

Six Good Friday Reflections

These brief reflections were prepared for a traditional three-hour vigil at the cross but they could be spread through Holy Week. I suggest each could last 10-15 mins.

Please use and adapt them in any way you find helpful.

You may find it a help to have a cross and perhaps a lit candle as a focus. You do not need a specially made cross. You could use the image on this page (which I reflect on in the final meditation). Or a simple hand-drawn image or two twigs from the garden will be sufficient. There are prayers to close each reflection and space to add your own responses to the theme of the reflection. The suggested hymn verses are for singing or reading – or substituted.

David Runcorn



Reflection 1 (12.00)

'He opened wide his arms' - *the welcome of God*

Hymn – to sing or read

My song is love unknown,
My Saviour's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I,
That for my sake
My Lord should take
Frail flesh, and die?

Reading:

'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say - "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, *'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'* The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, *'An angel has spoken to him.'* Jesus answered,

'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. Jn 12.27-33

Reflection

Over the years the words we use in public worship have been revised. One of the newer sentences in the communion service has proved more popular than most. Perhaps it is yours too? It is the line, 'He opened wide his arms on the cross.'

When someone opens their arms to you – what do you see?

What is being expressed?

What are you about to receive?

And how do you respond? - joy, love, delight, welcome - with open arms in return.

To be unable, or forbidden, to freely offer this in any time or place runs counter to our deepest instincts and feelings. But such is our context this Easter.

In this vigil at the foot of the cross we begin by imagining Jesus on the cross. His arms are opened wide towards us and our world.

Here is love that refuses to keep distance from us.

To imagine love in this place of such dreadful suffering is not easy. The focus is more often placed on judgement, guilt, punishment, debt and sacrifice. And they are all part of this story. But that focus too easily makes the cross a kind of extreme, divine problem solving – one which requires unspeakable suffering and death to deal with our sin.

Well the cross is a place of painful truths but that is not where the story starts. What is original to this world is not our sin or evil. It is divine love. When we begin with the negatives, focused on the problem, we never get out of the cycles of judgment and condemnation. No repentance is ever enough. No effort will make us acceptable.

It is true that human sin has made God's embrace of us a work of tragic redemption ... but it is love that holds him there. Love is reaching out to us at whatever cost. There is no distancing.

Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity – "now you can love them after all". Jesus came to change our mind about God.

God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because *God* is good. This is welcome beyond any language of deserving - good or bad

The cross tells us that nothing we humans can do will ever decrease or increase God's eternal eagerness to love us. Divine love is made visible here - forever.

So let us draw near to this love.

There is somewhere is this separated world where we have no need to keep our distance.

There is offered here an embrace unlike anything we have ever known.

It is beyond all imagining or any notions of deserving.

He opened wide his arms on the cross.

Where do you connect with these thoughts?

You might pause and keep silence for a few moments.

Prayer

O God, revealed upon the cross
through the open arms of your Son.

Your love is endless

Your reach is boundless

Your embrace knows no separation.
In wonder and gratitude
we turn to you
and open our arms to receive your love.

A space to add your own prayers

We adore you O Christ and we bless you
For by your Holy Cross
You have redeemed the world.

Reflection 2 (12.30)

'The place called the skull' - the crucified God

Hymn – *to read or sing*

O sacred Head, now wounded,
With grief and shame weighed down,
Now scornfully surrounded
With thorns, Thine only crown;
O sacred Head, what glory
What bliss til now was Thine
Yet though despised and gory
I joy to call Thee mine. Bernard of Clairvaux

Reading:

'As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' Matt 27.32-37

Reflection

Executions always took place outside the city, in places of maximum publicity, by the main routes into the city – as a warning and deterrent. That the sign above the cross of Jesus was in three languages (as we learn elsewhere) makes this clear.

This is a message and a signal.

Around the edge of any growing ancient city would have been quarries, close to the main roads, managing the endless demand for building material.

Occasionally the quarriers would come to a rock that was flawed or cracked – perhaps from earthquakes. They would chisel round and continue cutting back so that, over time, the quarry floor would have lumps and outcrops of damaged rock sticking out, standing alone, rejected by the builders.

One of these had attracted the name 'skull' – because that is what it looked like.

It was a place used for executions. It was by this rock, or upon it, that Jesus was crucified.

We know that for the first years after the death of Jesus, the Jerusalem Christians gathered by this stone on Easter day. That makes sense of the words of Peter, 'Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood. 'The stone that the builders rejected' has become the very head of the corner'. 1Peter 1.1&2.4-7

The first Christians were often from among the poor, the marginalised, the socially 'worthless'. To such people comes this unexpected invitation. Come to Jesus. You too are like stones in the quarry, left behind like so much debris, odd shapes and flawed pieces no one found any use for; discarded after the powers have chosen the best by their measures of value and importance.

But you are, in fact, of great value.

Here at the place of the skull - we too come flawed, unpromising and far behind when judged by the preoccupations and obsessions of this present age.

But listen. All the usual measures of what makes us acceptable, impressive or even useful have been suspended – or rather reversed.

'Come to him', says Peter. Really?

This takes some trusting. We should expect anything built on such a foundation to look foolish, sound irrelevant, and be easy to mock and despise by any normal measure.

We will not be found on 'Grand Designs'.

We will never be impressive building materials. But nor was Jesus.

He was a stone the builders rejected. If Jesus, the rejected one, is the foundation stone of life, we are being shown a completely different way of knowing ourselves and of seeing and knowing God. All that has been rejected and left behind as worthless must be seen in a new light.

Jesus, the stone the builders rejected, has become the foundation stone for the only building that really matters – the new humanity built upon his love.

Where do you connect with these thoughts?

You might pause and keep silence for a few moments.

Prayer

Christ our victim,

rejected and cast aside as of no worth.

May we not turn away from you,

but find here, with all this world rejects,

a sure foundation for new life and hope.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Janet Morley - adapted)

A space to add your own prayers

We adore you O Christ and we bless you

For by your Holy Cross

You have redeemed the world.

Reflection 3 (1.00)

'Why have you abandoned me?' - the abandoned God

Hymn – to read or sing

Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom,

Lead thou me on;

O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till

The night is gone,

And with the morn those angel faces smile,

Which I have loved long since, and lost a while.

Reading

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Matt 27.45-56

Reflection

I have sat with others as their earthly life has drawn to a close. No two stories are alike. But I have come to believe what others have long said - that in a mostly hidden but significant way the last journey of a person's spirit into death begins long before physical death.

We have some glimpses of what Jesus was going through on the cross - though even those near him struggled to make out his words and meaning.

The creeds say 'he descended to the dead'. And that, in Christian tradition, was a descent to hell itself.

A television documentary captures the moment when an explorer penetrates remote, deep jungle and comes upon ancient ruins. The breathless voiceover says – 'who knows when human voices were last heard here?'

Jesus descended to the dead. There must always be mystery in the language and imagination here. But Christian faith has understood this to mean that in his incarnation, suffering and death Jesus willingly and fully entered the farthest, deepest, waste places of human spirit and destiny. All that is most lost.

Now, from the cross, an anguished cry rends the lifeless silence.
'My God, my God why have you abandoned me!'

And when was a voice last heard from that abyss?

It is the only time in his earthly life Jesus does not call God 'Father'.

He is there for us ... It is our cry.

It is the cry of the world.

It still is.

In that cry is found our hope and salvation - and nowhere else.

In more recent literature and films about the cross the suffering and pain have been presented in overwhelmingly graphic detail. But we will not understand his gift by trying to measure his pain. It is not the quantity of suffering that saves. It is *who* is suffering and *why* that saves.

Nor is salvation achieved by some kind of transfer of punishment from sinners to an innocent victim. The cry of Jesus is not the agony of pain divinely inflicted, punishment pitilessly exacted, payment claimed in blood.

Rather, God takes it upon himself - and it tears him apart.

That cry is the harrowed anguish of divine love.

How are we to express this?

'I want to say it like this', writes the theologian Jane Williams, 'so that we can hear it and feel it. God is torn apart from God. Particularly about the cross, that is the only kind of language that I can find to say what I am trying to say. On the cross, God endures the separation from God that is the world's.

As Jesus cries, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', he is the life of God, streaming into our separation. Because Jesus and his Father are ripped apart, nothing can now separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. God is in our dislocation from God, as in our connectedness.'

*Where do you connect with these thoughts?
You might pause and keep silence for a few moments.*

Prayer

Christ our victim
Whose beauty was disfigured
whose body torn upon the cross
who willed to enter our abandonment and loss
Open wide your arms
To embrace our tortured world
That we may not turn away our eyes
But abandon ourselves to your mercy. (Janet Morley)

A space to add your own prayers

We adore you O Christ and we bless you
For by your Holy Cross
You have redeemed the world.

Reflection 4 (1.30)

'Take up your cross' - the followers of God

Hymn – to sing or read

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride

Reading

Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?' Matt 16.24-26

Reflection

Jesus never hid from his followers what his ministry was leading towards.

He regularly spoke of his coming suffering and cross. For their part his disciples never stopped struggling to accept and make sense of what he was saying.

On one occasion as he told them yet again Peter felt he had heard enough. Suffering, rejection, defeat and being killed are not what should happen to real Messiahs is it? Nothing in the faith they had grown up with prepared them for this either.

He takes Jesus to one side and bluntly rebukes him and tells him he is wrong.

This is startling language.

It is elsewhere a word used of Jesus casting out evil.

But Peter's response to Jesus may owe more to fear than presumption. For if what Jesus is saying is true then they, his disciples, could be in danger too.

Peter expresses what they are all thinking.

Jesus is looking at them all as he interrupts Peter and sharply rebukes him back. "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Not only is there no other way for Jesus. The way of the cross is the way of his followers too.

Carrying your cross is the action of someone on the way from their cell to the place of execution. In American prisons, inmates on death row chant 'dead man walking' when one of their number makes that last journey.

What life plans, hopes and ambitions make any sense at all in that moment?

This is such a tough uncompromising image of faith.

Yet this is the call of Jesus. 'Take up your cross and follow me', says Jesus.

To take up our cross is to surrender all our own attempts to use life, religion and God *for our own ends, needs and purposes*.

To take up our cross is to turn from our own attempts to manage and control and secure our own lives. The instinct to do this runs very deep. We are engaging in activity that is powerless to save. We cannot save ourselves.

To take up our cross is to turn to Christ and to surrender to the only gift of life that we can utterly trust and depend in – the life Jesus gives.

The story is told of a man seen late one night searching for something under a streetlight. A passerby stops. 'Did you lose something here?' 'No, I lost it over there', replies the man, pointing into the darkness some distance away, 'but the light is much better here.' His folly is plain. He has lost something important and knows it. He is looking hard for it. But he is searching on his own terms and while he does so he has no hope of finding what is lost.

To take up our cross is to set our mind on 'divine things', says Jesus.

So this all hinges on God and what he about.

All our hope is found here.

The cross is forever the sign of a God who loves, saves, delivers and raise life out of the darkness of what is dead and lost.

Those who are willing to lose their life here, will find it.

Where do you connect with these thoughts?

You might pause and keep silence for a few moments.

Prayer

Lord upon the cross

Give us the grace and courage to take up our cross and follow you.

That in losing our lives for your sake

We may be brought to new life and

May become signs of your love and
your salvation in the world.

A space to add your own prayers

We adore you O Christ and we bless you
For by your Holy Cross
You have redeemed the world.

Reflection 5 (2.00)

‘They do not know what they are doing’ - the forgiving God

Hymn – *to sing or read*

Amazing love, O what sacrifice
The Son of God, giv’n for me
My debt he pays, and my death he dies,
that I might live,
that time I live. (*chorus from ‘My Lord, what love is this?’*)

Reading

‘Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’ Lk 23.32-38

Reflection

‘Forgive’ ... we somehow expect that word to appear here. Even if this reveals we know this story too well and it has lost its capacity to shock. But it is the second part of the sentence that sticks - ‘they do not know what they are doing’

It is one thing to be forgiven for what you know you have done wrong – even if there is pride to swallow and shame to endure. But to be told we did not even know what we were doing ...! Hang on a minute!

A feature of our culture is its need to blame – someone must be responsible. It must be someone’s fault. When shocking stories emerge of the abuse of children, tax avoidance, air disaster or a global pandemic ... we need to know whose fault it is. It must be someone’s. We need someone to blame.

It is the deadliest diagnosis from the cross – ‘they do not know what they are doing’.

Who don’t exactly?

Crowds? - mocking. Carnival. Media driven.

Soldiers? – only following orders

Pilate? – political expediency. Ineffectual - did not know what to do.

Religious leaders? – they thought they knew *exactly* what they were doing.

Judas?

And you and I? What don’t we know?

Jesus's favourite metaphor for the human condition is blindness.

We just don't see.

(there are sensitivities to this metaphorical language of course. And in the recorded encounters with Jesus the physically blind often 'saw' him the most clearly)

On one occasion his religious hearers challenged him

'Are you saying we are blind?'

Jesus replied – 'you are not guilty because you are blind

You are guilty because you say you can see. Jn 9.41

If we are blind in this sense, then even our best intentions can be dangerous.

We cannot see our consequences; our effect.

If we come to cross in this place of not knowing, of *unseeing*, we should not expect the cross to make sense.

The cross is there precisely for all that is senseless, unaware, our unseeing and our wild, deadly assumptions about what we think we know.

Where do you connect with these thoughts?

You might pause and keep silence for a few moments.

Prayer

Father of Jesus,

For the judgments we make that are simply prejudices.

For the times we think we are right but we are actually wrong.

For the times we claim to see clearly but are blind.

Father forgive,

we do not know what we are doing.

A space to add your own prayers

We adore you O Christ and we bless you

For by your Holy Cross

You have redeemed the world.

Reflection 6 (2.30)

'It is finished' - the victory of God

Hymn – to sing or read

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Reading

'... standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Jn 19.25b-30

Reflection

And what is finished? The phrase comes twice.

Sin? Evil? Death? Pain? Suffering?

Plainly not

Whatever is finished this world is not yet problem or pain free. Far from it.

'It is finished' completes the earlier cry - 'why have you abandoned me?'

The gospel accounts express this in different ways.

Matthew tells that, at the moment of his death, the curtain of the Temple was torn 'from top to bottom'. Top down. This is God's doing. That huge heavy curtain hung before the holiest place separating off God's presence. God now rips it apart.

Something is open that was closed.

Something is united that was divided.

Nothing is outside the love of God.

No one and nowhere is beyond reach his crucified embrace.

There is now no division, no separation. It is finished.

The church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is built over the site of the crucifixion and tomb of Jesus. Climb the stairs and there is a crowded chapel where you can reach in and touch the top of the Calvary stone.

But underneath is an unmarked chapel. It is usually empty.

Behind the altar, behind a glass window is the bottom of same fractured rock.

It is called 'Adam's Chapel'. The message is clear - the cross penetrates down to the very beginning. Nowhere and no one is beyond its reach.

The embrace of divine love on the cross reaches it all.

It is finished.

The story can begin again.

In John's account, when all is finished, Jesus simply bowed his head and 'gave up his spirit'. For a few deadly hours Jesus had been willingly surrendered to earthly powers - passive in the hands and will of others. Now, at the last, Jesus again takes the initiative. He completes his earthly ministry - his total self-offering - in a final act of trusting surrender to the Father's will. 'Bowing his head' is the language with which you might describe someone quietly going to sleep - though here the pain and thirst are acute.

One thing remains - to give up his spirit.

In John's gospel what is offered 'up' is found in the perfect will and purpose of the Father.

The earliest teachers of the faith would teach that if Jesus had not hand over his spirit to the Father at this moment of death the world itself would have ended.

Bowing, laying down, offering up, handing over

The final complete, trusting, self-offering of himself.

The sacrifice complete.

It is finished

The Father and the Son are one.

This image of the cross was designed by Scilla Verney, an artist, who was herself dying of cancer at the time. The world is portrayed as split apart - painfully, sharply separated. That split can express anything that is fractured, separated and lost. Christ, in his own body, fills that contorted gap. His arms are thrust into the midst of it all. In his own being he holds it all together. This is our faith. This is where the world is now held In Christ. Nothing is outside of it. That is where all broken and separated things are found - in Christ. Nothing separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.



*Where do you connect with these thoughts?
You might pause and keep silence for a few moments.*

Prayer

Look, Father, look on His anointed face,
And only look on us as found in Him;
Look not on our misusings of Thy grace,
Our prayer so languid, and our faith so dim;
For lo! between our sins and their reward,
We set the passion of Thy Son our Lord. (William Bright)

A space to add your own prayers

We adore you O Christ and we bless you
For by your Holy Cross
You have redeemed the world.

3.00 - Closing worship, reading and prayers

Hymn – to sing or read

O dearly, dearly has he loved
And we must love him too
And trust in his unfailing love
And try his works to do.

Reading

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

As this vigil at the cross comes its close, take a moment to gather thoughts and insights that have particularly touched your heart and mind.

Pause and keep silence for a few moments.

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

Lord upon the cross
Our life giver, pain bearer, love maker
Open wide your arms
to embrace our tortured world
that we may not turn away our eyes
but abandon ourselves to your mercy
and so become life giving, pain bearing
and love making signs of your kingdom,
For your name and glory's sake.

We adore you O Christ and we bless you
For by your Holy Cross
You have redeemed the world.