torturers, "Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing;" assuring the thief that he would be with him in Paradise; ensuring that his mother would be cared for and, having borne the weight of the sin of mankind with the horror of separation from his Father which that inevitably entailed; only then did Christ think of himself. He was thirsty.

Hunger can cause men to faint and so there is a certain dulling of the senses. But that is not so with thirst; men have been driven almost mad by lack of water. In addition to all the pain caused, and deliberately planned to be caused, by crucifixion, Christ was now thirsty. It is ironical to recall that it was not so many weeks before that he had cried out in that very city, "If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink." I wonder how many of the priests remembered that, and mocked him all the more as he hung on that cross?

I suppose it is in these words, "I thirst," that we see most clearly Christ's full identification with man. I have not yet found any experience which we have to go through that Christ did not experience in some form. Hunger, thirst, exhaustion, physical pain; abuse, misunderstanding, rejection, fear and, finally, death itself.

But there is another thought also. Our God was so totally self-giving that he was dependent upon mankind for his needs. He was nailed to the cross; not only could he not go to get a drink for himself, but even if one was brought to him, he could not raise it to his lips. If no one responded to that cry, "I thirst," then he remained suffering.

How many people are there in the world today - people created in the image of God, as we are - who are crying, "I am hungry; I am thirsty" and, like their creator on his cross, are helpless unless someone else responds to their cry? What are you doing about the third world, the developing nations? For remember, in as much as you do it to the least of these, in the name of Christ, in fact you do it to him; so deeply is he involved. It is little use our coming here for a time of devotion, if our devotion to our Lord does not result in action towards those he loves; whose cry, "I hunger, I thirst," causes him still to suffer today.

At the cross someone ran and brought some of the sour wine rationed out to the Roman soldiers, and had the wit to pour it onto a sponge which he placed on the end of a stick to raise it to Christ's lips. Yet there were some who, while witnessing his agony, said, "Wait and see if God will save him." Some do that, or virtually do that, today. They see the want, the deprivation and the slow death (slower even than death on a cross) amongst great numbers of the world's population; and they pray and wait to see whether God will save them. Can we not see that God still puts himself into the hands of mankind and, if mankind does not

respond, God is helpless? God does not mint money, the only money God has is in the pockets, the purses, the bank accounts of his people; his body on earth.

I speak to myself as to you. What am I really doing to help those crying, "I hunger, I thirst," today, in my life time? Little enough! Through TEAR Fund and other such organisations, it is possible to educate and feed and clothe a child for about £15 a month. Why, many of us will put more than that amount of petrol in our cars in a week - and we are talking about life itself for a month! are you supporting someone in this way? Will you do so?

It is so easy to intend to do so and let it fall by the wayside for lack of definite action, and it will be another year before you hear again that cry of the poor nations from the cross of Christ, "I have no hands on earth but yours; for mine, which were nailed helpless to the cross - now plead for you and for them, in heaven. Listen, do you hear? in them , still , "I thirst."

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Eight

"It is finished."

We require three words to convey what Christ said in one. It was a glorious shout; "Done," "Completed," "Finished." Let us be quite clear that this does not mean, "I am finished," "I am done for," or "I have had it." No, it is a shout of victory, "I have done it!".

There are not many who die feeling that they have accomplished everything they have wanted to do. Schubert left a symphony which is actually known as 'the unfinished.' Dickens left an uncompleted novel. Any who have had the sad task of

tidying up the affairs of a loved one who has died will know how much has been hoarded - just in case they might need it again. Some have died rather suddenly with knitting or embroidery half finished, or a book they have been reading open half way through. We die incomplete, so to speak. But that was not so with Christ. There were no personal effects to deal with; he owned nothing except the clothes he stood up in - and the soldiers who crucified him had those as part of the perks of the job. As for his work - that was completed.

Let's think together for a short while, just what that work was. There must have been some moment in heaven, before the creation of the world, when the Godhead agreed to create the universe, and then the very crown of their creation - mankind; "Let us make man in our own image." We must take care because, with our human limitations, we do not really know what we are talking about when we speak of heaven. However, in that decision to create man, to love him into being, God must have foreseen his rebellion and fall; but also decided upon a way to win his redemption. Somehow, the Son must have offered to leave his Father's side in glory and to become man, part of his own creation; and also, fully appreciating the cost involved, he offered himself to his Father to die for the sin of the world. We know that, because in Revelation 13 v.8 we read of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. (There is an alternative translation of that verse but it is clear that the way of salvation is prepared even before God carried out the work of creation.) So Christ was born to die. That is not to say that because all human beings die, by taking our human nature on himself, Christ would also be subject to death. No, he received human life in order to be able to offer that life as a sacrifice; he was born to die.

When he became flesh he would have no memory of that decision in heaven. Many people have never really thought that through. That little baby in the manger was not lying there thinking, "Of course, I am God." Although Jesus was, in his

essential being, part of the Godhead and could never cease to be God, he really did become fully man. He had a human body with a human brain. As he grew older he would have been taught about God's promise that a Messiah would come, and gradually it would have dawned on him that he was that expected Messiah. He would then have had to learn exactly what that meant. Having, in heaven, come to the decision that he would offer himself as a ransom for many, he now had to make that same decision again, this time as a man upon earth. Let me put it in another way. In heaven Christ would have been involved in expressing the prophecy that the Servant of the Lord would come on earth to be despised and rejected and finally killed. On earth as a child growing to manhood, he would have heard that same prophecy and gradually have come to understand that it referred to himself.

He learned all he could from the law and the prophets - we know that he got left behind in Jerusalem when he was twelve, talking with the doctors of the law in the temple; learning all he could. He was thirty before he actually took up his ministry and was baptised by John the Baptist in the Jordan. At once he went out into the wilderness to plan his ministry. He was immediately tempted by the devil, who did all he could to deflect him from the cross. Satan even offered to give Jesus the kingdoms of the world - the very kingdoms which Jesus had come to win, if only he would worship him, instead of God the Father. Make no mistake; Jesus was tempted, sorely tempted to go that way - to receive the world without the suffering of the cross. Never believe that Jesus found it easy to reject that much more attractive way.

Then there was the time at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked the disciples if they knew who he was. It was Peter who saw it and said, "Why, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Immediately Jesus began to teach them what this meant - the cross. Peter said, "No, Lord, not if you are the Messiah." You will remember that this remark of Peter's was so attractive to

Jesus - the possibility of avoiding the cross - that he recognised the same temptation and the same tempter behind Peter's words and he cried out, "Get behind me Satan."

Then, on that last journey up to Jerusalem from Galilee, you may remember the description of how Jesus was behaving so strangely, so unlike his usual self, that his disciples were disturbed. Jesus had set his face so determinedly towards Jerusalem and was so pre-occupied that, instead of walking with them, he kept striding on ahead, not realising that he was doing so. Do not imagine that in his earthly ministry, Jesus was so spiritual, so other-worldly, that he had no problem in obeying God's will for him. This was the man Christ Jesus, having to force himself to go to Jerusalem and face his betrayal, torture and death and, dare I say it, he hardly trusted himself not to back out.

We know the battle in the garden; we began our time together today in that garden. If Christ had been tempted by Satan before, now the strain is worse than ever. When he was in the wilderness, the cross still lay three years ahead; now it is tomorrow, tonight; at this moment Judas is on his way with the soldiers. "Father, is there some way for me to avoid going through with it?" and the agony was so great that he prayed more earnestly and his sweat became blood stained as it poured off him to the ground. What intensity of feeling must have been involved for that to happen! When he rose from prayer he returned to the disciples and found them sleeping! And he said to them, "Rise and pray so that you may not enter into temptation."

It is not dishonouring to Christ to believe what Scripture teaches, that he was tempted to breaking point not to go through with winning your salvation. He very nearly cracked - so great was the strain. So no wonder, just before he died, he gave that great roar of triumph, "I've done it, I've done it, I've done it!"

Yes, the work is finished - for ever! The door stands open and no man can shut it; you have only to walk through.

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Nine

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

We come to the closing moments of the earthly life of Christ; the most perfect human life that has ever been lived. Notice how completely He identified with us. Everything we have to face, somewhere Jesus faced something similar. Hunger, thirst, exhaustion, pain, being misunderstood, deserted, denied, betrayed. Finally he died. Have you understood how astonishing that is? The God we worship, we who are Christians, our God knows what it feels like to die. For a moment, leave aside the reason why Christ came to die and what he accomplished in dying, and think simply of the fact that we have a God who knows what it is like to die. In everything that happens to us in life, we can go to our God, our Christ, our Jesus, and say, "Lord, life isn't fair, life hurts," and he replies, "I know, I really do know, for that happened to me too."

In dying, Christ revealed a deep basic principle of life. The world demands that you should be strong, competent, and successful; do not let others think you are weak. We have a God who is willing to die, helpless, hanging on a cross. What sort of God is that, in the eyes of the world? He cannot even save himself, so how can he possibly save anyone else? But that is it! In his teaching of his disciples he explained to them a basic principle: "He who would save his life, will lose it. But he who loses his life for my sake, will find it." Christ lived out his teaching. What does that say to us - in our relationships? in our homes? How often have you held onto your rights as a matter of principle? - not giving way to your wife or your husband, or your

children. Oh, you have won your point - but have you won their respect? and have you won their love? Think about it, which is the more important, to win your point or to win their love? It was a strong thing to hang helpless on the cross to die; not a weak thing. As the risen Christ was to teach St. Paul, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." But that is foolishness to the world. It always was, it is and it always will be. You have to come out of the world to see that.

Let us look at the actual words Christ used at the very end. The phrase itself, "Into thy hands I commit my spirit," without the opening address, "Father", is found in Psalm 31 verse 5. Almost certainly our Lord would have heard those words as a baby. In the Jewish faith there were certain Scriptures to be taught to children and others to be taught to the more mature. The verse was one learned at a mother's knee. It is most probable that Mary would have used these words every evening as she settled Jesus for the night. He would have been familiar with the sound of them, even before he understood what they meant, perhaps even before he knew they were words. It would have been much as Christian parents today will settle their babies with the words of the same song or prayer each night. It is very likely that the last words Jesus spoke on earth as a man, were the first he had learned as a baby; "Into thy hands I commit my spirit." Certainly they were most natural to him, in that the whole of his earthly life had been devoted to committing himself to his Father's will.

It is no surprise, therefore, that now, with the victory won, with that dreadful moment of separation and desolation over, and the fellowship restored, Jesus should commit all that he was into the perfect and safest keeping of all, which he had known throughout the whole of his life. He adds the word, 'Father'. He knows intimately exactly who it is to whom he yields himself; "Father."

Now, what of you? One day you must die. Unless Christ comes again before that, it is the most certain fact of all your life; it will come to an end. Have you planned how you will die? I do not mean the cause of your death - an illness, an accident or just old age. No, but, as far as it lies with you, when the time of your death comes to you, have you decided how you plan to do it?

Sometimes I am called to the bedside of a dying person of whom I know nothing. I have no idea whether they have any faith at all, and if they have, then in whom or in what? Perhaps they believe that there is a God in much the same way that I believe that there is a President of the United States of America; I believe that he is there, that there is such a person, but I do not know him. Certainly such people cannot utter that wonderful word, 'Father'. Often I sense a fear, a reluctance to let go, because they do not know the one to whom they go.

Let me stress this. If you do not know God now, you are unlikely to get to know him as your senses dim near the time of death. I would like to die with Christ's words on my lips - "Father into your hands I commit my spirit," or the very similar words of the first martyr, Stephen, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

I believe that Christ chose when to die. Oh, within limits, of course; he was being put to death by men. But the actual moment, I believe, was Christ's decision. I remember my own father's death. My mother telephoned me in the early hours of the morning, and I cycled the four miles to their home. He was apparently unconscious, but the duty doctor who came listened to his heart beat and said, "It is really quite strong." My mother and I knelt by the bed and very simply I told the Father that we would not hold him here any longer, but released him into his care. The doctor listened in again and said with surprise, "It is weakening rapidly," and in less than five minutes after my prayer my father had died. I believe it is important, if we have the opportunity, to release our loved ones. I hope, therefore, that

when I die I will be able to make mine a deliberate act of committing my spirit into the hands of God who gave it.

We have been here for three hours, some of us watching HIM THERE! As we close, let us remember that it was only because he was there on the cross, for you, for me, that any of us has the right to say that word, "Father" and continue, without any fear, "Into thy hands I commit my spirit."

Prayers for use on Good Friday

Lord, it is difficult to concentrate our thoughts for very long on what happened nearly two thousand years ago. The cross on the hill seems so remote from the homes from which we have come and to which we shall return.

But for you, Lord, the cross was terrifyingly real. All your life it had cast its long shadow down the path you had chosen to take, and on that Friday it was no longer a shadow but heavy wood and sharp nails of pain.

We have gathered round your cross in fellowship; you were utterly alone. In the quietness of this holy hour we cannot really appreciate the suffering and sordidness of Calvary, and in our hearts of hearts we know that we do not want to experience it:

truly to see your blood and your anguish;
truly to see the helplessness and despair of Peter or John.
truly to see your mother's face as she watches you, her son,
die.

These things are too painful for us to want to experience them. Yet we come to watch, to wonder and to learn. Open our eyes to see and our ears to hear, so that our hearts may be opened to love.

* * * * *

Lord Jesus, on this Good Friday we remember with penitence and gratitude, the agony and the shame, the darkness and the desolation you endured at Calvary for us and the redemption of all mankind.

As we meet under the shadow of the cross, we ask you to help us understand more of what it cost you, the innocent and

holy One, to bear away our sin, that we may love and serve you better, our only mediator and redeemer, to whom be glory for ever and ever.

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O God, our Father, we thank you that you so loved the world that you gave your only Son for us and all mankind: that he was obedient to death, even death on the cross; that he loved us and gave himself for us; that he came to seek and to save the lost; that he gave his life a ransom for many; we give you thanks this day, O God.

Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. Help us this day to remember, and never again forget, the love of him who laid down his life for us.

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O Saviour of the world, we praise you for your victory won on the cross. We thank you that everything needful for our salvation, you have completed. Help us to follow you to that throne which you have prepared for us, however dark the way may be for us to reach it. Remind us that we do not travel alone and that you have passed this way before. Bright and morning star, guide us on our journey to where you already reign.

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Lord Jesus, we have come to watch with you one hour. Help us to do that, Lord; that our attention may not wander. Help us to grow in understanding and in spirit.

You died for us on a cross, but that was only the culmination of your whole life given up for others - for us. As we

consider again the cost of our salvation we ask that, following your example, we too may be strengthened by your Holy Spirit to live our lives to the glory of God and the benefit of our fellows.

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