

Today we devote to remembering the crucifixion of Jesus, taking ourselves in heart and mind to the foot of his Cross, recalling what St John's Gospel means when it says "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" In his last three hours of life when, as scripture says '*there was darkness over the earth*', our attention is on him, on all he reveals about God and about ourselves.

From somewhere back in the mists of time comes the tale that when the first Gospel story tellers came to these parts, they were welcomed by chieftains, bards and seers who declared they had been waiting for this story to arrive and be told. They had a sense that due to a far off event, the world had changed in an unprecedented way. It's an extraordinary thought, that everything could be different because of one person's life and death. A change making possible a new and different way of living and self-understanding in humankind's relation to God.

Since time immemorial people have looked into the cosmos with awe and wonder, striving to find more about the meaning and purpose of existence. Philosophy and science have grappled with questions about the origins, purpose and destiny of the universe and us within it as conscious beings. The more we learn, the more there is to wonder at, but the less we feel we know of who we are, what life is for. Unless we have the key that enables us to embrace the whole, to discern and experience truth beyond mere information, beyond all theory and ideas. Jesus, I believe, is this key. The story of this man of Nazareth as told by his disciples and the church they brought into life, proclaims him to be One in whom the fullness of Godhead dwells in human flesh, unique Son of the eternal Father, divine Word of the Creator of all that exists. It's very strong language to use about a human being. Language to be reckoned with. It's less than familiar as part of the vocabulary of everyday modern life, and I wonder if it is always fully grasped even by religious people. It arises from the belief Jesus inspired in his disciples. It wasn't what Jesus taught that inspired such thoughts about him. It wasn't what he claimed about himself, for the Gospels portray him as reticent when referring to himself. He forbids witnesses to speak openly about his miracles.

He mounts no campaign to convince anyone. He just does what he has come to do. The Jesus presented us by the Gospels challenges all to consider 'What do you think?', 'What sort of man is this?' At the heart of his words, his actions, and the way he suffered and died, are the questions: 'Who was he then? Who is he for us today?' What we think about Jesus matters. It's linked to what we think about ourselves. Do those exalted phrases about him resonate with conviction in our hearts?

Before the evangelists pieced together Jesus' life as a framework for recounting his teaching and miracles, the story of his death and its aftermath, was at the centre of all his disciples said or did. Set against the 15 billion years of creation, the brief life of Jesus 2000 years ago is a recent historical event. The writer of the NT letter to the Hebrews considered Jesus' coming to be - '*in the fullness of time*' - at a moment in human social, moral and spiritual development when conditions were right for this change of direction and consciousness to take place. Six centuries before Jesus' time, awareness of personal individuality and responsibility emerged. You can see it in ancient literature and in scripture. In his passion every facet of his individuality is put to the test to the point of destruction. Although mistreated and killed, Jesus does not lose his humanity. Though damaged by the evil deeds of others to the limit, He remains the flawless example of what being true to oneself means. He shows us *the way to the truth and to life*, paradoxically, by dying - not by any scheme of self help planned achievement or cognitive therapy. His supreme example of faithfulness to God is the light he sheds on our humanity. Who he is for us matters profoundly.

We live in an era of de-construction, of rationalist culture which examines everything and denies there is any golden thread of meaning by which to interpret everything coherently. Humankind, having come of age is claimed to need gods no longer, nor resort to transcendence or religion to make life good or meaningful. Religious claims can't be proved, their usefulness in human progress is doubtful, maybe harmful - ideas the world is evolving away from – thus goes the argument. Claims of this kind, deny the spiritual dimension – it's disbelief, as opposed to those constant honest companions, doubt and faith, and it's as ancient as our search for truth.

St Paul writes

*“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? Jews demand miracles and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, the weakness of God stronger than man's strength.”*

This is bold rhetoric. It rests on Paul's conviction, first about the objective reality of God and spiritual life, secondly that the crucifixion is when the nature of the unseen, unknowable, eternal, creator is revealed where one would not expect to find it - in a man's public execution. The Cross tests his belief to breaking point. But all that might rob Jesus of his humanity fails to do so. He is sustained by loving and being held in love by his creator Father. Jesus reveals that unconditional trust in divine love is the source of true meaningful life, material or spiritual in every aspect of existence. This makes little sense to philosophers or secularists, but what matters is:- Is it true?

When He arrived at Jerusalem as a pilgrim for the last time, the crowds welcomed him because of his reputation as a healer, his bold criticism of religious hypocrisy and his inspiring teaching about God's compassion and generosity. They looked to him with hope. They sought meaning in lives crushed by Roman oppression, poverty and by religious belief that often seemed to make life harder rather than easier to live.

Some in the crowd may have wondered if he'd make a better religious leader. Others may have wondered if he was attracting attention to catalyse resistance against the armies of occupation. For everyone overjoyed with anticipation of interesting times before them, another harboured anxieties and resentments. For the religious leaders, Jesus threaten to undermine all they'd strived to preserve of Jewish autonomy and way of life under the colonial yoke. He was to be watched carefully.

As far as occupying security forces were concerned, the crowd could call him 'King' or anything else they liked. He was harmless enough in their eyes, riding his donkey - no swords or spears in sight, no banners or flags to suggest incitement to disorder.

Just a few coats and palm branches strewn around. He was a brief distraction, relief

from the sullen, resentful mood emanating from crowds - everything was under firm control to prevent trouble breaking out among pilgrims arriving for Passover.

The Temple was the place where pilgrims met with God. It was a place of sacrifice, thoughts and words of prayer turned into action - the deed of offering up the life of an animal as thanksgiving and homage to the author of all that nurtures and sustains us. Sacrifice was also offered to say sorry for wrong doing. If you believed in the mercy and compassion of God, sacrifice for sin expressed gratitude for pardon granted. Yet how easily that converts into an attempt to bribe God into forgiveness. When we offer an gift to someone before owning up to something to say sorry for, it's charming, but it distracts from the pain of admitting the offence. In Jesus' day, the sacrificial system had degenerated into a set of organised transactions. One could offer a sacrifice to secure pardon for offences great and small, without really praying or feeling sorry. Emphasis was on the action, divorced from intention towards God. Jesus exposed this as hypocritical.

When he goes to the Temple to pray, he is appalled that this quiet holy precinct is invaded by money changers and sacrificial animal traders, He becomes the focus of disorder and disruption, overturning their tables, driving them out, reclaiming God's house as a place of prayer for every nation, quoting from the prophet Isaiah.

It's seems a crazy thing to do in such tense circumstances. The security forces take no notice, and don't intervene. The Temple precincts are out of bounds to them, part of their peaceful co-existence deal with Jewish authorities.

Jesus' deed embarrasses Temple officials. He argues scripture with them, justifying his action. Little harm is done, except to pride and profit. The status quo can be restored when he is gone. If anyone understood his intention, they'd know he's made a big declaration. Jesus draws inspiration from prophets who envisioned Jerusalem as a place of welcome for the pilgrims of all the world. He teaches that God's mercy is for all humankind. At what price would his inclusive vision be achieved? As for the last time he approached the city he lamented *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing”*

Anything he might attempt in that setting was risky and dangerous. Volatile crowds took notice of him. Religious authorities knew his reputation and were resentful of what he might do to upset the balance of power they strived to maintain. Yet Jesus is ready to lay down his life to ensure this city is what God intends it to be. Nobody will understand or appreciate until afterwards that for him it's never a matter of 'kill and be killed', but accepting and enduring violence rather than cause others to suffer, for the sake of the great change that has to come. In this disruptive act, He wasn't starting a campaign against sacrificial practice, simply protesting for the right to silence and prayer in the place consecrated to prayer.

He lived prayerfully in a way that made sacrificial ritual irrelevant to knowledge and love of God, and care for one another. For us, the idea of ritual sacrifice may seem a bit strange. We tend to associate sacrifice with lives taken by war. '*Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for a friend*' is a familiar saying of Jesus that appears on many a cenotaph, whether we feel comfortable about it or not.

The strangeness of animal sacrifice for us is due to the great change Jesus pioneered and perfected, in revealing the reality of self-giving love.

Intimacy with God can never be a matter of carefully arranged transactions.

We learn to love the Father, who first loved us, and sent his Son to die for us, the perfect sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world.