

In these Vigil hours we have rehearsed and re-told the story of the sufferings and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Hopefully we have glimpsed in passing at experiences and events that resonate with our contemporary world, and are not merely part of its history.

Immense progress has been made in the past two centuries of scientific and technological innovation, making us safer, healthier, more prosperous, better travelled and educated than ever before in history. An improved world for some, though not for all. Two thirds of the planet still lives in deprivation and poverty, and many of the one third possess many times more than enough for a good life. Progress achieved at the cost of possibly irreversible damage to our environment, endangering survival of our species. These are issues of huge moral and spiritual concern, yet we haven't touched upon them. We've focussed on one man's journey through betrayal, rejection, loneliness, doubt, exhaustion and pain into death's embrace. We've looked at people around him and the parts they played, great or small, in bringing him to his untimely end.

Now in this final hour our attention focusses on Jesus hanging on the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem, in a place of disgrace, shame and punishment.

At every stage we have been invited, challenged to see how his story could equally happen today, how the same kind of tragedy is played out in the setting of the modern world, with all its sophistications and achievements – any why? Because despite the progress made by humankind, despite knowledge and education, we are little different over two millennia, in very basic characteristics of our being, our response to life in the face of uncertainty and change is governed by the same basic forces.

The procession of Jesus' ministry through Palestine introduced a new way of thinking about God, and what it means to be human, expressed in his teachings and his action. In a world of cruelty, injustice and fear, Jesus became a sign of hope, of healing and joyous freedom, attracting crowds to himself. He was also a sign of contradiction to all who lived by fear, prejudice, faith in violence, loving power, rather than the power of love. Jesus rebuked religious hypocrisy in all its forms, and exhorted all who'd listen, to enter a new world in which all people regard themselves and treat each other as children of God, the God of compassion, goodness & mercy.

Jesus showed what it meant to live only by loving trust in God. All he taught, all he stood

for was put to the ultimate test, by his rejection, abandonment and shameful agonising death, surrounded by contemptuous crowds. Is it any wonder that he cries out from the cross as the first three evangelists report “*My God my God why hast thou forsaken me*” ? From the Book of Wisdom, written a century before his time, reaching back another six centuries to Amos, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah the prophets, scriptures that would be familiar to Jesus recorded how God's spokesmen met opposition and hostility from the wicked and foolish, how they were persecuted and rejected for their message and for the challenge they issued on God's behalf. Anyone following the prophet's path would soon learn - they'd be tested for their trouble.

In accepting his Father's call, Jesus knew the risk, knew what he was letting himself in for, sooner or later. “*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*” says Jesus, aware he'd have to lay down his life for his witness to bear fruit. He accepted this deliberate choice. Not out of heroic despair, like today's suicide bomber. He lets himself be killed rather than kill. *He saved others. He cannot save himself.* His love for God, for humankind is expressed by his embrace of a cruel fate.

“*It is finished*” he cries out, before he breathes out for the last time – giving up his Spirit, as St John finely puts it, drawing our attention to the fact that the whole of Jesus' suffering is a deliberate offering of himself to be the victim of every aspect of human ill-will and wrong-doing. In Gethsemane he had to struggle, like any man with a healthy love of life, to accept every aspect of his fatal decision - not only in what would happen to himself, but the effect on his nearest and dearest friends, as a result

Peter, brave foolhardy Peter, is broken by his own failure of nerve. Judas, so sure he knew his master's mind, provoking this crisis by leading the authorities to Jesus, and then killing himself when it all went terribly wrong. Jesus couldn't save them. And then there was his mother – Mary, who had known him to be a child with a destiny since before his birth. Mary, who thought her son had gone crazy when he first took to the roads of Palestine, who in the end, was among the women who self-effacingly followed him and supported his mission. As he hung there dying, Mary came to see him, accompanied by John, the other disciple who kept himself out of the limelight and took note of everything to serve as witness. Can we imagine a mother's helplessness and grief, and Jesus' pain at being able to

do nothing to comfort her, not even put his arms around her? Nor could she embrace him. How many times have we turned away from terrible sights on the TV news of women grieving for slain offspring? How many stories have we heard of women crushed by the violence that war or street crime has done to them or their families?

Humankind's potential for wild savagery or cold calculated cruelty is undiminished by material progress and advances in knowledge. But equally, humankind's capability for gentle compassion, protection and nurture is undiminished.

Jesus says: "*Mother behold your Son, son, behold your mother.*" In the depths of pain and failing strength, he thinks of others. He entrusts Mary and John to one another to re-make family life without him. In all his teaching Jesus insisted by word and deed that love is all embracing, inclusive, something which grows by being shared, something to say 'Yes' to, in the face of all our uncertainties and fear. There are two other Marys present also. They help when it comes to his burial. Here at the foot of the cross a new community is forged, of witnesses to his suffering.

As he was nailed to the cross, Jesus prayed "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*", praying not just for those performing this cruel act, but for all those whose weaknesses and failures contributed to this injustice. There was no room in him for revenge, retaliation, blame or shame – habits of our modern secular world, as it has been in every religious culture the world has known.

The blameworthy things we do to each other, we are blind to, ignorant of, when we do them. Those who know shame and guilt know they are wounded, made helpless by their suffering. They already know their need for pardon, for a chance to make amends. Why make anyone feel worse? For Jesus, to forgive means also to heal the damage caused by sinning and being sinned against. Just as the worst evil is being inflicted upon him, He calls upon God, not to avenge him, but to be compassionate to all who contribute to his suffering. The depths of faith are revealed here too, as Jesus calls upon heaven from a place where God is as far from evident as it is possible to imagine.

He is crucified between two thieves. In an act of mockery and contempt for the Jews and their religion, Pilate arranges for the words 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' to be displayed above his head on the cross. The religious leaders argue with him that it should read 'He said I am King of the Jews', the crime they accuse him of. But Pilate is firm. He

despises them for their travesty of justice, and will make fools of them. But, he will not make trouble for himself by refusing to execute a clearly innocent man. The thieves are divided. One mocks him, as the crowd does, for being unable to save himself or them. The other thief, however, recognises that Jesus has done nothing wrong, whereas they are guilty as charged. He glimpses truth behind the allegation of Jesus' kingship.

*"Remember me when you come into your kingdom"* he says, and Jesus replies: *"Today, you will be with me in paradise."* A strange way for the loneliness of both men to be relieved, and for us, a glimpse of the faith of Jesus in life to come, at the heart of darkness. There can be no turning back, no rescue - only moving on. The power of evil has done its worst in testing Jesus to the limit. Nothing has hindered him from reaching out to others with words of hope and comfort in that place beyond hope and life.

The end of the law of retaliation, and its replacement by overcoming evil with good begins here. Those who live as if the world can still be made safe by reciprocating violence have either not understood his story or wilfully disregarded it.

For us to be here today, together at the foot of the cross is more than a witness to our faith, it stands as a protest against all those who refuse to renounce retaliation, and shun the path of reconciliation, whether in the family, or in the face of street crime, terrorism, or the dealings of nations.

*"It is finished"* says Jesus as he dies. Finished, the power of evil and sin to rule human affairs. It cannot overcome the power of love revealed in this greatest act of self sacrifice. The catalogue of humankind's wickedness is interminably long. Despite it all, Jesus' death calls to us to declare that God will have his way - goodness will prevail, through the lives of all who say 'Yes' to follow the way of love revealed on the cross. 'Yes' to compassion and forgiveness. 'Yes' to the power of God expressed in the raising of Jesus from death to life when his trial was finally over.

*"The evil men do lives after them"*, said Shakespeare's Mark Anthony in Caesar's eulogy *"But the good is oft interred with their bones."* A century later, Jesus was unlawfully, unjustly killed in another corner of the same empire, and overturned this melancholic sentiment. Jesus left no legacy of evil. The good of his life was not buried with him. Death could not contain him. There are no bones to contemplate in the place supposed to be his sepulchre. *"Why seek the living among the dead. He is not here. He is risen."* is the

message broadcast from there. His goodness couldn't be confined there, nor to his circle of friends. It spread from that place to the ends of the earth, across the centuries since – His way of love is the only way to a secure and fulfilling life, in this world and the next, such *'love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life my all'*. For this we give humble and hearty thanks, God's love revealed in Jesus. To Him be glory for ever and ever, Amen