

Meditations at The Foot of The Cross

Good Friday

12:00 - 14:00 21.iii.08.

Kevin Carey

i. "Crucify Him!"

"Crucify him! Crucify him!" I am standing in the crowd shouting: "Crucify him!". I know I should not be there; but I am. I have barely heard of this Jesus. But I am here, I tell myself, because I am the history man. I know that the cry has resonated down the centuries in blood and anguish. What started as a bitter cry from Matthew the Evangelist, who could not understand why so many of his fellow Jews were obdurate in the face of the Good News of Jesus, ended in the sustained scream of Auschwitz. I am with the whole world in the crowd but only the Jews will be blamed.

If you had told the genially meticulous, pipe smoking Johann Sebastian Bach that his *Matthew Passion* would be a tiny but significant piece in the superstructure of genocide he would not have been able to imagine it. Yet it is a testimony to how humanity can use beauty for its own warped ends that this is what happened. But, in a strange way, he should have known, born in the shadow of the recently concluded 30-years-war when the armies of supposedly civilised Western Europe slaughtered each other in the name of Catholicism and Protestantism. I am the history man; I have seen it call before. I saw it in the Holy Land when Crusaders killed Muslims for Christ; and I saw it in Byzantium when Crusaders from Western Europe slaughtered Greek Orthodox Christians in the name of Christ and sang the *Te Deum* in the Hagia Sofia clad in their armour.

I can argue that there were complex underlying causes behind every act of cruelty from the Condemnation of Jesus to Hitler's "Final Solution" and onwards through the killing fields of Cambodia and the jungles of Central Africa - that is what historians do - but what is more easily definable, more sharply etched, is the use of violence as a quick fix. Whatever the political entanglements of the Sanhedrin, the death of Jesus would fix something, buy time, create 'wiggle room'; it was right, as Caiaphas said, that one man should die for the whole people. Pilate, dithering and dangerous, opted for the quick fix, to stave off difficulties with his vassal princes and his distant but lethal superiors. Medieval Kings, short of popularity and even shorter of revenue, turned on the Jews for living in the way that Christianity had imposed; they were secretive in their ghettos, they practised usury, they walked with the mark of their religion upon them. All over Europe, from the birth to the death of the second millennium, they were butchered for being what we would have them be. And Hitler? Yes, I have heard all the arguments about a humiliating peace at Versailles and the ravages of economic depression; but it was another instance of the fix, though not so quick. Somebody had to be blamed. Somebody always has to be blamed. I am standing here in the crowd, without

knowing very much about it, blaming Jesus.

I often ask: why Germany? To which the sad answer is that it could have been anywhere; and, indeed, it did happen in Russia; but Stalin was our ally so we stayed quiet. And wherever Hitler went he had friends who were happy enough to go along with the "Final solution". But what we need to remember is that German religion had slipped out of Reformation agonising into bourgeois moralising; it had no more force than enlightenment philosophy; it had reduced Jesus to a benevolent and distant philosopher; it had stopped up its channel to the Holy Spirit.

The crowd shouts: "Crucify him", "Heil Hitler", "Send them home" or "Sharia!" and the combination of self interest and adrenalin-induced hysteria is unstoppable. This is the clue to where we stand on this grimmest of days. We are not looking down grandly on the sultry crowd, not the occupants of the moral high ground looking down on Pilate, Herod and the Pharisees, not the resistance forces risking death; we are here, on the ground, in the crowd; and, therefore, we are not standing beside the refugees as they are manhandled onto aeroplanes to meet almost certain torture and death. We are the crowd, we are shouting: "Crucify him!"

This is such a cruel accusation against ourselves that it is easier to dismiss it as absurd than to take it seriously; that is the problem with direct speech; nobody really believes it anymore; it sounds like something in a play, something that only fictional characters would say. We hear people saying harsh things in soap operas but our lives are altogether more homogenised. We no longer protest and do not like to be the objects of protest. We have managed to separate ourselves from unpleasantness. We let other people deal with the dirty side of life: the despised immigrant will clean the toilets and push the trolleys; the despised media will say what we dare not say; the despised politician will see the economic benefits of the immigrant but make sure that he is properly insulting at the same time; and we who are respectable will let journalists and politicians, loud mouths and gentle mouths, the brutal and the subtle, do our dirty work for us. That is how the Jews got killed; that is how the Armenians got killed; that is how the people of the Sudan are being killed.

Was it different then? Jesus, a Galilean, only one step up from a Samaritan, has been talking straight, telling people that simply observing a superficial law is an inadequate response to the wonder of creation. He appeals to the vitality of Abraham, Moses, Samuel and David; he is indifferent to incense and burned flesh; he is tired, like his Father, of the cauldron and the coldness, the fire and the frigidity, the lamentation and the luxury. His weariness has been uncomplaining; but this week events took on a brisker tempo and a greater intensity until the explosive mixture of radicalism and religion could not be contained. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, attacked the economic system, scorned the priests, supported imperial taxation and generally created religious and political instability. Faced with the easy power and time honoured nostrums of the religious authorities, he refused to fall into line.

Now he stands in front of us; Where are we standing? Are we standing out, providing mute moral support for this condemned man? Are we challenging glib, coherent authority or are you with me in the crowd shouting "Crucify him!", or perhaps worse still, are we at the back of the crowd trying to have it both ways, giving the appearance of collusion but not meaning it or giving the impression of detachment but not meaning it? Are we moral creatures as long as the morality is private? Are we the sort of people who say our prayers at home but allow blasphemy to go unchallenged in the street and the market, at the board room table or at the dinner table?

The Jews I am standing with shouting for Crucifixion and the Germans who are applauding Hitler are not a different species; for we are they and they are us; and everything they do they are doing on our behalf. As I stand at the foot of Pilate's dais or in the stadium at Nuremberg I am too frightened to die for Jesus but that is not surprising. I have been too frightened to live for him; and that is where the problem starts.

The idea of aggression against Jesus may seem far fetched but it is not. Attacks on Jesus by atheist intellectuals are commonplace; and we must not allow ourselves to be dragged down by indifference to the Word of Christ. We are allowing ourselves to suffer from poor morale because we have adopted the management speak of targets which show Christianity to be a numerically declining phenomenon; what matters is our individual relationship with God, not the numbers. But all that we have undergone is nothing compared with what we will soon have to face. There are many challenges before us but the one we really have to face is finding the strength to ensure that we do not do to Muslims what Christians have already done to Jews.

The law, violence, structure, monitoring, surveillance, audit, prison, power, manipulation, vengeance, codes, condemnations, edicts, vetoes and sanctions - all such summary and restrictive instruments - are simply instances of the need for a quick fix; but speed is not enough; we want the fix but it must be executed somewhere else. We will collude in silence but of course we would not dream of sanctioning real cruelty. If an impoverished African with a mental health problem has to be manhandled onto an aeroplane by half a dozen security men at four in the morning, that is not our affair; there must have been a good reason for such harsh official action. Are we, then, as democrats and citizens but, above all, as Christians, articulate and well informed, part of the security corps or are we standing with Jesus who is standing with the deportee? And look! Jesus is standing with the Muslims!

These are unpleasant questions but we live in unpleasant times. There is a well documented phenomenon, of SS men retiring to their homes to listen to Schubert. Culture did not save Germany from its terrible disaster and culture, whatever is left of it, will not save us. It is the supposed people of culture who are waging a campaign against the wisdom of God, the wisdom of Christianity and Islam. The only figure that stands between us and barbarism is the condemned man, the man we would crucify, the man who says that the world which God created must be built on love, the man who is to die because we

earthly creatures simply cannot not live alongside his perfection.

Yet, in spite of the difficulties, our Lord promised that we would never be asked to do anything for which he would not provide the resources; so let us look at ourselves now, and see whether we have the courage to move from the crowd, to cross the open space, to stand with the condemned man.

The horror of this day is that every time we re-live it, we are in danger of ending up in the wrong place, in this place, where the crowd shouts for a quick fix. But with a little courage, with a little strength, gained from looking into the eyes of the man, we can cross the open space as long as we keep ourselves focused on the eyes of the man, as long as we do not look round to see the angry faces of the crowd. If we are to be true to the man, if we are to stand by him, we must forget the crowd, the people of whom we are frightened, with whom we have colluded. We must forget the bribes and the pressure and focus on the inner strength we have gained from this man to whom we are walking.

Soon we have a hill to climb; and when that is over and we are exhausted, there will be a period of silence; and then a great shout; and we will be renewed; and then, as the days turn and we are worn down by the world, we will find ourselves drawn back towards the crowd; and then we will yet again have to find the courage to look into the eyes of the man and cross the open space; and climb the hill. It feels circular but it is a spiral. Each time we see the same objects but from a slightly more elevated angle; if we have courage our pilgrimage will take us ever higher; but today the big picture is too difficult to grasp; all we can feel is the danger of crossing the open space.

Slowly, keep looking ahead; let us cross the space together.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you sent your son to live among us so that we might better learn of your love; as he stands condemned before us now, help us to cross the space from our comfortable prejudice to stand next to Jesus and, in that witness of the victim, resolve not to do to others what we did to him. **Amen.**

ii. "What is Truth?"

I am the documentary man. I am making a fly-on-the-wall documentary about Roman justice, watching Pilate manoeuvring his way through the minefield of Jewish religious politics, land rites, taxation and military infractions. The crew is somewhat irritable because as we were packing up for the festival, an emergency case came up. There's this B list celebrity called Jesus who has made a bit of a splash in town this week and got the authorities rather annoyed and they want Pilate to sanction his execution. Pilate is worried; you can see it as he keeps going out to talk to the leaders and coming in again; it isn't that he's reluctant to execute people, far from it, it's just that there isn't really a charge and that makes it difficult. There is a suggestion - and it's really no more than that - that this Jesus wants to overthrow the Government; which is a bit odd because earlier in the week when the Pharisees tried to tempt him to insult the Emperor he publicly supported imperial taxation. Pilate is talking to Jesus in an unusually quiet and intense way about his aspirations; he says he's some sort of king but nothing to do with the world; a kind of superpriest, I suppose you could say, except that he doesn't seem very keen on priests.

While Pilate goes out yet again, picked up by the external cameras, we mull over the angles: Jesus is a mental case worth a flogging which Pilate can reasonably administer without causing any problems; or he is a vague threat, in which case he can be put into prison until after the Passover break; or he's a real danger and Pilate knows something we don't know, probably picked up from that snitch, Herod's intelligence service; on the other hand, it could simply be that Pilate wants to do the Jewish leaders a favour, though we can't figure out why; or he's frightened, as he often is (in fact he's at his cruellest when he's most uncertain). And it's that last option that seems most likely as he shuttles to and fro between Jesus and the people outside; he doesn't want to kill Jesus because there's no charge; but he's frightened.

Although we are aware of the huge noise outside, it is really quiet in here as Jesus talks to Pilate. He is strangely calm, even serene, in spite of his bruised and bloody face; he is relaxed in his beaten up body. It is not the incongruity but the apparent normality that makes it such good footage; ordinary people doing ordinary things never become boring; it's the forced incongruities of drama, the clever cuts, the obsession with the extreme, that become boring. Pornography and violence are the hallmarks of second rate film makers. This man is, well, ordinary but different. You can't take the camera off his face. It's a trick that you see pulled off less well by great leaders; he's looking at everyone intensely but you only know that he's looking at you.

Jesus says he has come into the world to tell people what is true; and then Pilate, right out of the blue, asks: "What is truth?"

It's not the sort of question that Pilate usually asks; he usually wants to find out what the truth is of a given situation; Romans aren't very good at abstraction; and, I have to admit that all too often it's not the sort of question that documentary makers ask either? What is truth? It's a question that gets

blown away by the hysteria, the pressure of deadlines and Pilate's mounting fear. But when we come to edit the film, it's there; it's the most compelling piece of footage; and we don't know what to do with it. The only thing we can do, given that Jesus does not answer, is to go back and look at his life and his teaching to see if that gives any clue to the answer he would have given. It's a bit hackneyed but a flashback might be effective at this point.

What are we to do with Pilate's question, as we stand outside, at the end of the interview, trying to sort out what it means? We have ready access to all the teaching and miracles, the kindnesses and the warnings, so how will we proceed? Well, the art of the film maker is to create an elegant, coherent piece of narrative architecture out of a welter of material. You know how it goes. A scene is set up and if it does not quite work, you order another 'take' until that piece is just how you want it. This is difficult because everything has to come together: the words delivered properly, the right facial expressions, elegant picture composition and a sense of continuity, or disruption, with the preceding and succeeding shots. You can see how all this piecing together can make abstract truth a bit, well, abstract. And when you have got all the pieces you want and put them into some kind of order, throwing huge amounts of material away, you decide that the architecture you had thought of isn't quite right; so you throw some of the carefully edited material onto the floor and you go away and re-write bits of the script and then do some more filming until your stamina or your money runs out. Everything has to be in its neat and tidy place; it is the most contrived form of art.

Handling this flashback is so easy because there is very little choice. There are pictures of Jesus opening his arms to everyone, healing people, making people smile, handing out bread and fish. There's a fair amount of homespun truth about being good to your neighbour and, because he's a Jew, a lot about loving God. We've cut the tricky stuff about Jesus and God as his Father as the audience would find that obscurantist; but the lakeside flashback is simple enough in its impact. But it doesn't answer Pilate's question. In the end, if you go along with Jesus, it's what you do that answers the question not what you say.

As we review the Good Friday shots, it becomes more difficult to work out what to do. Our usual technique of taking and re-taking, of editing and re-editing, is being called into question. We increasingly feel the need just to run the whole thing. We began, as usual, by wanting to present our version of Jesus but that is becoming more difficult. Of course, the difference in Jesus movies is quite natural, it's an inevitable result of our natural inability to handle perfection. Look at *Jesus The Movie* showing at your nearest multiplex and you will see that each editor has a different take.

* There is Jesus the castigator who spends all his time complaining about Jewish society and the poor behaviour of the rich and poor alike, of the priests and the peasants. And the world is certainly wicked enough already without letting women make it worse.

* Then there is Jesus the empathiser who just lets it all happen, man, who

doesn't really mind what people do as long as their heart is in the right place; they just have to feel it, like, in their soul and everything will be all right

* Then there is Jesus the revolutionary, who came to turn the political world upside down and was murdered by the authorities for being too radical, the man who overturned international capitalism in the Temple court

* There is Jesus the choreographer, who loves liturgy; he likes the right number of candles and the right number of backwards steps and genuflections and he thinks that this choreography should be entirely male

* And then there is Jesus the comfortable, who spends all his time cuddling children, feeding animals and generally keeping everything neat and tidy; everything and everybody in their place, the Jesus of Hurstpierpoint, or, rather, middle class Hurstpierpoint.

Now it seems to me as a film maker that there are two things we can do here. The first, the old fashioned, high art, approach is to take pieces from each of these sets of perceptions and put them together into a multi faceted Jesus; lots of sharp editing for contrast. the other approach, much more modern and risky, is to forget all the characterisation and go back to the original footage and just run it.

While we are weighing up the options, let's take a look at the editing material The Jesus of Hurstpierpoint is being squeezed out by two much more powerful versions, Jesus the castigator and Jesus the Choreographer; there is hardly any room for a gentle word or a smile of encouragement. How strange and sad it is that we have resorted to the art of film, resorted to making and re-making. No wonder Pilate isn't sure what truth is. He can't properly get a fix on it. He is so worried by administrative matters that he finds it difficult to sleep and he watches a lot of late night movies and recently they have all been different cuts of *Jesus the Movie* and he is becoming ever more confused.

Unlike Pilate, we don't watch all these movies; we have made our own and we are very pleased with it. The Jesus of Hurstpierpoint has become an old friend; and, like all old friends, it changes over the years but never beyond recognition. The Jesus who was sympathetic to rebels steadily becomes the Jesus of the solid state and comforter of the elderly. The Jesus of frugality effortlessly morphs into the Jesus of modest comfort. Now and again as the world shakes and shudders, we bring in a new scene of Jesus the Third World prophet and Jesus the protector of the great whale, but the overall shape transforms itself slowly with our lives in such an artless metamorphosis that we do not notice it.

We all suffer from this self centred view of Jesus. This might be rather a harsh judgment on ourselves but we have to ask whether we still retain the wonder, the sense of drama, in our relationship with Him, whether it informs our days and comforts us at night; whether it infuses our kindness and our passions. Conversely, we have to ask whether Jesus has simply become a rather dull,

academic documentary, whether He has been taken captive by the militia who bombard each other with Creeds and Confessions, Articles and Covenants. We have to ask ourselves whether, using our own version of Jesus, we could answer Pilate's question.

As an experienced documentary maker, I know you have your own particular problems making honest films, so here is the secret. I will tell you what happened when we were trying to edit our fly-on-the wall documentary of the Roman Justice system. We fiddled around with all the footage except what we had taken of Jesus; somehow you couldn't cut it, you just had to let it run, it was natural and graceful, it was eloquent and economical, it never over-stated or under-stated; you had to take each word, each sentence, each gesture, each scene, for what it was. I know that there might be differences of interpretation but these are not very great if you look carefully at the face, if you listen carefully to the words, if you bring yourself to remember what he did and what he taught. It's difficult if you're an artist but the trick is to try to take yourself out of the equation; it isn't a movie about my view of Jesus, it's a movie about Jesus. As he would have put it; God isn't a concept invented by humanity, humanity is a reality created by god.

This is not the day for re-making but for knowing that there is only one way. Watch with me now, watch Jesus The Movie; uncut.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, who sent your son to live among us so that we might better learn the truth of your goodness; as he stands humiliated before us, help us through Jesus to recognise the magnificent truth of your goodness and our shortcomings in being worthy of it. **Amen.**

iii. "Behold The Man"

I am the practical man. I am a trader in spices, caught up in the drama. After the sleepy backwater of my home town there is always something dramatic going on in Jerusalem. And I have to admit that this is more dramatic than anything I have seen on other visits.

There was, for example, a moment of supreme drama just a few seconds ago, more complete in its way than any other scene so far in the sorry story of the trial of Jesus, when Pilate produced Jesus. We see him now, being paraded by Pilate before us, looking like a failed gladiator who has lost a fight but somehow hasn't died or killed himself; and although he retains the trappings of power, Pilate might be a beaten gladiator himself, offering Jesus to us as if we can do anything about it. He says: "Behold, the man!" and for the very first time I begin to wonder whether that is all there is to it; it is the very use of the word "man" that somehow does not work for me, does not encapsulate the whole of what I can see in the face of Jesus as I stand, slightly behind the rest of the crowd, trying to summon up the courage simply to watch, to detach myself from the hysteria. This is hardly heroic but at the moment it is the best I can do. You have to start somewhere, and detaching yourself from the mob, driven by self indulgence and fashion, is a good place to start.

I don't know what I am doing here, anyway, a foreigner, a Gentile, a slave who bought my freedom, a trader in spices.

Let us, then, consider Jesus together; behold the man. Since I came here there has been talk of little else. This man, whose picture I will still see, even though he has been taken away by the soldiers, has performed miracles, he has made fun of the rather mad, old fashioned laws that the Jews stick to so fanatically; but it's not that. It's the smile behind the pain, the sense that what he is going through, well, was meant to be.

As we stand at the back of the crowd, waiting for Jesus to re-emerge, to be goaded up the hill to Calvary, what do we think about the man? How do we behold him?

In two thousand years of distancing and dispute, some of us have almost forgotten. We can remember the lovely little baby and a teacher in parables, and a risen phenomenon; but the man is more difficult. Perhaps that is why Dan Brown's book, the Da Vinci Code, is so successful because it talks about a man who loved a woman and had children. Is it partly because our society is so sexualised that we are not really human unless we are having a sexual relationship? Well, partly, but perhaps it is more a matter of cultural heritage. At the beginning of the unceasing re-appraisal, there were a great many followers of Jesus who tended to be gnostic, who thought that substance, the earth, bodies, were basically and irretrievably evil; how they squared that with the God of Creation is a difficult question. But the incarnational forces in the church gained the upper hand which explains the rather particular nature of the Nicene Creed. Then, at the Reformation, there was another bout of anti materialism from which we have never really recovered. We associate being

religious with being other-worldly; and some of us associate being truly religious with being celibate.

What we know, but Pilate could not, is that this man whom we behold is the Creator's injection of self into creation. Until now there was the Creator and creatures; with Jesus there is still the Creator and Creatures but one of those Creatures is also the Creator. When we behold this man we also behold our God. Yet in recognising this supreme mystery we must not, in awe of God, forget the man.

This man is us; we are this man. Because he bridges the gap between creator and creature, brings God to earth, we are full of the energy which this has released; Jesus lives in us through the power of what we call the Holy Spirit. These are massive doctrinal ideas but at root we have a man, someone with whom we can identify, who laughed and cried, became bored and irritable, who ate and drank with all manner of people. His perfection condemned him to an inevitable death. Wherever and whenever a Jesus had been sent to us he would have been killed; that is the underlying, collective guilt from which we cannot escape as long as we are on earth, it is what not being with God means; but none of this makes any sense at all unless we behold the man.

I have travelled far with my spices, I have seen all manner of peoples; but I will never forget this one man. What was he trying to do? From the story I have heard he said that he has been specially sent by God to recover the world for God. Some people say that he is the Messiah who was supposed to restore Israel to worldly greatness but that seems to be a minority view; most people who know anything about it know that Israel has never been that great compared, say, with the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and, of course, the Romans. A very few people say that he said that he is somehow the Son of God which is difficult for the Jews but not much of a problem for people like me, accustomed as I am to many religious and philosophical ideas. Most people, it seems, just wanted him for what they could get out of him, a spectacular piece of magic, healing powers; they weren't very bothered by the theology, they were only interested in what they saw, heard and heard about. But what was he really trying to do? I think he was trying to bring something back that had been lost. I often think that humanity's greatest fault is to make simple things complex. Everywhere you look there are people making simple things complicated and it becomes all so involved that you then need somebody with a clear vision to get rid of all the tangles, so that we can start again. But you have to travel far from the conventional and the safe to see that this simplification is necessary.

We, too, have travelled far to be here. We have come from Baptism to the Cross; from that moment when we died to sin and were re-born in Christ we have been on a journey. Sometimes it seems that the journey is a perpetual climb up this hill towards the place where Jesus is about to die. And at other times it is a puzzle that we can't solve. But whenever the journey seems too arduous or the puzzle too difficult, we need to start again with the man because the man is our way to God. For all the complexities of the way in which we try to understand our relationship with the Creator, Jesus himself

has taught us always to start with him as he is the great intercessor, through him, through the unique channel of his Incarnate self, we can establish a relationship with God.

If we are to do that, we need to use our imaginations, to find a way of living alongside the Jesus who healed and taught; and the Jesus who suffers and is about to die. As he stands, bruised and bleeding, scorned and scarred, scandalously dressed and searingly crowned, let us remember what he told us. The man we are looking at was born to bring us the good news of the kingdom; he uniquely articulates a Gospel of love as he came to live the meaning of God as love rather than as power or judgment. As he stands here, resigned to taking up his cross, he does not stop loving. He never stops loving. He never will stop loving. He does not blame us for colluding in his death. He wants us to know that we can kill God and still be folded back into the Creator, to leave the guilt of our collusion behind.

Pilate is washing his hands. It's all over. They are going to kill this sweet tempered man. As usual, after the drama of the verdict, most people are already losing interest. What is another crucifixion, after all, to people who see too many; they have grown hard; perhaps that is why it is so easy to shout for punishment. Where I come from the people are more relaxed. I think Jesus would have done really well in my home country where people are less rule-bound. Our philosophers say that you can relate the way people behave to the kind of climate they live in and there is something to be said for that; but I think that it takes so long for people to get over fear, to think about things that are more constructive; for it seems to me that in any struggle between love and fear, the fear is always stronger, the love more tentative, more at risk, more vulnerable. That's the idea I have been looking for when I think of him! Vulnerable. He has given himself to his mission, he has laid himself open, he attracts violence in a way that only the virtuous can attract violence.

If he is a god - and there is no reason why he should not be - you still have to start with the man to see the god; there's no other way. To that extent at least, Pilate was right. He didn't say: "Behold the God". You can't find the god a man is, or represents, unless you study the man. I've watched all kinds of faces; and the face I know best, because of my trade, is the face of the bargainer, the face of the man who shows no emotion when the dice stop rolling, the man who wants you to believe that he has nothing when he has more than you. I can't see any of that in this face. If this is the face of God, then God is a simple fellow after all, constructive and loving; and constructing out of love, the way people make things just for the sheer joy of the figure emerging from the stone.

We who roll the dice and keep our faces straight, we who know how to say one thing and mean something, not precisely opposite but slightly different, we who exercise power without thinking about it, find the idea of vulnerability deeply troubling. Yet, as we watch him now, let us try to reverence that vulnerability, the kenosis, the sacrifice of control, the setting aside of power. We who see our incarnate saviour about to die should carry this picture of him as the one above all others which we need in order to live faithful lives.

We have seen the arbitrary power of Pilate and the unbroken love of Jesus demonstrated in his vulnerability. WE are to choose. As long as God is abstract, somewhere else, omnipotent but unreachable, there is some excuse for us to choose power and control, to see our lives as purely earthly, for we know none other; but the reality of the Incarnation, God in history, destroys the defence that God is so difficult, distant and complicated that we might as well just get on with our earthly lives.

He had some followers, I know, but they all seem to have run away. I wonder if his movement will last. Vulnerability doesn't seem like a good core value; love sounds better but without vulnerability what is love?

Later, we will need to answer that question from the trader in spices. Without vulnerability, what is love? But for now, behold the man; and then hold him until death.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you sent your blessed son to take flesh among us so that we might better learn the indivisibility of the human and divine; as he stands condemned before us, help us to imitate the perfection of the humanity of Jesus and aspire to be enfolded into the perfection of your divinity. **Amen.**

iv. "Today you will be with me in heaven"

Soldiers are the scum of the earth but where would you be without them? You're ready enough to hang medals round the necks of our commanders but treat us little better than slaves, doing society's dirty work. You want quiet streets, to keep the barbarians out, criminals despatched, send for the soldiers. As you can see, I am here on your collective behalf, nailing three men to crosses. The first one is an easy enough case; he's a danger to society and isn't sorry for what he's done. The second is a bit of a wimp; he says he is sorry and deserves what he's getting; But the third one, the one in the middle, is a basket case and should have been sent home to his mother. If you put Jewish scruple and Roman ruthlessness together you get harsh decisions but this is one of the worst I've ever seen. But I'm only a soldier, not a judge, sent to align the cross beam, knock in the nails and then just hang about until it's all over.

They all take it differently; I think if I was nailed up there I would want to think long and hard about how it happened and whether it could have been different; but these three start talking. The first man is wasting his time, just foul mouthed; but the second one, who is still going on about getting what he deserves, asks the middle one for forgiveness. And the middle one simply says: "You will be with me in heaven before the day's out." I don't know what that means really but forgiving people, particularly when you're in such a mess, seems noble to me, the sort of thing that we learned about in the stories of the Republic before the Empire. After that, they went quiet and all I have to do now is wait until it's over.

Here we are, soldiers of Christ, waiting at the foot of the cross, waiting until it is over. Not for the first time today, we are in a compromised position because we have knocked in the nails but continue to claim that we are soldiers of Christ. This is the supreme paradox of the death of Jesus and trying to untangle it has led his followers into some of their most convoluted and subtle thinking, so let us go back to the training manual. Jesus, condemned to die, suffering immense physical pain, was born so that he might connect the Creator with creatures, with humanity. The way that some Christians describe this is to say that Jesus came to redeem us, or to save us, or to take away our sins. But these statements do not make sense on their own. Why did Jesus have to do any of these things? Surely not because the Creator was a demented accountant or a mad judge who wanted justice, who wanted somebody to pay. The clue is in the mysterious story in Genesis Chapter 3. The version of the story which we most often hear, runs something like this: the serpent, the craftiest of creatures, whose identification with Satan began in Persia and was transferred by the Book of Revelation into Mediaeval iconography, this serpent lures humanity - nom, better still, a woman - into trying to be God and in order that this serpent should be crushed, God must punish himself in the form of the mutilated Jesus. But an alternative and more plausible understanding of the story, it that The serpent, the symbol of wisdom, beckons all of humanity to abandon the naive idyll in utopia and to fulfil our role as God's special creatures by learning how to exercise freedom of choice. And the reason why this freedom is so important is because without

it there is no such thing as love. God is love and we have the awesome privilege of choosing to love, a choice which we often misuse. It is the freedom to choose not to love that explains why we are here now.

How bad could it get, we have to ask ourselves. Well, in the Old Testament it got so bad that God regretted what he had done and almost wiped out humanity; but this version only makes sense if we think of God in relationship rather than as an impassive force. Throughout the Old Testament the Chosen People underwent or forged, depending upon your point of view, a fearful oscillation between faithfulness and disaster as they struggled with a God they could hardly grasp. The Incarnation provides the means by which we can grasp the idea of God but something else needed to happen to avoid the oscillation, to sustain us in some kind of journey, to give life and history a forward trajectory. In the Crucifixion we are not only forgiven, we are told that there is nothing that will not be forgiven and nobody who will not be forgiven. Sometimes this has been taken to mean that it does not matter what we do because Jesus will put it right through his death; but the converse is true. Because he died to demonstrate the indestructibility of God's love for all humanity, everything we do in the exercise of the choice for which we were created counts enormously. It is so important that we should love out of love and not out of fear that everything that we do is significant.

Sitting here watching people die makes me wonder about what we are here for. One minute you are enjoying a drink with your friends and the next minute a goblet goes flying and before you know where you are, you are dead or arrested for murder. One minute you are enjoying a mild joke at the Emperor's expense and the next minute you are being sent to the top of this hill to be killed. It makes me value the little things. I might be a soldier but I'm also a human being. I notice the landscape, the flowers, the smiles on faces, the taste of a grape. Since I started this duty I think I have become kinder; I know that there is so much roughness and retribution in this world that we must cultivate kindness; we must be meticulous in everything that we do to celebrate the gift of life. I, who have taken life to make my living, value it more now perhaps than those who stay at home. Sometimes what we have to do is difficult and distasteful which is why I love doing something for its own sake, because it's the right thing to do, whether or not anybody notices or knows.

As soldiers of Christ our celebration of nature and life is more directive; we do not simply enjoy what we experience, we know who deserves the praise; And yet, praising God in a judicious sort of way, giving credit where credit is due, is not enough. Our form of celebrating the wonders of Creation should be to live lives of celebration where everything we do counts significantly towards a Kingdom of Love on Earth. When Jesus forgives it is not because our wrong choices do not matter but because it is vital for our being that we become unfettered from our mistakes so that we can continue to choose to love. If you think that human beings are fundamentally wicked, this is an impossibly risky strategy because it leaves the way open for repeated infraction; if you give us a moral inch we will take a mile. But if you believe that we are fundamentally creatures of love, the need to retain sorrow without guilt is overwhelming for our mission.

So many Christians who believe that we are fundamentally wicked, have got themselves into hopeless muddles over what we are watching and it is easy to understand why. We are watching God's own self in the form of a human being, suffering horribly; we know he is going to die. We have to work out why? It is impossible to take this in? It is a stupendous sacrifice and an equally stupendous scandal. And the obvious conclusion is that it is the direct result of human wickedness. But the only way to make sense of it is to go back to the basic manual and re-learn that we have to understand everything in the context of love; not some sentimental attachment, but something difficult and dangerous and ultimately steadfast. Thinking of the effect of the Crucifixion in terms of atonement, ransom, redemption, is to understand it from our own perspective, to think of it in terms of human justice and judgement; but the Crucifixion is an act of God so it has to be thought of in God-like terms; and the only thing that we know about God is that God is love. Every time we stray from this central focus to our own anthropocentric understanding, we go wrong. If we are sorry because of what Jesus did we have missed the point; the reason we need to be sorry for where he is now is not because of what he did but because of what he is. His love has taken the form of suffering because our love did not fulfil its promise.

Our lives are lived at two levels: at one level we struggle to fulfil our promise and at another we mourn the love that has failed. We are part of a pilgrimage of lifelong spiritual *Schadenfreude*. We say sorry and perform some kind of act of sorrow but to be sorry is a permanent corollary of being created to love, it is part of our necessary imperfection. Whenever we are not sorry we have lost touch with ourselves and with the beloved; that is why penitence is turning back to God, it is putting us back in touch with ourselves as creatures and therefore back in touch with the Creator. The reverse side of this is that the permanent state of sorrow is assuaged by a permanent state of forgiveness. As we were created for one thing and one thing only what appear to be episodes in our lives are simply tangential symptoms; the real meaning of our lives never changes.

It's all grind; I can't see an end to it; but if you watch people like this Jesus it all begins to make some sense. He may be a bit of a basket case - I was probably exaggerating when I started talking about him - but where would any of us be without forgiveness? Nobody's perfect; so no matter how hard we try to love other people we need forgiveness; and we need to know it's always there. How could you be happily married if you never knew when you got home a bit drunk, whether you would be forgiven or not? Because you know it will always be there you don't take advantage of it. Let's face it, this Jesus had nothing to gain by saying what he did to the repentant one; he forgave because it seems like this is part of his being. Perhaps one way of thinking about people like Jesus is that we think they are mad just because they are good all through, they always forgive. But you need people like that. They help you to see that human beings are basically good, that most of them don't take advantage and that when they do they are sorry. I see criminals like these brought for punishment; I see people who join the army because they enjoy being cruel; I see people who think burning houses down is a bit of a

lark; I see the appalling misuse of power. And yet, when you look at the faces of people you cannot help thinking that they were made to do good.

Jesus was always clear about forgiveness as he walked through Palestine but when we are enfolded back into the Creator we will no doubt still be shocked to find that the whole world is there with us. The whole world, the soldier and both thieves.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you sent your son to bring us courage when we fail so that we might better discern the unfathomable depths of your love; as he hangs before us now at the point of death, help us to turn again to Jesus when we wrongly choose not to love so that we may be one with you in Paradise. **Amen.**

v. Silence

Jesus has said his last words; and now there is silence. The historian has nothing more to record than the actual time of death. The film maker has one last shot to get right and only one chance of getting it. The seller of spices is standing in the middle distance, still looking at the man. The soldiers have stopped gambling. Jesus said something but it was so indistinct that nobody understood what he was saying. And he will say no more. There is silence.

To understand this silence we need to remember that from the time of the arrest of Jesus up until his Crucifixion there has been nothing but noise. We are so used to background noise from traffic and machinery, computers and phones, radios and televisions, that we have forgotten what real noise is like. When we walk in the mountains or bathe in a distant lagoon, we hear the noise of the train or aeroplane that brought us. We have lost the noise that contrasts with silence because we have lost silence. And because we have lost the silence we have lost the noise.

Yet there is more to silence than physical silence. There is the silence of self denial, the refusal to make a noise, the refusal to speak. George Steiner famously wrote in the mid 1960s that after Hitler's mass murder of Jews it was impossible to use language with integrity; it could not, he said, adequately report what had happened with the degree of intensity that was required; in which case it was better to say nothing. Because the SS had listened to Schubert we had to ask what the culture was worth and whether going into the permanent mourning of silence might not be better. He was not, of course, thinking about such trivia as asking somebody to pass the salt; he was thinking about the way we use language to convey significance.

Whether Steiner was right or wrong, we are now burbling our way out of significance, murdering our language through the traditional cruelties of forced labour and malnutrition. Even if Steiner were wrong, we make part of his point for him by hurling accusations of Nazi at trivial infractors and tiny political factions call themselves Nazis. This makes it ever more difficult to understand what it meant to be a Nazi under the control of Hitler; the word becomes devalued. Almost every day of our lives we hear life's little misfortunes described as "A nightmare" "A shambles" or a "Disaster". We have stopped using hyperbole as hyperbole. Yet, like fast food and pop music, there is a kind of noise that becomes addictive, that becomes part of the backdrop of our being or, to put it negatively, it is the kind of noise that stops us from feeling lonely. We might ask, on the other hand, whether we are most lonely when we are surrounded by people and noise and things; and most at peace with ourselves when we can find silence.

Here, now, after all the noise of the trial and the climb, we are at the end of the journey.

Talking about silence is one of life's unavoidable paradoxes. What kind of talk about silence is germane to where we are now?

In this silence, as Jesus has finished talking, we need to review all that he has said. For the greatest man who ever lived it is a slim collection. After all, between 1/3 and 1/4 of each Gospel is an account of his death which, incidentally, tells us of its importance for the earliest Christians. Then there are the passages that repeat. But what distinguishes the Gospels from the books that never received Canonical status is that the Gospels were all about a man who preached the kingdom of love on earth, whereas the books that were ruled out were only interested in a kingdom of love in the sky and they were not interested in the death of Jesus. We have tried to connect the Kingdom of Love on earth with the significance of the death of Jesus and so there is room for only one more thought: if Jesus had been born both divine and human, as he was, and proclaimed the same Gospel, and had ascended into heaven, without the kind of death he is dying now, what would we think? What would we know and what would we not know?

In this silence we need to review our own way of talking to ourselves and to each other about Jesus. Part of the way we talk slipped into our way of witnessing in the second half of the last century. Until then, we had thought of God as impassible, of never changing. We were apt to slide over Old Testament remarks about God changing his mind or being sorry for what he had done. We were very much caught up in the doctrinal cat's cradle; if we let go of one loop of string the whole lot would collapse; which doesn't show much real faith in the Jesus enterprise. Then came the horrors of the 20th Century, made real by the mass media; and we began to think that Jesus, the incarnate God, had a passable aspect, that he was not somewhere in the sky watching us suffer but that he was suffering with us. It is as if we have come to realise that God through Jesus understood the imposition of Creation and would not change it for anything but saw how difficult was the mandate created for us. And it is difficult. So difficult that when social conformity was relaxed in the 20th Century, most people stopped trying to live the life we try to live.

Because the life we live is both difficult and precious we need to mind our language. We need to do two things which are difficult in themselves simultaneously although they appear to be contradictory: we must always remember that 'god talk' is hopelessly inadequate; but we must ensure that our 'god talk' is earthly talk, talk of the here and now, of the Kingdom of Love on Earth.

As we stand here in the moments before the death of Jesus, between his last word and his last breath, what might we say to ourselves? That Jesus has shown his love; that he has lived out for us the imperfection of our love; that we can now without doubt understand the degree of difference and the fundamental identity, consubstantiality, of his love and ours; for love is undifferentiated; God is love, we were created to love; our roles are different as Creator and creatures but love is our only concern. As we stand we may think of the indescribable triumph of love in Jesus or the all too describable failure of love in us; but even if we have put him up there on a cross, he is still down here standing with us.

There is a time for theology and a time for silence. There is a point at which words fail in the face of mystery, just as they fail in the face of a beloved. The mystery of Jesus the beloved draws words out of us in the way that the earthly beloved draws words out of the lover. We are caught between words and wonder, between skill and silence. And that is where we almost always need to be, caught in the middle, alive to both our human gift and our human failing, between God's human form and mysterious being. And just as there are times when we instinctively feel it is better to say nothing than to say anything, no matter how beautiful or loving, this is the time when we are moving, inexorably, towards silence, towards a contemplation of a mystery that has eluded all our words. This man who is there, above us, is also down here, with us, watching himself. In a way that words will never master, he is helping us to bear his passion.

We need to ask ourselves what it is that we are bearing. Is it a feeling that we ought to be sorry because it is the kind of event that evokes sorrow? Is it a feeling that we are somehow complicit and that if we had acted differently things would have turned out differently? Or is it the sorrow of the steady state of our relationship as creatures with the creator? Is it the sorrow of our condition rather than of our individual behaviour? I like to think that our sorrow is of this last kind because I like to think that Jesus is with us now, sharing the sorrow of La Condition Humaine because we are what we are and he is who he is. The febrile accountancy of good and bad added up, of guilt apportioned and debts written off, seems a totally alien set of transactions to what is happening now as we stand together with Jesus, up there and down here.

What, finally, might we say about silence? We need to give ourselves mental and emotional space to come to terms with the mystery of God's love and our terrible transgression. Today we have thought about the murderous treatment of the Jews and other groups and tribes that the Nazis wanted to eliminate; we have seen genocide in far away places like Cambodia and central and East Africa and as near as the Balkans; and as we stand here now, countless people are being killed in the Sudan. There is plenty to make us protest and plenty to keep us silent. And God preserve us from making the same mistake with Muslims as we made with Jews. Whenever we are in danger we must stop shouting with the crowd and cross the empty ground to Jesus as he stands condemned. And we must never forget as we stand by him, that we once shouted in the crowd.

We need to be careful with the truth that we tell ourselves. The relationship we have with God through Jesus in the power of the Spirit must not resemble the truth of the film maker who packages elegance and architecture, who creates the kind of reality which makes the complex simple and which provides us with a route to escape. We need to keep ourselves grounded in our untidy dialogue with God. We must not be persuaded by easy words either to sell out or to think that we have overcome our difficulties in establishing a relationship with God. If we think that we will never communicate again then we should look at Jesus as he hangs now, in silence; if we think that our communication is smoothly effective then we are deluding ourselves. If we want to know how difficult it is, we can think of the

lives of the saints; or, better still, watch the life of Jesus uncut.

More often than not we are like the seller of spices; we take small steps towards God and away from God; our life is not one of heroic gestures but of constant, tiny efforts. Such striving can be exhausting and even we, faint heroes, need time to recover, to say nothing. To look carefully at the man, to look and never stop looking, to behold and never stop holding.

As soldiers of Christ who knocked in the nails, we must remember that everything is forgiven, even this, not because Jesus paid some kind of supernatural debt but because without unfailing forgiveness the human purpose of choosing to love is too much to ask. We must remember that our crime and our suffering are a common element of our humanity; we are soldiers, not here to judge but to do the will of our Commander as best we can, our Commander the King of Love.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you sent your son to suffer with us so that we might better feel the strength of your compassion; as he lingers between his last word and his last breath, help us to love Jesus in joy and in silence until the very end. **Amen.**