

HOLY WEEK 2005

Meditations & Prayers

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I. Peter

Not again. Not again! Peter could not imagine how it could be worse; but that was his real problem; he could not imagine.

It had been such a turbulent day that he had been even less in control than usual. There had been the preparations for the Passover and friction with young John over where everyone would sit. He remembered The Master saying that he who put himself at the bottom of the table would be brought higher; but it hadn't happened, so John had kept the seat of honour. Then there was the foot washing; it was the most embarrassing thing that had ever happened to him, the Master behaving like a slave. He had got used to hearing Him say all kinds of outrageous things but apart from the scene in the Temple with the traders he hadn't done anything really mad until this. Of course, like the rest, he had to go along with it, particularly as there was so much talk about the Master going away. He couldn't face that; whatever his faults, Peter had become so committed to Jesus that he could not bear the thought of leaving Him. That's why he was so emphatic about never denying his Master. He could not imagine any situation in which he would deny Him.

Then he had fallen asleep in the garden when he should have prayed; and then, flustered when that traitor Judas turned up with the Temple Police, he had lashed out and injured Malchus; and still The Master stayed calm, looking at him with that peculiar mixture of love and pity which He saved only for him.

The Master could see right inside him. When Peter had made a fool of himself, like that time when he broke the vision of Elias and Moses or the time when he jumped out of the boat, thinking he could walk on water, he would always go away quietly and perform some special task and try to pray even harder. He never told the others how many nights he had spent fixing things for people who could not afford to pay; and he never said how much effort he put into prayer and how hard it was; but The Master knew. And that's when He gave him that special look.

That was in the good days in Galilee before they had all come to Jerusalem where people were so hostile and snobbish; they seemed to spend all their time trying to trap The Master so that it was really hard work teaching. And Peter didn't like living in this hilly, arid place without a lake; and he didn't like the meat; and they didn't like the way his beard was cut or, rather, not cut, and the fisherman's coat and his Northern accent. They were always wrong footing him, trying to make him lose his temper; and they always succeeded.

He thought of the Galilee days as he walked down the hill towards the city, keeping the Police in sight. He was knotted up with hate and fear. He had never trusted Judas who was far too clever and full of stories about his great namesake; and he had been very clever to get hold of the money. But after the injury to Malchus he would have to be a bit careful.

As he came through the city gate his fear increased but he could not turn back because John came out of the shadows and signalled to him to follow. John

knew everyone because of his Temple studies so Peter was not at all surprised when John pushed open a side gate in the wall of the High Priest's house and, after a minute, signalled him to come in. As Peter pushed past the woman who kept the gate she said: "Are you a disciple, like John?" and, without thinking, he said "No" and hurried on.

As usual, Peter had been so busy dealing with events as they happened that he had not thought clearly about what would happen to Jesus. The High Priest could make a big fuss and have Him beaten but that was all; and perhaps Nicodemus could sort things out. He was a bit posh for Peter but he had got them out of a couple of tight corners before and this looked like the tightest yet.

Then he heard somebody mention Pilate and he felt himself getting out of control again. He had always been strong and physically fearless but he could never remember a time when he had not been frightened of the Romans. Up in Galilee it was not too bad as long as they got their money but down in Jerusalem they were edgy and that meant trouble. The less certain they were, the more brutal they were.

A junior clerk said that the Romans were obsessed with what he called due process but he was overwhelmed by critics who said the Romans would do anything to get their own way but, much worse, it was impossible to make a deal with Pilate because nothing ever stuck.

He had stayed against the courtyard wall until the cold got the better of him and he had to warm his feet. He did not want to be noticed but he had forgotten to get rid of his long knife and a Policeman roughly reminded him in a loud voice that it was strictly forbidden to carry unauthorised weapons on the High Priest's premises. Everybody looked at him and then, to his horror, a servant said: "I recognise that knife; you attacked my cousin Malchus with it".

Now he was really frightened as everybody looked at him and began to crowd around him. They could not shout in the courtyard because they would get into trouble but they started a low, menacing chant: "Kill Jesus! Kill the Galileans!" Then he completely lost control and charged blindly through the crowd, his knife flailing, until he got through the gate.

He would have to hide until he could work out what to do next so he crouched behind a wall to get his breath back. He heard a cock crow somewhere on the Mount of Olives and then he remembered what The Master had said; and slowly he realised the enormity of what he had done. The Master had been in danger and he had pretended not to know him and run away. Not again! He had failed the test, his biggest yet. And he would never see The Master again if the Romans got Him.

He heard a small group of soldiers marching round the corner. He crouched lower. They were passing him on the way to the Governor's House. Even in his fear he could not help looking; and the only thing he saw in the flaring torchlight was the face of The Master.

The Romans had got Him; that would be the end of everything. How could he possibly live once Jesus was dead?

Then Peter saw that look; that mixture of love and pity He saved only for him; and in that moment Peter knew that he would promise and fail and struggle and be forgiven; and would promise and fail and struggle and be forgiven; that The Master would be with him forever.

Prayer. Jesus, Saviour of the World, may we not deny You in word and silence when called upon to bear witness to Your holy name. May we, like Peter, be contrite and humble when we have failed, seeking Your forgiveness, turning again to You in prayer and good works. Even now, as You are condemned through false witnesses, we pray for Your help that we may always be true to Your earthly life in everything that we say and do. And, as You loved Peter's flawed love for You, may we never forget that our love imperfectly returns what You have given to us in Your Passion and Death. Made sorrowful and joyful by Your full and final sacrifice, may we ever thank the Father for being His creatures and for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

II. Judas

Just for an hour, as Jesus rode down the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, Judas saw a crown; things were going to be all right.

All the disciples had turned out with their families newly arrived from Galilee and there was a fair crowd of onlookers. Some were obviously foreigners and some were simply enjoying the spectacle but there were many serious and then joyful faces; it might not be ideal but it was certainly a step in the right direction. Of course there would be opposition from the Jewish hierarchy and the Romans but Judas had seen enough miracles to convince him that if Jesus (he never called Him "The Master", as the others did), if Jesus wanted the crown of Israel, He could have it.

Out of force of habit he kept an eye out for trouble. The Roman soldiers at the check points were not very interested in this motley procession but he recognised some of the Temple Police mingling with the crowd and he thought he saw that slippery Nicodemus gliding away from the scene; which reminded him, he would go and see Joseph of ARAMATHEA later to get a hefty donation for the fighting fund because even if Jesus could work miracles there would still need to be some sort of fighting fund; after that story of Cana you could imagine Jesus turning anything into anything, except into money.

No, Jesus had been decidedly ambivalent about money, though He did not mind eating and drinking what it bought. The Disciples, on the other hand, were anything but indifferent to money; it caused more trouble than anything else except the rivalry to be close to "The Master". There was even a nasty incident when somebody accused him of stealing from the kitty. A stupid accusation because they all knew how fanatical he was about the cause; but when he reminded them of what Jesus said about the Pharisees who pretended to be pious when they were corrupt, it made no difference. The problem was that people exaggerated what they had actually given; the only one you could really trust was Joseph who gave quietly and never said anything.

He had seen Joseph as he left the High Priest's office after giving back the money. Joseph had been waiting outside the door and when he saw Judas he looked hurt and confused but Judas had stared him down. It had not been so easy during the short interview with Caiaphas as that oily cove Nicodemus was there. As Judas put the money down he could have sworn that Nicodemus gave him a contemptuous shrug but before he could take it in, the diplomatic mask slipped over his face, looking as if it had never moved; perhaps it never had.

Why had he taken the money in the first place? It seemed stupid now but it was his kind of revenge, his way of getting back at Jesus. After all, his problem was that he had seen through Jesus; the others, even Peter, still thought they would be courtiers of Judah. Just before the procession from the Mount of Olives broke up, Judas had manoeuvred all the young disciples, except for that dreamer, John, to form a kind of phalanx around Jesus; he had

got them all chanting "Hosanna to the Son of David!" as they moved towards the Temple Courtyard. If they could just get Jesus to the steps He could make His victory speech on the spot where all the Kings had been crowned. But Jesus had told them to keep quiet and, before Judas could do anything to intervene, He had signalled to Peter, James and John and had slipped away, leaving the remnants of the crowd; and Judas holding the donkey. That had been the last straw.

He took the wretched animal back to its owner and settled the bill. He had heard Jesus say something about borrowing it for nothing; but there was no such thing as a free donkey. Then he had found John and asked him how he could get in touch with Caiaphas and John, all innocent, had said he would have a word with Nicodemus who had been his Scripture tutor.

Judas had not quite known what he would do but there was no point going on with this charade. He had thought that the parables and coded statements were part of an elaborate plan to build support for a coup. Now there were masses of supporters from Galilee, there were sympathisers in the Council and, of course, those miraculous powers. And what was it all for? He did not know any more; he just felt cheated. He had wasted three years of his life, raising the money, making ends meet, haggling, putting some by for the big day; and now there was not going to be a big day. The only chance of preserving Judah from Roman absorption was to throw in his lot with the Temple Authorities. His namesake Judas Maccabeus had fought to preserve the Temple rites against Hellenisation and he would do the same against the Romans.

So Judas had steeled himself to bait Nicodemus with a story about reaching an accommodation between Jesus and the authorities, more necessary than ever after a recent nasty little incident in the Temple. CAIAPHAS had been cold but interested. It would be most helpful for the Jewish cause to keep Jesus under lock and key for a while. Nicodemus had slid back in and CAIAPHAS had changed instantly. It had been good to see a representative of Jesus; he hoped this would lead to a much better working relationship. Judas thought he saw Nicodemus give him a very old fashioned look as he headed for the Treasury.

From the moment with the donkey he never wavered; better, as he heard CAIAPHAS say, that one man should die for the sake of the people; but it had been difficult because he knew that Jesus knew. It was like being in a dream. He went on with his secret life that was not a secret. It had been a relief when he had grabbed the piece of bread from Jesus and almost fallen down the stairs into the street.

Judas never wavered until he saw Jesus crowned with thorns. He had betrayed Jesus but then CAIAPHAS had betrayed him. Once Jesus was sent to Pilate the game was up but, much worse, CAIAPHAS had told Pilate publicly that he would not be a Friend of Caesar unless he condemned Jesus.

There was no way back: no way back to Jesus; no way back to The Temple;

no way back to Maccabeus. CAIAPHAS had caved in; Jesus was about to die. All his life he had dreamed of a priestly king. It was all over.

He felt the rope tightening around his plunging neck; and then he saw the crown of thorns transformed into a crown of unbearable light.

Prayer. Jesus, Saviour of the World, may we not be lured away from You by our earthly entanglements. May we, warned by Judas, recognise how close we become to him if we do not stay close to You. Even now, as you are condemned to die for us as Your final act of service, we pray for Your help that we may be Your humble servants, accepting the mission You will for us in Your Church; and, as You declared the Kingdom of Your Father upon earth, may we, stirred by the Grace of Your Passion, proclaim it steadfastly in Your name. Armed with the sacred gifts of the Holy Spirit, may we never betray your obedience to the Father's love. **Amen.**

III. Simon

It had only been a chance remark, a throwaway line, when Simon had said that if Israel wanted a Messiah so badly, Jesus was as good as any.

He had been delivering a consignment of Incense to the Temple and got into conversation with some of the clerks while the packets were being weighed and authority obtained for the payment from Joseph of ARAMATHEA who always took his time checking the bills. Then the hot topic of the day, Jesus of Galilee, came up. One of the older men said that you had to maintain discipline; all sorts of people were claiming to be prophets or the Messiah nowadays; it was bad for the Temple; and if things went wrong at the Temple there would be no defence against complete absorption by Rome. As long as there was a Temple there would be a buffer, in the form of Herod and the religious elite, between the Jews and the Romans.

Simon had said that after the free and easy atmosphere in Cyrene, Jerusalem was getting the whole Jesus situation out of perspective, it was on the verge of hysteria over nothing. And then he said Jesus could be the Messiah; and the room went silent.

Simon had seen the so-called 'Procession' on the previous day. Some of the followers of Jesus were shouting about "The Son of David" but it seemed good humoured and, as usual, the Temple spies had exaggerated the crowd numbers so that they would be kept on for more work; it was always best to keep everybody nervous.

Simon had been immediately drawn to Jesus because He had such an interesting face; He looked as if He could see everything but, at the same time, He was looking straight at you. No doubt He was holy, maybe a prophet but Simon did not see how He could threaten the Temple and the religious authorities, a serene-faced, quietly spoken Galilean riding on a donkey. In fact, one or two of His followers looked a bit sheepish; there was one fellow, holding the donkey at the end of the ride, who looked decidedly embarrassed, almost angry. This did not look like a coup.

The awkwardness was broken by Joseph's messenger coming back with the tally and the authorisation; but because of some clause in the contract and the long weekend, he would not be able to pick up the cash until the morning after the Sabbath. When it came to temple funds Joseph was a stickler, though he was said to be charming in private, in his own quiet way.

Almost a week in Jerusalem and nothing to do. He had seen the sights before, when he had come with his father to learn his trade; things were so expensive during Passover; and they did not know how to cook. He longed for some fresh Mediterranean fish. The only place he really liked was a shady courtyard near the Temple where the manuscript dealers gathered. His father, as the purchaser of new scrolls for a group of synagogues in Cyrene, had introduced him there.

This time he had been asked to buy the LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH - a curious little piece, it turned out - so he would study that to pass the time.

Simon could not sleep properly on Thursday night so he got up early and went for a walk. He heard a crowd shouting over near the Governor's Palace so he followed the noise. And then he saw Him, Jesus, beaten up and bleeding. Roman officials looked fed up with the whole thing and a couple of soldiers almost threw Jesus at the Temple Police. He stumbled and fell in front of Simon. That is when the disciplinarian from the Temple office saw him; gave him a nasty look; and talked to a senior official who signalled to a pair of Policemen who beckoned Simon to follow them.

He did not have any choice. They pointed at a rough, heavy, section of a log and told him to take it over to Jesus. His rash words had caught up with him.

The man he had casually called the Messiah was struggling to stand up; a beaten up peasant. But He still had that look Simon had seen during the procession; He looked as if He could see everything but, at the same time, He was looking straight at you.

Jesus tried to say something but the police were threatening and clearly in a hurry. The wood had an awkward girth but it was so short that it was easier for one to carry than two. Simon put Jesus in front but they had only walked a couple of steps when Jesus tripped up; there was so much blood coming from the wounds on His forehead that He could not see and move at the same time. Simon put Him behind and took all the weight so that Jesus could pretend to carry the log but He fell over again as soon as Simon moved off. And, anyway, Simon wanted to look at Jesus. So Simon let Jesus hold onto the log, walking a pace behind him and to the right; that way Simon could take most of the weight in his right arm and glance at Jesus whenever he wanted to.

"It is good to bear the burden when young ... to eat dust ... to turn your cheek to the assailant and be crammed with curses". The LAMENTATIONS echoed in Simon's head, in the face of Jesus, in the crowd; the Lament of the Prophet, the wickedness of the city, the yoke and the log fused in his brain. He was lost in the noise and the words within; his concentration lapsed and Jesus fell again.

This time Simon abandoned all pretence. He took Jesus under the arms and hauled Him to His feet; He was deadly light. Jesus looked straight at him through the blood, the sweat, the hair and the thorns; Simon could feel His eyes through everything; and then He raised His hand and put it on Simon's head; just for a moment before the Policemen kicked Simon so hard that he fell over. Without thinking, he picked Jesus up and carried Him to an empty pole, collected the wood and rushed back with it.

He could not bear the sound of the hammer. He went away and was sick. When he came back Jesus was on the Cross, still seeing the whole world and looking straight at Simon. "Is it nothing to you all who pass by?" He had never

seen anything so sad.

He had been touched by Jesus. He knew it would change his life forever. He had been more right about the Messiah than he knew.

Prayer. Jesus, Saviour of the World, may we carry our Cross whenever You will it to fall upon our shoulder. May we, like Simon, show compassion to others when we are most under stress, struggling to Calvary. Even now, as You look down with compassion upon Your persecutors, we pray for Your help that we may be Your faithful companions to the end. And, as Simon was touched by Your love, may we feel Your touch most fully when we are preoccupied and confused. Softened by Your touch, may we walk quietly in the Way of the Cross, praying to the Father for holy strength and guided by the Holy Spirit that we may not fall. **Amen.**

IV. Mary and The Women

Silent women. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane all the disciples had fled and, later, Peter had denied him. Only the young John had crept back to the foot of the Cross to be commended to Mary and she to Him.

So apart from John His only close friends were women; women who had followed Him from Galilee, who had uprooted themselves from their homes to live a ramshackle life on the road. This itinerant and mendicant life was easier for the men who camped where they stopped; but for women who were subject to much stricter social rules in every aspect of their lives, travelling presented real problems.

The women ministered to Jesus and His Disciples and, with the exception of Martha and Mary, they said nothing. Now they are silent, stoical figures, standing quietly amid the abuse, the spitting, the wanton, routine cruelty; standing amidst the stench of the rubbish dump that is Golgotha; standing in silent witness.

The men had been the inner circle for Jesus; they had organised the crowds, fanned out across the country to preach, heard the explanation of the parables, and shared the Last Supper; and now, when Jesus really needed them, they were not here; and the women who had been patient and silent, who had asked for nothing, who had said nothing, had stayed to the end.

That brave and humble girl who agreed to become the mother of Jesus was their unity, their strength, their magnet and their catalyst. After the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple Mary tried to fulfil the impossible mission of being the mother of God. When Jesus stayed behind in the temple at the age of twelve she had to curb her terrible fear; when He said at Cana that His time had not yet come (though His mother knew better), she had to bite her tongue; and when she asked to see Him after He had finished preaching, she could hardly control herself, gripped by a mixture of fear and joy.

And always in the background was Simeon's ominous warning that a sword would pierce her heart as the result of her faithfulness to her Son Jesus and that strange look she got from Hannah; and here is this sword now, piercing her heart, even before the soldier pierces the side of the dead Jesus, emptying the last drops of blood and water.

Mary has followed her son every step of the way and many mothers must know how she feels with sons who are so mysterious: sons who talk in incomprehensible jargon; sons who are obsessed with the esoteric; sons who leave home to travel with hardly a spare shirt. Mary has such a Son who was old before His time; who spoke in parables and sometimes in riddles; who cured the sick and even raised the dead to life. How do you talk to a son like that?

And, then, sons can be so gruff. Mary remembers Jesus in the temple, aged Twelve, telling her off for being worried; did she not know He had to be on His

Father's business? And she remembers trying to escape unseen from the wedding party at Cana to have a quiet word with the servants; and she remembers how often when she called Him out of the Synagogue to give Him a message that He was rather short with her. And although she knows He loves her more than anyone else in the world, she just wishes it was occasionally a little more lyrical, not quite so forthright; He is so full of love but a little short on sentiment. But, then, there were all those unbelievable moments when the sick were cured and the poor were fed; and He even brought the dead back to life; for all its trials, she could not imagine a better life and a better son.

But she knew it would end in trouble; it was bound to, with all that preaching against the Scribes and the Pharisees. In an occupied land where people had to make unpleasant compromises, no leader was ever safe; the Jewish religious leaders had to be careful to balance their authority over the people and their unwritten deal with the Romans; and Jesus had steadily undermined their authority. Nicodemus had said a quiet word to her now and again but it had made no difference.

So here He is now, hanging from the Cross and here is Mary, patiently waiting for the end she knows will come soon; but she cannot quite see this end. She still believes the Angel who said Her Son was the Son of God, brought into being through her by the Holy Spirit; she still remembers Simeon's promise that her son would be a light to the Gentiles and she, with a mother's faith, always stored away what He said without wanting immediate answers. He has said He will establish His Heavenly Father's kingdom on earth; and He has said He will rise again after three days.

Here, in this desolate landscape, amidst the rubbish rotting in the Mediterranean sun, amidst the blood and guts of another batch of Crucifixions, within her there is an incongruous note of joy amidst the sorrow. Something will happen. Something must happen; she has to believe this or her whole life will have made no sense.

And as the men sat over the dregs of their cheap wine, stretching out towards the meaning of what Jesus told them, the women gathered quietly to comment on the day's events, strengthened by the conviction of Mary that they were on a special mission; and even now, when all seems lost, they are still there; something is holding them to the spot, keeping them next to Mary as Jesus cries out.

And, being women, there has to be a plan past the immediate present. You cannot give way to total suffering; you cannot go into yourself and hope that the rest of the world will manage; because the Disciples will not sort out the embalming and, in their distress and fear they will not buy food and prepare it. Their emotional disintegration will be made worse by poor food and too much wine if the women are not there to put things right.

And so, even as Her Son is dying, Mary cannot be totally self absorbed; the woman who has given life to Jesus and the whole of her life to Jesus is still

giving it now, still making a sacrifice of her own emotional preferences, still thinking of others when she wants to focus on her Son, still seeing a tomorrow when today is such a disaster.

And then, in excruciating agony, her Son's cry tears through the sneering hubbub around her; and He dies. For a split second there is nothing; and then she feels the movement of the Holy Spirit within her.

Prayer. Jesus, Saviour of the World, may we not run away when called upon to bear witness to Your saving mission. May we, like Mary and the women, be faithful and humble as we now stand with them at Calvary. Even now, as you hang helpless on the Cross, we pray for Your help that we may be Your faithful servants in adversity to the end. And, as You commended Your mother, Mary, to Your disciples, may we take her into our hearts as an icon of what You want and what You have made possible for all Your creatures. Fortified by Your love, may we watch and pray in obedience to the Father and at one with the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

V. John

Suddenly, in the middle of the day, it had become pitch black; unusually black because there were no stars. John thought he must have been having another of his visions.

Ever since he came to the Temple School in Jerusalem John had been having visions. It was too much Daniel. As the youngest in the class he had been the last to choose his special book and there were not all that many left, so he had chosen Daniel and its multiple variants; but it was the visions that gripped him not the exegesis. Of course, he said nothing; imagine what the other boys would have said if he had told them he was having visions. It was bad enough being an outsider.

John had been born so late that people talked about it: some said a child so late was a special gift from God; others said that no child born so late could be normal. John always thought he was different. He did not like boats and water and when it became clear that he would not carry on in the family fishing business he was lucky enough to get help from the local Rabbi to go down to Jerusalem. It had all been fixed by his Guardian, Nicodemus and his friend Joseph who chaired the Scholarship Committee at the Temple.

At the beginning, the visions were disembodied flashes, huge infusions of light that made outlandish shapes; but when he first saw Jesus as he sat with James in their boat, he was overcome by a vision of light and water so that he felt sick. James, being phlegmatic, would say it was the angle of the sun and the movement of the boat but John knew it was a sacred vision and it had something to do with Jesus who, according to the locals, was turning into a fine interpreter of Scripture. John had known that he would follow Jesus and from then on he was rewarded with regular visions. Even though those who followed Jesus were much kinder than the group of boys he had now left behind at the Temple, he was still too frightened to mention the visions, even to Peter; but The Master knew. Peter tried to look after him so carefully as he was the most sensitive but they never quite worked out their relationship and Jesus had to keep rescuing John when he was teased by the others for his affected Jerusalem accent, his soft hands and his tendency to daydream. Still, Peter was so confused when Jesus had taken him, James and John - the leader, the fixer and the dreamer - up Mount Tabor. Peter could not keep still; he needed to do something. James had looked blank but knew how to keep quiet and keep a straight face; but John knew what was going on and just concentrated on The Master. There had been no jokes about visions after that. John had talked to Judas about it because he was the most intelligent of The Master's followers but Judas was still thinking about a coronation in Jerusalem. John was too young to argue but he felt danger.

He saw the Spirit around the Master and he could hear The Father. He knew that The Master was the Son of God, not just the greatest of the prophets; but the brothers were very muddled and defensive and it was best to say nothing and follow quietly.

Then, as they had made their regular trip to Jerusalem for the Passover, the visions grew darker; they were full of blood and the sound of torture.

The last few hours had seemed like one unbroken vision. He knew that the foot washing was a farewell; he knew that the breaking of the bread was the breaking of The Master's body, he knew before Judas got up to leave who the betrayer was; and, knowing all this, he needed the comfort of The Master who was to die. Without that comfort he would have fainted.

But in the Garden of Gethsemane, with all that emotion in the air, he did faint. The blood had become almost tangible, the noises had grown louder and they happened while he was awake, not asleep; so the fainting and the darkness that followed were a relief. Then Judas came with the soldiers and John knew that Jesus wanted to be arrested. He could not work out the detail but he knew that The Master was just that, completely in charge of what was going on. That is why he wasn't frightened.

John knew how badly Peter would take it after the little skirmish with Malchus, so he decided to look after him during the trial and see if he could explain what was going on. But Peter did not understand the true purpose of the one he most loved or the politics in Jerusalem and he was so scared that he started saying really foolish things to the servants in the High Priest's courtyard after John had taken so much trouble to get him in. Then Peter had made an unearthly howling noise and rushed out, waving his knife. It could have been much worse but just as Peter ran away the news spread that CAIAPHAS was sending Jesus to Pilate. John knew what that would lead to; so Jesus must have wanted to be condemned both by the Jewish authorities and the Romans, by the spiritual and temporal rulers.

He could not find Peter who had not gone back to their Jerusalem headquarters but he did find the Master's mother and the other women who had heard nothing. They were still clearing up after the evening meal, growing anxious about the men who had gone out to pray. It was hard for John to tell his story but Mary's calmness helped him. They did not like going out, particularly not when there were crowds about but they had no choice. They reached the Governor's palace in time to see Pilate showing The Master to the crowd before He was bound over to be Crucified. John thought he saw Nicodemus slipping out of the side door but a soldier blocked his line of sight.

John walked with Mary because they both seemed to know that the whole series of terrible events were somehow under the control of her Son. The women were very upset but they said nothing. They followed The master, careful not to fall within his eye line but once he stopped suddenly and saw them and comforted them.

It was when they put The Master on the Cross that John knew he really was having a vision; but he knew he would not faint. He was the only man with Mary and the women; he must try to be more mature than his age.

In the dark the noises carried much further. John could hear the Master's

slowing, shallowing breath; he could almost hear the beating of His heart. And then He said: "Mother, here is your son" and to John He said: "And this is your mother". She held his hand.

Then The Master gave a deep sigh and said: "At last, it is finished"; but John did not hear the rest. He felt Mary's hand suddenly tighten, as if seized by a spasm, and he felt the Holy Spirit's life passing from her to him. Then his vision of the dark was transformed into a vision of unending light.

Prayer. Jesus, Saviour of the World, may our lives not be rooted in earthly things but remain faithful to Your Heavenly vision. May we, like John, be sustained by the promise of Your Kingdom, enshrined in Your redeeming love. Even now, as you ascend into Heavenly glory, we pray for Your help that we may be seekers after eternal truth through prayer, Sacrament and Holy Scripture. And, as you Commended your Mother Mary and Your beloved disciple John to one other, may we accept what you commend without doubt or hesitation. Filled by hope of salvation, may we hold before us the vision of the Blessed and undivided Trinity. **Amen.**

VI. Jesus

Where did it all go wrong? How did so much love become transformed into so much hate? How did He become separated from the lovely lakeside of Galilee and end up, dying between a pair of thieves on this rubbish dump? But, more important, where was the Father to whom he had been so faithful and obedient for the whole of His life?

Relatives always will reminisce about the birth of a child but nobody had said much to Jesus; they were obviously ashamed of something. He remembered childhood trips to Jerusalem which broke the monotony of village life as an odd job man but it had all been calm until his wild Cousin John had burst out of the wilderness to preach the Kingdom; and He knew at once that John meant the Kingdom of His Father. He knew this when He was baptised by John; He heard His Father and He felt the Spirit within Him. He knew it when He fasted and prayed in the wilderness before those magic days by the lake when He had felt totally free, recruiting his followers; and He knew it when He performed His first miracles. Of course there had been scepticism, and even some small minded opposition, but He had everything in front of Him. He knew, of course, that it would not always be easy; but those first few months with all the raw faith of the people, the rows of sick and broken humanity made whole, encounters with gentiles and strange people; it was like a blur now, with flashes of sun and water, boat trips and scenes of wild jubilation as thousands were fed.

And then it had all become more serious as opposition hardened and became organised at the top of the religious hierarchy. He knew He had to go on but it became more edgy; He had to say what He had to say but was tempted to speak less directly, sometimes choosing enigmatic sounding statements rather than the homely and hard hitting parables he most liked. And slowly, as the time went by, He saw that He would have to work out the choreography for His own death; it could not be allowed to be a messy chapter of accidents; it needed to happen in a certain way in order to show the world the love and power of His father.

He had not been travelling the length and breadth of Palestine for more than a few months before He knew that He would die at the third Passover, to make a neat alignment with the Scriptures. It haunted Him constantly but there was still the companionship of the Disciples and the somewhat unsteady love of the crowd; but as the time drew nearer, the Disciples were not such good companions and the crowd was ever more fickle. Even as he sat at table for the final Passover, He knew that His ordeal would be lonely; He knew that Peter would not have the nerve to stick with Him, that the others would flee; and that, as usual, it would be His mother and the women who would stay. His mother; what a miracle she was!

The physical pain since his arrest had been alternately excruciating and numbing; the noise and mockery and mess had been unrelenting. He had known how it would be; every time He visited Jerusalem there were crucifixions. It would soon be over; and then, what?

Where had it all gone wrong? Where was His Father to whom He had been so humbly and unswervingly faithful? He had preached the Kingdom of His father, He had always deferred in everything to His Father; He had claimed nothing for Himself which did not come from the Father; He was acting now in painful obedience to the Father; but He could not see why; he could not see what it was for.

Even in pain he liked the ironic plaque that the old rogue Pilate had caused to be put above his head; King of the Jews in three languages; he liked it because He had spent so much of His time telling people that He was not going to be the King of the Jews; and that had been the killer blow for poor old Judas who could not bear His airy fairy promises about a Heavenly Kingdom and wanted Him to be the King of the Jews here and now. Poor Judas; and it had all ended like this with Judas dying before Him.

He saw His mother trying not to cry; He saw young John pretending not to cry; He saw the women who had been so quietly faithful trying not to cry. He wished they would cry because he wanted to cry, too. He had known all His life that there was something special about Him and his lifelong mission. He had somehow known from as soon as He could speak that He was a very special child of His Father in heaven. He had felt it with every visit to the Synagogue, as He was allowed to untie the scrolls and read from the Torah. He had read and understood very well for a boy of such humble origins. He knew, when His spirit was freed to travel and preach, that He was doing the right thing; He knew as He prayed alone whenever He could find respite from the crowds, that He was doing the right thing, that He was a special child of His father in Heaven. He had never felt embarrassed using the sacred language of Godhead; He had never felt that He was overstepping the mark, that He was being blasphemous, even though that was the charge most often levelled against Him. He had said He would rise in three days; that was the Spirit in Him; but where was the Spirit now?

He had known that His mission was special right up to the time when He was condemned to die; and then His certainty had forsaken Him. It was all very well to say that His Kingdom was not of this world and that His accusers would learn the reality sooner or later; but here He was, about to die, with His disciples fled and nothing lasting accomplished.

Where had it all gone wrong? How had so much love turned to so much hate? With His last breath He cried out to His Father: "Why Have You forsaken me?"; and in the split second after He said it, in the split second before He died, He wished He had stayed quiet. In that split second He saw that it had not gone wrong; that He was not forsaken; that His unswerving obedience to His Father, even in death, had earned Him a unique place in His Father's love that would spill over Golgotha, over Palestine and over the whole world; He did not know how; but He knew in that instant that He had not been abandoned but had simply been left to show love in the way that only the lonely can show love. And then He died.

Prayer. Jesus, Saviour of the World, may we learn true obedience, through Your example, to our Heavenly Father. May we, in imitation of You, be brave and steadfast in the face of mockery and, even more committed in the face of indifference to Your word. Even now, as you are suspended between earthly life and heavenly glory, we pray for Your help that we may stand daily within the shadow of Your Cross. And, as you were unswervingly obedient to the Father, may we, strengthened by Your example, temper our obedience with love so that we may be His true children. Secure in His love, may our obedience be deepened by Your passion and Death and broadened by the calm of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

VII. Nicodemus and Joseph

What did it mean? He cried out through the sneering hubbub: "My God, why have You forsaken me?"; and then He died.

Well, at least that is what Nicodemus and Joseph thought He had said. Some time later somebody said that He had commended Himself to the Father but that sounded a bit unlikely given the lasting impression of desperation they heard in His distant cry. Distant, of course, it was distant; they were frightened; they did not want to get too involved. The place was infested with fellow Pharisees, Sadducees, minor officials, soldiers and cranks; and you could not be too careful. CAIAPHAS was clearly in a filthy mood; he had probably overstepped the mark in calling for the death of Jesus. They heard strange laughter from a passer-by who said Pilate had proclaimed Jesus to be King of the Jews. Well, he was so unpredictable; you never knew where you were.

They always had kept their distance except for the night when Nicodemus secretly visited Jesus to ask Him about The Kingdom. Ever since then he had been in the background, quietly pulling strings; arguing for moderation when the authorities wanted to arrest Jesus; sending discreet warnings when things were getting too hot; urging the Disciples to take Jesus out of Jerusalem for a few days until things quieted down. Yes, Nicodemus had always been there and thereabouts in the corridors of power, quietly doing his earthly bit for this unearthly prophet; but always careful not to be identified as a follower; just doing his cautious bit on the Council to keep the temperature down.

And Joseph, well, he had always been too shy to approach Jesus directly but he had quietly tipped Judas the odd donation, for the poor, for the Disciples and for Jesus; he had never been one to put himself forward but business was good and he always had a little something to spare. He would have liked to do more but he never could quite work out how; Jesus was so odd when it came to money; so gentle and yet so forthright. Joseph did not know whether he would ever quite come to terms with the incident in the Temple Courtyard when Jesus had expelled all the traders.

And they knew each other, Nicodemus and Joseph; in the hothouse of Jerusalem religious politics that was hardly surprising; they had even sat on the same Temple fund raising committee for a while. And they each knew that the other knew Jesus; but they had never brought themselves to mention it as they exchanged pleasantries at social and ceremonial occasions.

And now, as this horrible, almost unbearable scene drew them together, they still found it difficult to drop the pretence. They knew they had not done enough for Jesus; they had been content to be discreet, like fellow travellers, tacitly supporting a good cause. Each of them had suspected Judas but had sat on their hands.

It was too late to show their hand now to Jesus but things had to be done. Pilate would have to be approached for the body and you never knew what

sort of a mood he would be in; and it was a bit awkward but they would have to talk to the women about the burial of Jesus. There was not much time to waste as the Sabbath was rapidly approaching.

They forgot the horror in the flurry of activity; filing a writ for the body of Jesus, making all the burial arrangements; and Mary was so quiet and calm, making them feel that she was looking after them instead of the other way round, so gently that it was not embarrassing.

But on the way home it really hit them. They felt that they had missed a once in a lifetime opportunity to find themselves spiritually. Jesus was like nobody else they had ever heard but they had never quite managed to commit themselves, there was always a tiny cord of caution holding them back; they could have broken it but that would have broken the cautious habits of a lifetime; so they had watched, and listened and waited; and then He had cried out with a loud voice; and it was too late.

So before they parted for the Sabbath they agreed to meet regularly with the Disciples, if they could find them, to go through the whole life story of Jesus to see what they could salvage from it. They would try to be brave; they would try to face up to their own caution, or perhaps it would be more honest to call it cowardice; they would commit themselves to the memory of Jesus and see that His wisdom would not be forgotten; and they would do their best to help those He had left behind.

It was a miserable Sabbath; the most miserable they had ever known. They kept hearing His distant, desperate cry; they wished they had been closer, to hear what He had really said. Nicodemus could hardly bear the moonlight; it reminded Him so much of that night he had talked with Jesus; Joseph could not bear the darkness when the moon disappeared because it reminded him of the tomb. Nicodemus could not get the strange riddle out of his head that Jesus told him on that mysterious night: "God loved the world so much He sent His only son; all who believe in Him will not die but will be saved; for God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it but that it might be saved through Him."

What did it mean? Well, whatever it meant, it was meaningless now.

And, as Joseph tossed and turned during that desolate night, he, too, remembered Jesus saying something; something about coming back again after three days, something curious about destroying and rebuilding the Temple. What did it mean? They could make no sense of it when they met on Saturday evening. They were haunted by an opportunity missed. Only God, looking down on His broken world knew their broken hearts; only God knew that they were not too late; that they would get another and another and another chance; only God knew that His Son had not died in vain, that His unswerving obedience would bring Him to unimaginable, everlasting glory. Only God knew.

Prayer. Jesus, Saviour of the World, may we be bold and brave in Your

service, loving Your Father without restraint, loving our neighbour with cheerful generosity. Even now, as You are taking Your leave of this cruel world to be ever glorified with Your Father, we pray for Your help that we may lose our earthly inhibitions and grow in our desire for the Heavenly life. And, as you loved all Your Father's children in spite of their timid strivings, may we feel Your sacred love, born of the Father and radiated within us through Your Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

VIII. Mary Magdalene

Such small feet. The nails had not so much pierced them as smashed each of them into two, jagged halves; but Mary could still make out a tiny scar which she remembered from that time when she had tended His feet.

For so long she had literally sat at His feet that it had become her natural vantage point. She liked to watch Him pray in the quiet of the early evening while supper was being prepared. She liked to pray with Him because she felt His spiritual energy. Martha occasionally grumbled but she would not have liked sitting at His feet any more than Mary liked cooking. The Master said you could come into the kingdom as a mystic or a cook; and she, by temperament, was a mystic, as totally unaware of her beauty as Martha was unaware of her plainness. That is why Mary got on so well with John whereas Martha liked to be with Peter and James.

She could not help thinking, as she opened Joseph's big jar, of the time they had embalmed Lazarus. This time they would have to do everything in a hurry before the Sabbath was about to begin but that time they had waited as long as they dared in the hope that The Master would arrive; and do something. They were not sure, in a focused kind of way, what He would do; but they felt He would do something.

The waiting was terrible but the entombment was even worse. But they still went on waiting, even after mourners began to arrive. Martha covered her anxiety by looking after everyone but you could see she had not given up hope. Mary tried to get closer to the Holy Spirit, leaving herself as open as she could to receive strength.

And then He came. Martha had gone out immediately but Mary knew she must wait, that nothing they said could change things; that only The Master could make a difference. Martha came back trying to look calm and said He had asked for her. So Mary went and knelt at his feet, noticing how sore they were. People would think that she was crying for Lazarus but she was crying for Him; nobody understood Him. All that love that He sent out and so little ever came back. She could feel it then, as she knelt at His feet, worshipping, not pleading.

He went to the tomb and some of the men reluctantly opened it; and Lazarus came out, frightening everyone but Jesus and Mary; and John who was in a kind of trance in the middle distance. Somehow they got everybody away and gave Lazarus the peace and quiet he needed but just before Passover they arranged a small party. Lazarus, who was still in a state of shock, said nothing; Martha was busy making everything comfortable; but Mary felt that a gesture was called for; friendship, food and wine were not enough. She anointed His feet; that is when she had noticed the small scar; it was amazing that there were not more, the amount of walking He had done in the past three years. She wept in gratitude for what He had done and fear for what would happen to Him. Then she sat nearby on the floor. She was so upset that nobody understood Him that she could not eat. She just sat there, half

praying, half grieving.

She went with some of the other women into Jerusalem to assist at the Festivities; but nobody was very festive. She fetched hot water from the fire and a large towel but it caused dissension; Peter was upset though she could not immediately work out why. As she left, she caught sight of Jesus as she stood at the angle of the stairs; He was bending down in precisely the way she could see herself doing; then she knew exactly what was going on and why Peter was upset; he would be; but John would know what was going on. And later, when they left the dining room, they did not look refreshed; they looked shattered as they went out to pray. She wanted to go with Him but knew that she could not; they had no time for women and, except for John, no time for mystics. She put the towel into some more hot water.

They worried when the men did not come back at their usual time; but most of them managed some sleep. Mary felt the tension in the air; she could feel His love being twisted and returned to Him in hate. But she was still shocked when John rushed in and said what was going on. She asked no questions and only stayed long enough to see that Mary had everything she needed; of course she did, even under such pressure.

Mary stood uncertainly near the Cross. It was not the cruelty, she had seen enough of that, and it was not the hostility which she could blank out; but she felt as if she was waiting for something, as if what was going on in the real world was a dream, a feeling greatly enhanced by the unearthly darkness.

And then He died.

Such small feet. She worked more quickly than she had ever done before. The whole process was unearthly: the strange environment; the febrile activity; the important men looking at her. But Mary made everything real; you would have expected a mother, even one as serene as she, to give way a little; but she was intent on looking after everyone; she would save her grief until later when the job was done. And this was not nature working of its own accord before the impact of shock, she was using her reserves; you could see how the ethic of service was something that she and her Son had shared.

Seeing Nicodemus, such a staunch Pharisee, standing nearby reminded Mary of her brother Lazarus and his return to life. Jesus had told Mary afterwards that He had deliberately waited some way off after He heard about the death so that He could bear witness to the greater glory of His Father by raising Lazarus. She had understood what He meant. And as the raising of Lazarus passed through her mind, Lazarus who was nearby, helping Joseph to find a rock that would fit the entrance of the tomb, she wondered how The Master would be raised from the dead. She knew that He, like all true believers, would be raised; but she thought He would be raised in a special way. He might deliberately stay away for a few days but He would be back, for the Greater Glory of God. She felt the Holy Spirit coming back to her as if He had been bearing company to the Soul of Jesus, and, in that moment, Mary knew He would return.

Prayer. Jesus, Saviour of the World, may we stay with You to the end, no matter how hopeless our lives appear to be. May we, like Martha and Mary, find our way to Your kingdom by uniting Your redeeming Grace with our human wills. Even now, as Your earthly body is entombed, we pray for Your help that we may once again faithfully re-enact our own earthly entombment in Baptism. And, as You gave strength to Martha and Mary's faith in You, may we recall their faith that You would raise Lazarus from the dead, their Hope of the life to come and their Love of Your earthly sisters and brothers. Grieved by the pain You suffered for us, yet may we be joyful in Your Resurrection, through our faith in The Father and our obedience to the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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