

# The Seven last Words of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

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Good Friday 2007

## Introduction

During this time by the Cross of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we are going to look at what are known as His *Seven Last Words* which are actually phrases of the Dying Jesus taken from the Gospels.

I am going to assign a one word description to each phrase. The first six fit into three pairs: doubt and faith; forgiveness and hope; dependence and love. This pairing involves re-ordering the phrases but it allows us to contemplate the three great Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity and not so much their opposites as their commentaries, doubt, forgiveness and dependence.

Finally, we will sum up our thoughts in a meditation on the final words of Jesus: "It is finished", under the heading of "responsibility".

There is an Epilogue appended for use between the end of the Liturgy of the Cross and the commencement of the Easter Vigil.

## 1. Doubt

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" - Matthew 27.46.

Every so often in the middle of a period of quiet prayer, my brain asks the question I least want it to ask: "Do you really believe this or is it just a massive superstructure of comfort to give your trivial life some kind of meaning?"

Doubt is possibly the most misunderstood Christian attribute because it loses all its dynamic force when it is separated from faith. If an atheist says that she doubts the existence of God it doesn't mean all that much; but if a Christian, struggling with faith, says that he doubts, then the statement has true vibrancy, true value.

The mystery of the passion and death of our Saviour is only one of the sacred mysteries into which we have been initiated in our Christian life by virtue of our Baptism.

Yesterday we witnessed the re-enactment of the mystery of the Eucharist; today we witness the working out of that mystery in the physical death of Jesus.

Ironically, looked at from a Christian perspective, the mistake we most often make is thinking that we understand God, that there really are no mysteries in connection with the Creative, salvific and sanctifying purposes of the Trinity. In a very real sense the problem for many of us is that we do not doubt enough.

Yet There are some Christians who walk in Our Saviour's Church Of Doubt with a list in their hands of the great certainties, as if there is no mystery at all, as if it is all perfectly clear. They say what is true and that anybody who disagrees with them must be wrong. They say that Scripture is as plain as plain can be; that our sin is in not seeing what is obvious.

God created us with brains so that we might think, so that we might choose, so that our love might be consciously given, so that we might leave ourselves open to the Holy Spirit in a state of intense calm; and in creating us to choose, in creating us to reflect God, in creating us to explore the mystery of God's love and our creation, God created doubt. But doubt is suffocated by pride, pride that human knowledge can penetrate the sacred mystery of God. And doubt is corroded by cowardice.

I have doubted but instead of pressing on towards the core of doubt, towards the zone of acute discomfort, I have stood back, I have been prepared to forsake My Saviour and live in the comfortable world of Jesus the fairy story, the story which starts so beautifully, goes through a horrible episode, as all fairy stories will, but ends happily every after. I have left My Saviour hanging on the cross instead of getting closer; I have read my Bible and prayed my prayers and flinched when it has become too difficult to face. I have wanted to be in command of myself and of the Holy words and books; yes, I have wanted to be in command; and at the same time I have only wanted comfort from this enterprise. I often fail to flex my inner self to see where the sharp edges of commitment might be. And because I want to be in command, the prospect of being out

of my depth is too daunting to live with. So I have exchanged the challenge and pain of doubt for the relative comfort of dogma.

There may be some technical problems with dogma but the Creed sounds so comforting if we don't think too carefully about it; and we have become comfortable in our Sacraments; and we feel such warmth in the fellowship of the Lord's Supper; but unless we flex our commitment, unless we examine its cost, unless we stretch to the limit for its healing, we are taking refuge in a formula, something familiar and comforting, something that is a social ritual rather than a journey towards faith.

Given the centrality of doubt in the condition of human holiness it is inevitable that Jesus should have suffered from doubt. WE must always remember that although He was fully God, Jesus was also fully human. He knew what He was doing in obedience to His Father but He did not know how this would end and for what ultimate purpose. He knew that He was dying for the forgiveness of sin, to absorb in Himself as a Sacred vessel, all the wrong choices, all the choices not to love, that had ever been made and would ever be made; but He did not know precisely how this transaction related to His Father. In taking human form He had denied Himself knowledge, He had been cast into the human condition of doubt. We might go further and argue that Jesus had temporarily lost His faith altogether, that He thought that He had been abandoned.

This is the most searing consequence of doubt, the moment of blankness, the moment when we are most human, living as we were meant to live, living as we were meant to live because one of the consequences of being created to choose is that we must confront the extremes of certainty and doubt instead of living halfway along the spectrum, managing to rub along with the Divine as if it were a rather anomalous but comfortable 'given' in the way we see the universe.

When we go to the extreme, we face the prospect that there is no God, that our lives are shapeless and meaningless, that within years of our death the memories will have faded, the photographs will have been thrown away, stories once funny will be meaningless. Nothing.

Only then can we begin to leave ourselves open to the Holy Spirit, to begin to know God from a position of humble creatureliness. Only then can we see every doctrine as a question not as an answer; only then can we understand that all human enterprise is a question, not an answer; that the Church is a question not an answer but, hopefully, the right question.

There are those who tell us that we can be risk free Christians, that as long as we believe in God all will be well. But not to take risks is not to know what it might mean to believe. All our lives we must take the risk of walking towards the cross, of trying to work out what it means, of trying to understand why Jesus hangs there in front of us and why we still have the strength to walk towards Him. All our lives we must face the inevitable discomfort of not knowing, of not being in control, of being made small, of having our intellectual powers overwhelmed by the mystery of God's love. But because the only

way in which we can really relate to God's love is through the incarnate Son, the only way we can really know why we are is to keep on flexing ourselves out of complacency, to keep on walking forward towards the cross, to risk the horror of that tortured face, to look into the face and see our own imperfection. For there is a paradox in the Cross which we have to confront; it is our comfort that has brought about the torture of Our Saviour which we are looking at now.

Let us come closer. Closer.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as you hang upon the Cross in the loneliness of human doubt, forgive us our pride in the refuge of human doctrine: may we struggle towards the cross, abandoning comfort for commitment, so that we are alive to the mystery of Your grace.  
**Amen.**

## 2. Faith

"Into your hands I commend my spirit - Luke 23.46

Faith is not the opposite of doubt, it is the flower that can only bloom where doubt has been sewn; but whereas doubt will always be there, the flower of faith will bloom and fade before it blooms again. The Church sustains "The Faith" because it is a corporate enterprise, a huge garden of questions where, through the Grace of Our Saviour, there are always some flowers blooming. Hopefully, it is never completely Winter in the garden of Jesus; and, hopefully, in the way of divine institutions on earth, there will be times when the array of flowers is stunning, like one of those magical, searing Summer days when Van Gogh was lucid.

Because it is a flower that blooms and fades, faith commands the greatest care: the thought and love of the gardener, the right nourishment, the balance between sun and shade. And yet, as different flowers of faith, we all need different kinds of fertiliser, different balances of sun and shade. Some of us grow in clay, others in sandy ground, others in chalk. Some of us are gaudy and long for the Summer sun, others, more delicate, long for the misty days of fine rain and Winter's pale sun.

Our gardener, Our Saviour, will give us all the nourishment we need, the right balance of sun and rain to suit our needs, to help us best accord with God's purpose for us as flowers in the earthly garden. But we turn to other gardeners, to other nourishment; we crave more sun than is good for us or more rain; we see another flower in the distance and think we should be like that flower and not simply be ourselves.

This is not a parable about beauty or earthly pride, this is a parable about the way we have come to misunderstand faith. We have persuaded ourselves that faith is robust and uniform instead of seeing it as fragile and highly differentiated.

Yet there are some Christians who walk in Our Saviour's Church Of Faith with a list in their hands of all the essential ingredients, who think that God is one kind of gardener and that all of us are not delicate and different flowers but are cabbages to be forced into uniform ugliness and utility. We are not in a garden where the blooms vary and where our own flowers fade and revive, we are not individual believers in a corporate church; we are identical plants that react in a uniform way to the correct dosage of divinely approved but humanly manufactured fertiliser.

We have all grown familiar with the idea of faith as some kind of production line that begins at Baptism and ends at the Crematorium or the cemetery. In this we have misunderstood faith in two serious ways. First, as I have said, faith is not a production line where standard nutrition is poured in and a standard product is forced out. Faith is a risky business. One year a flower will not bloom at all. Sometimes the ground is too dry, at other times too wet. Sometimes there are blights and infestations. More often, however, we have abandoned our gentle gardener and opted for a supposedly more reliable, hermetically sealed greenhouse. Secondly, faith is individual to us but the

garden in which we bloom is as old as mankind. We grow in the soil of saints and martyrs, of those who went before us in faith, who bloomed in a different time but in the same place, whose flowers look strange and exotic.

Those who went before us as saints and martyrs lived that they might be worthy of Our Saviour, that their spirits, too, might be commended, through Him, to the Father. When we listen to Our saviour as he Hangs upon the cross we do not hear Him say: "Father, into Your hands I deliver my spirit as part of a spiritual job lot". There is in his word, the humility of commendation, the possibility in the word that what He has to offer might not be good enough.

Our ultimate act of faith is to doubt our worthiness, to flex our capacity for self knowledge and look at our self image. It is so easy over time to mould our self image so that it adjusts to new circumstances. The young person that demands an answer and searches feverishly is replaced by the older person who has found an answer that is good enough; and in turn that older person becomes increasingly desperate as time wears on. Is the faith which we have now going to carry us into the presence of God or have we been too complacent?

Unfortunately for our sense of stability and comfort, faith is reflexive; we have to have faith in faith; and, at the same time, faith is indispensable. Just as true wisdom is to know what we do not know, true faith is to know the limits of our faith, to know that we have been unable to take the step of abandoning ourselves to God. By this act of abandonment we do not give up trying to lead virtuous lives, it simply means that we know the virtuous life is not enough, no matter how virtuous. We must count everything we have done as nothing compared with what God has done for us through Our Saviour.

And what is this Spirit which, reflecting the cry of Jesus, we commend in faith? It is, above all, the spirit of courage. WE are not called upon to be right for Our Saviour; we are not called upon to be prudent for our saviour; we are not even called upon to be pious for our Saviour; we are called upon to be brave for our Saviour, to commit, to take the risk, to risk being unpopular, even to risk being wrong. While the fashion is for this or for that, that spirit of courage might involve staying still and waiting until the gardener reaches us.

I am restless, I am full of ideas, I strive but the striving usually amounts to an assertion of the human will. Instead of faith in stillness, in subjecting myself to the sun and rain, instead of being content to be in the ground where I was planted, I long for a programme of forced virtue, to make me fat with grace, to make me shiny with virtue, to make me ripe with advice, to make me rich with learning and oh, the consequence, to make me feel fitted in all my ripeness and richness, to judge all those plants that never seem to flower, that are limp and bedraggled.

How easily we are moved by the rich and the colourful, the perfumed and the pretty; how much we value the aesthetic and under-estimate the healing powers of

unglamorous plants. Yet only Our Saviour who tends us, nourishing us with that endless grace which flows from the reservoir of His blood, only He can commend us to the Father as He commended His own spirit as He hung on the cross, ready to die for us. We cannot, no matter what we do, commend ourselves.

A flower blooms; a flower fades and dies; and a new flower blooms, nourished by the blood of the Cross.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as You hang upon the cross in ultimate obedience to the Father, forgive us our resort to a coarse and cold faith: may we struggle towards the cross in soul as well as mind, learning to grow in submission to You so that our frail flowers of faith may bloom in Your tender care. **Amen**

### 3. Forgiveness

"Father forgive them; for they know not what they do" - Luke 23.34

Recently I have been dipping into *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, paying particular attention to the words of hymns. The most striking discovery I have made is the extent to which the compilers of the hymn book we use, *Hymns Ancient and Modern Revised (New Standard)* have omitted beautiful verses from initial compositions which refer to Satan and to sin. I have some sympathy with the omission of Satan whose depiction with horns and a tail can be a distraction from our deeper understanding of sin as deliberately distancing ourselves from God; but if we are to eliminate sin from our vocabulary, what is today about?

We must be careful to understand the relationship we have to God. Sin, as a symptom of our capacity to choose, is inevitable in imperfect humanity, but no individual sin is inevitable. We have to take responsibility, today is the day of responsibility, our responsibility to God and the responsibility which God, through Jesus, has taken for us.

Let us begin at the beginning. We were created by God so that we might choose to love freely; and, naturally, as human beings possessing, as Genesis picturesquely portrays it, the knowledge of good and evil, we frequently choose not to love rather than to love.

That is the essence of sin. There is not a ledger with sin on one side and virtue on the other; it isn't the outcome that matters. There are virtuous people captivated by their own goodness and there are struggling people torn between almost impossibly difficult choices.

Yet there are some Christians who walk in Our Saviour's Church of Forgiveness with a list in their hands, claiming to know from external appearances who is a sinner and who is saved. But they are forging disastrous caricatures of God's purpose. Nobody but God knows what we chose and how; they only know what it looks like; and what it looks like can be fatally misleading.

Today, then, is the day for facing up to our sin. But we must not face up to our sin in an intellectual way, admitting that the human race frequently chooses not to love; nor is it good enough to admit that we, collectively and individually, often choose not to love. This is the day to flex our notion of sinfulness so that it becomes alive in us as a self reproach instead of simply being a dispassionate social commentary.

Because I have chosen not to love, Jesus is hanging on the cross; because I have chosen to be proud, to give myself credit for an act well done, a thorn is pressed into my Saviour's head; because I have chosen to be cruel in what I say, my Saviour is being mocked; because I have used power instead of love, a nail is being driven into my saviour's hand; Because I have stood by instead of acting out of love, the crowd are standing by as My Saviour dies.



And yet, the searing mystery of this day is that the very sin I have committed can be forgiven because of what My Saviour suffered. Through His incarnation, passion and death, Jesus created the possibility of forgiveness for sin. His blood is the reservoir from which grace flows.

And as He hangs there, on the cross, He articulates the meaning of what He is doing through forgiving. He is ostensibly forgiving those who are throwing dice for His clothes but His forgiveness surely encompasses all of those who have been a part of this terrible human betrayal from Judas up until this moment of impending death; but that forgiveness spreads out in time and space from the cross to the whole world from the beginning to the end of time.

And the forgiveness which we hear granted through the waves of pain is not the cramped forgiveness we bring ourselves to utter through clenched teeth. This is not the cold forgiveness of duty, the fruit of severe moral schooling; this is the generous forgiveness of the one who has lived without sin. Jesus even goes as far as to excuse His persecutors and us: "They know not what they do" He says. True, those on the spot did not know what they were doing. They thought they were dealing with yet another zealot, another awkward customer in the tortured history of military occupation. Jesus had said He was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God but He was not the first and no doubt He would not be the last. These were difficult times for the Jewish authorities. So to that extent Jesus was correct when He said that these people did not really know what they were doing. But can we plead the same ignorance when we sin? Do we know what we are doing?

Often at the end of the day I begin to examine my behaviour, to see where I might have done better; but so often there is an excuse, an extenuating circumstance, some mitigation. So often the decisions about loving and not loving feel as if they are at one remove; the sense of loving and not loving is not flexed, not tried.

So often the admission of sin does not hurt, it becomes an item on a salvific balance sheet. And why? Because we have come to know, deep in our psyche, that the reservoir of the blood of Our Saviour is the source of unending Grace. We forget the price that was paid; and we forget the part that we played; and that we play. We have absented ourselves from the drama; we are watching Our Saviour hanging on the cross as if it were a television programme; but it is not. We are there: we have pressed in the thorns, we have mocked our king, we have driven in the nails; and now we are watching, at a distance. And in those dreadful moments before death, we are forgiven.

Not for us the remission that we do not know what we are doing. I know. We know what we are doing but that does not mean we are allowed to assume that other people know what they are doing. If we are to be worthy of Our Saviour we must forgive in the absolute conviction that we are not entitled to judge those who sin against us. We must accept, that they are innocent, that we must leave them in the hands of Our Saviour as the intercessor between the Created and the Creator. Forgiveness is not a statement of accounts where we magnanimously wipe the slate clean. In the truest sense it is not for

us to forgive or withhold forgiveness except in the sense that we try to treat all of God's creatures as Our Saviour said we should treat them. We forgive in the sense that we have nothing to forgive.

Forgiveness belongs to God alone, made lively in the death of Our Saviour. And because forgiveness lies solely with God we will never be able to measure it. We tamper with God's prerogative at our peril. We may well have attained the knowledge of good and evil in an external, human sense; but we cannot measure forgiveness, we cannot match it with a deed.

We are not worthy to forgive. We are not worthy.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as You hang upon the Cross full of forgiveness for the thief and for all who have persecuted You, forgive us our part in your suffering and death; may we struggle towards the Cross passing from cold judgment to warm forgiveness of all those who have injured us so much less than we have injured You so that we may be worthy of the fruits of Your sacrifice. **Amen**

## 4. Hope

"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise - Luke 23.43;

How could we dare to hope without forgiveness? What would it mean to think of shaping our whole existence as a journey towards God or, at least, a struggle not to be pulled any further away, if we thought that this was simply our personal struggle? Surely it would mean nothing very spiritual. It would mean an endless calculation of how we were doing: up yesterday, down today. We would be a myriad replicas of Sisyphus, forever pushing our boulders uphill to nowhere, only to be rebuffed. We would be like ants in a colony, faithfully working away; for nothing.

Hope is our apprehension on earth of the Heavenly light, made possible by the energy of forgiveness. Hope is the only means we have of seeing our way around this muddled earth with all its dark corners. Without hope we live in a state of endless terror, of the fear of what is round corners, behind walls, out of our eye line. To be without hope is like playing a lifelong computer game, assaulted by demons.

Hope is our human entitlement as children of God but for so long, living in the shadow of Adam, we lost hope. It is being restored now, as we stand by the cross.

I am a thief: I have stolen ideas, I have stolen a reputation, I have stolen office supplies. Perhaps my punishment is harsh; but I bring myself to admit that I have stolen. I beg forgiveness and My Saviour says to me that I am forgiven and that in dying I may be illumined by the light of hope shining from a distant place, light that is created by the wonderful, mysterious encounter between the Creator and the created, by the in substantiation of those who have been saved into the being of the Creator.

Yet there are those who walk in Our Saviour's Church of Hope with a list in their hands of tariffs for light; if we pay them so much in torment and treasure, if we perform a modern day variation on the Medieval theme of indulgences, we will be assured all the light we need here on earth which will draw us safely into the light of our Creator.

But human pride obscures light so that we have to move our position, to evade the obstacle, to be in a permanent state of flex and flux to keep an open channel between ourselves and the light. It is ironic that those who claim to be the most faithful inheritors of Luther should be the most ardent sellers of contemporary indulgences, armed with the price list for Heaven.

There is a paradox in our approach to hope which we need to grasp. On the one hand, hope is less clear cut than the transaction model just mentioned; we simply do not know the price of our entry into the light of our Creator; but, secondly, the terms we are being offered are much more generous than any tariff that humanity will ever devise. It is in the nature of humanity that it forms power relations, and the Church of Our Saviour is no exception. The tariff model is based on a power structure where some people put themselves in charge, make the list and then tell us how we should pay; but God has no

need of power relations because we are not in the same category as God; so, just as there are no meaningful power relations between a human being and a grain of sand, so there are no power relations between God and humanity.

Once we see that hope is not related to power we need not be frightened of the earth. Instead of seeing our lives through the occluding glasses of earthly vanity, so that we are always frightened of other people, we can live in the innocence of Heavenly light. Earthly fear, of losing out to the competition, of not being able to keep up appearances, of being less physically strong or beautiful than our peers, of being made a fool of, all this fear is undergone because we have misunderstood the purpose of being here. We are not here to compete, we are here to strive, individually and collectively, to reach the heavenly light.

Even in the gloom of Good Friday, as we stand at the foot of the Cross, as we see the thief turn to Jesus and admit his sin and beg for forgiveness, even now, the scene is still lit by that distant heavenly light because at the moment of his own greatest agony Jesus turns his mind and that of the thief towards heaven. If we are just a little cynical we can see why the thief might have been so anxious; after all, he was near to death and had nothing to lose; so he asked for forgiveness and was shown the hope of the Heavenly kingdom? Is that the sort of game we play? Do we regard being here now, standing at the foot of the cross, as filing our insurance policy with the almighty? Is it a coincidence that the older we are the more likely we are to be in church? Does religious conviction uncannily mirror concern for a comfortable transition from earthly gloom to Heavenly light? Is it simply a prudential punt? I fear we are all a little too apt to file our insurance but claim higher motives.

I have to wonder why my prayers were perfunctory in my twenties, brisk in my 30s, solid in my 40s and now substantial in my 50s. Have I really grown in the knowledge and love of Our Saviour or am I conscious of time passing?

Our eyes may grow dim as we ponder the approaching end of earthly life, but the heavenly light never dims. We only see it here on earth faintly, in the same way that we see the sun in the light of the moon; but it is still the true light that we see, the true light in a moon that has emerged from the eclipse of Adam's sin. We may not know the substance, the true meaning, of our substantiation into the life of God, but, through our doubt, we may glimpse its reality. The imprecision of hope does not arise because of the whether but only the how.

God knows our weakness, knows if we are filing an insurance policy while pretending to act in love. God knows the games we play with ourselves and with God. There are no places into which the heavenly light does not penetrate; no walls too thick, no scheme too dense, no sin too great. Our sin is not thinking that we are worthy of heaven, our sin is thinking that God's mercy is as shallow and narrow as our own.

"this day" says Our Saviour to the thief "You will be with me in Paradise". But if we take our worldly glasses off and see the world as God created it, we will see that we are

already in paradise; a paradise which sin has defaced but which Our Saviour will make radiant.

Look steadily, straight at the Cross; behind it, past the gloom, there is a glimmer of the heavenly dawn.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as You hang upon the cross promising paradise to the repentant thief, forgive us for abandoning heavenly hope and cowering in earthly fear; may we struggle towards the Cross, creeping from the darkness of our own devices towards its shadow from where we shall see the light of the heavenly dawn. **Amen**

## 5. Dependence

"I thirst" - John 19.28.

Dependence is a word which we all hate. We think of people who cannot feed themselves, of children that cannot walk, of disabled people who cannot hear or see, of scroungers and misfits, of the poor and the poorly, of the bruised and battered, of the helpless and the hopeless. Our images of dependence are a warning to our sense of integrity; but for the Grace of God, we say, go I.

It is such a strange idea that it is the Grace of God that keeps us independent. Many people think it is the other way round, that the Grace of God is what we depend upon; but perhaps that is too technical a debate for this sad and solemn time when we ought to concentrate more closely on the human condition as it relates to Our dying Saviour instead of worrying about theological metaphors.

Hanging on the cross, dying, Jesus is sick, disabled, poor, bruised, battered, despised, outcast; and He is thirsty; and He cannot get Himself a drink but has to ask for help. And when the drink comes it is horrible and He cannot take it.

Millions of times every day this happens to people all over the world: to people in wheelchairs who wait to be loaded into vans; to starving peasants who watch helplessly as their crops are washed away; to refugees in camps; to people not five miles from here trapped in the welfare state. All over the world there are millions, hundreds of millions of people, consciously or unconsciously, living their lives, day after day, in the imitation of Our Dying Saviour. And instead of respecting them, of seeing their union with Jesus, of seeing Him in them and them in Him, we want to separate ourselves, to be proud of our independence. We worship choice: free to drive wherever we like in our cars; free to choose from 50 different flavours of ice cream; free to choose from hundreds of varieties of wine, beer and whiskey; free to fly the world. This, as we now know, has disastrous ecological consequences but what should concern us today, as we stand at the foot of the cross, is the damage it does to our understanding of who we are. The essence of our existence is the simple, though not easy choice of loving or not loving God; the other choices by which we set so much store are incidental.

And yet there are some Christians who walk in Our Saviour's Church of Dependence with a list in their hands of the marks of Godly approbation, who say that prosperity, the freedom to choose earthly things, is a sign of Our Saviour's love, inferring that the poor are less loved. There are lists of skills which indicate divine favour; there are physical characteristics, there are mental characteristics, all humanly defined, which are supposed to illustrate closeness to God.

We have already thought about the false distinction between virtue and vice based on external appearance; and we also have to get away from drawing any spiritual conclusions from lifestyle options and choices, flexing our analysis to see that matters are not so simple. But, having said that, we should remember that Jesus came to earth

as a baby of poor parents in an occupied land; and through all of His mission he kept warning how dangerous this world was for the rich and how its rewards would make it more difficult for them to go to Heaven; and he kept saying how heaven was prepared for the sinners, for the poor and the weak. Nonetheless, the symmetry between earthly fortune and heavenly prospects is fixed so firmly in our minds that we cannot shake it off.

If we only stop to pray, we know that earthly dependence is an illusion, a poor shadow of the dependence on Our Saviour. In the terrible 20th Century we learned to understand the idea of the suffering Saviour who kept company with the imprisoned, the tortured and the condemned. We came to understand that the passion and death which He suffered fitted Him uniquely for the mission of consolation. It does not matter how often and how vehemently Jesus is claimed by the rich and the powerful, He will not be bought. It is incredible to think that He who has everything can be bought when His mission is to give, to enrich the poor; not only the economically poor but the poor that we are.

And yet Jesus can give nothing to us if we do not learn to take. If we are not prepared to be dependent upon Divine love expressed through human loving, how are we to live lives of Christian discipleship? To be a witness of Christ is to give in love but it is also to take in love. We are very adept with our accountancy model. We can add up all the good we have done, all the things we have given, all the virtue we have shown; and then, on the other side of the ledger, we can add up all the self denial, all the gifts refused, all the pleasures foregone.

And I say when I insist on giving and will not take, when I glow with the superiority of my generosity, when I think my neighbour too mean to give me anything, I am not being virtuous, I am being proud; I am not learning to live like My Saviour.

Some people, aware of the dangers of power and the need to cultivate dependency, took up the monastic life; but most of us never will; and so we have to try to live out our lives of dependency in a fiercely competitive world. This is terribly difficult. Perhaps the temptation we should fear most is that of power. We may think that we only have power in relatively small things but the routine exercise of power and choice are so seductive, particularly if we think we are exercising power and choice in the name of the good.

By the time we are so helpless that we cannot function without others, when we rage against the dying of the light, when our active minds are frustrated by our feeble bodies, it is too late. The rage only shows how badly we have lived our Christian lives. Instead of disciplining ourselves in humility, in subjection, in gratitude, we are trained in assertiveness, in choice, in the exercise of power. When Our Saviour came to earth He emptied Himself of all His divine power and became like us; lived less well than us, spent his whole mission on the road dependent on others for food and drink; and then, at the end he needed a drink as we, close to death, might need a drink and be too weak or confined to stretch out and grasp it for ourselves. But the purpose of coming to grips with future incapacity is not so that we will be prepared in a functional way; we are to

learn dependence because that is our true state. Any power we have comes from God and so it is agency not power; any power we have is illusory.

Jesus is thirsty. We may give Him something to drink; but only if we will also take the drink He offers in the shape of our neighbour.

Take and drink; the taste is bitter. Say nothing.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as you hang upon the Cross dependent on the few friends who remain to give you a cup of bitterness to drink, we are sorry that we have so often fled and only returned to you with a bitter cup; May we struggle towards the cross exchanging assurance for dependence on Your Grace which is the only true freedom. **Amen.**



## 6. Love

"He said to his mother: 'Woman, behold your son' then he said to the Disciple: 'Behold your mother'." - John 26.27.

There is no word more abused than "love"; it is the human talent for corrupting the divine that can take its most sacred word and turn it into selfishness. I love chocolate means I want chocolate; I love a girl means I lust after her; I love you means I want something you have; I am doing this out of love means that you must be more like me.

We have got it completely wrong. If ever a word has been turned upside down and inside out, if ever a glass has been fractured, if ever a picture has been blurred, if ever a candle has been blown out, it is love.

Love is not something that we do to other people, love is making space where people can do what they want without precondition. It is that simple; and that difficult. How else could we understand it?

I am born to choose to love or not to love; I perform a variety of acts of preference and denial; I form friendships and break them; I marry and divorce and marry again; I try to love my children but sometimes I am speechless and indifferent; sometimes I cannot express how deeply I feel and sometimes I too readily say how deeply I feel when it would be better to say nothing; and yet, through all of this thicket of small torments and triumphs, Jesus loves me.

And do I think Jesus loves me for what I have done or not done? How can my actions and words, my restraint and silence, be worthy of the love of My Saviour? How can I think that there is some correspondence between what I do and how Jesus relates to me?

Of course there is no correspondence. There is no way of describing the relationship between the love of Jesus and the way I behave; they are not relational in any way we understand; and for that reason, for that state of being, I live in a judgment free space, a space of love, which God has created for me and in which I live and move and have my being. Jesus meets me in this space which God has made; he meets me on earthly ground which God has made, he meets me by a lake and in the city, He meets me on a mountain and in a market town; he meets me wherever I am but he never pushes or pulls, he never makes a face or drops a hint; he never passes a comment on what I have done or on what I intend to do. He inhabits my space when I let Him and sometimes when I do not, thanks to the zeal of the Holy Spirit. But He lets me know that it is my space. I am not living in His space; for God lives in God's own kind of space quite separate from mine.

Here He is now, living in earthly space, ready to die so that we may continue to live in space created by His love; here he is commending His mother to a friend and the friend to His mother. He has no other instructions; he does not lecture them on what love

might mean; He seems not to be interested in obedience.

And yet there are Christians walking in Our Saviour's Church Of Love with a list in their hands of the components of love, who think that love is a form of obedience. They carry lists of what love requires, of actions, words and attitudes which will indicate whether we are loving or not loving. They have rules for who can love who and who cannot, they have rules for what is good love and not good love; they have honed love down to a set of proofs that Euclid would recognise; there are propositions, working out and proof statements; there is a whole sub culture of love theorems which have been devised to circumscribe, to keep people in confined spaces, to ensure that love does not get out of control. In an act of supreme arrogance, divine love is modelled in human love, divine enterprise is modelled in human enterprise; but, worst of all, divine space is cramped into human ecologies. There are supreme moments in our lives when we know how to love outside the walls but we grow frightened; we do not flex, we wither.

Jesus is a terrible disappointment to the Pharisees and to contemporary Christian leaders. He sits with sinners and enjoys a meal and he says nothing about their bad behaviour. He disrupts a perfectly proper trial of a prostitute and sends the prosecution packing. He forgives sins without ever wanting to know what the sins were. He spends a lot of his time telling the law makers that their laws are not divine at all but a human invention. He seems to like the outcast Samaritans, he has a soft spot for the Prodigal son, he empathises with the Publican at the back who thinks Himself not worthy to pray, he tells Peter that he will deny Him but seems to think that recognition of the denial by Peter will be punishment enough; He even seems to have no complaint against Pilate.

Looked at objectively, Jesus is a discredit to contemporary Christianity; He refuses to judge, all he wants to do is to love.

And we, as we watch the final minutes of his life, as we see Mary and John bravely approaching the foot of the cross, where do we stand in the argument between love and judgment? Are we prepared to take the risk of love, of creating space where others might do things we would prefer them not to do, or are we content to be Pharisees, defining everything that must happen and must not happen in earthly space? Are we prepared to take the risk of love and then ask Our Saviour for the strength, when we have taken that first step, not to judge when we feel that the space we have created has been violated, that we have been let down.

What we so often mean when we think this way is that our love has not been returned; that we are, in love terms, in debit. But if we think that love is a matter of debit and credit we have misunderstood. Love is a valve, it is one way, it is not a boomerang, it goes and it goes and it goes; for its own sake. That is why parents who expect their children to return love are fatally deluded. It goes and it goes and it goes; But of course the more of it you give away the more of it you have; the more space you make the more capacity you have for making space.

No wonder people worry about love and the space it creates; love is the greatest risk of

all; but that risk is under-written by the King of Love who hangs before us now.

Jesus, surveying the desolation of Calvary, with his dying breaths is still God's child of love, still making space for others to love.

The mystery of love is that the closer we come to our Saviour, the more space we have.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as You hang upon the Cross with no thought but love for those who are faithful, forgive us for a love that pinches and encircles; may we struggle towards the cross, freed from the desire to control to live in Your openness, learning to make space for all our sisters and brothers as the vessels of Your love. **Amen.**

## 7. Responsibility

"It is finished" - John 19.30.

From the beginning of time, when we were given the freedom to love and not to love, this death was inevitable, bearing within itself divine and human responsibility. From the sin of Adam to the proclamation of John Baptist via the dramatic history of the Chosen People, it has come to this. The sacrifice by the Faithful Abraham of his son, averted by God's intervention, confronts the grandeur of David and Solomon. All the fear and hope of the prophets has come to this. The whole activity of the whole world from beginning to end, all the good and bad choices, all the false starts, all the unfinished enterprises, all the glass that has been smeared and broken, have come to this, to this single, solitary point of flesh on a cross in occupied Palestine. And all the music that has lifted us above ourselves, all the prayers, all the hands joined in supplication and raised in triumph, all the inspiration that has lifted us out of baseness into animation, all of the striving for Heavenly light generated by God's grace, flows from this point, from the reservoir of Our Saviour's Blood.

Last year I was walking quietly up a flight of steps. I passed through a narrow doorway and Father John said: "We are here." I crawled on my knees the few feet to the place where the cross stood, and thought: "It all comes down to this. To this tiny, physical space; everything comes down to this."

"It is finished." At the simplest level, the life of Jesus is finished. The life of a man who walked the land of Palestine for three years, preaching a Gospel of Love, is finished. The enterprise of fellowship which He built up has almost disintegrated. The man who was the friend of everyone, even - particularly - sinners, has been abandoned. Jesus knows this. His statement, at the simplest level, is obvious.

"It is finished". At a deeper level the history of the Chosen People from Adam to Jesus is finished. There is no genealogy past the cross. The line of faithfulness and faltering has ended at this gruesome place. There is a final act to come but Jesus does not know this. The most He could know was that He had acted in obedience to His father for the forgiveness of sins and that Adam's debt, in some mysterious way, had been paid.

"It is finished", at its deepest level, encompasses the ultimate act of forgiveness. The purpose of the incarnation has been worked out in the Crucifixion. At the deepest level, everything human and divine is concentrated in this battered human frame.

At the root of our thought, of our ability to grasp what is going on, there is a paradox of failure and success, of tragedy and triumph which we try to deal with through our earthly expressiveness. There is nothing more haunting than a cross made of gold, nothing more poignant than blood celebrated in rubies. There is so much that we want to say and we have so few means to say what we want. The love of gold and rubies which killed Our Saviour celebrate His death.

Why is this important, now, at this minute? Because if we only do this now, once in a year, we have to flex ourselves out of thinking of this moment as the end of a story and flex ourselves into the story. This story is not about the relationship between Our Saviour and us, it is the story of Our Saviour and us. We are a part of the story as murderers and, mysteriously, we are part of the story as captives freed. If only once a year, now, we need to bring ourselves to feel ourselves as both of these things and then to fuse them into one wholeness in our hearts. We are not simply to think of murder and not simply to think of freedom, we are to think of the freedom granted to murderers, to us.

Our means are slight; and often when we try to think, our minds are crowded with two thousand years of culture, of music and painting, of meditations and narratives, of proverbs and prayers. All the images take us away from enactment; we think we are watching when we are doing. We need to understand our freedom and responsibility and where they have led, to this single point in space and time.

Let us stop for a few moments and focus on the fused idea of ourselves as murderers freed.

One of the reasons why this is so difficult for us is that we cannot hide from ourselves what was hidden from the dying Jesus. Stretching for the future, before He has been placed in the tomb, we see Him in the middle distance, rising.

But that is our strength and our weakness; we are not satisfied with the present.

And yet to survive the perils of earthly life, to bloom now and again, to reach that Heavenly light, we should live in the shadow of the Cross. For the more bitter the soil with blood, the more rich and frequent the bloom; the deeper the shadow, the brighter the light. For our soul's sake, for our survival's sake, we need to look as deeply into ourselves as we can to recognise the divine conditions which have made us human and the human condition which makes us divine; and the hinge of this human/divine symmetry is the cross on which hangs the dead Jesus who took human flesh and put aside His Godhead so that we might know not just intellectually and theologically, that we have been saved; but to know it in our hearts, in our blood, in our pain.

Let the noise of the crowd fade. Let the turmoil of the past week settle. Let the terrible torment come to an end. There is nothing more to be done now. There are many things we could have done better; but there is nothing to be done now. It is time to stand still. If we know how to - and it is never easy - it is time to pray.

the minutes go by and, as the final drops of blood fall to the ground, as the lance pierces His side to produce a tiny drop of blood and a weeping of water, it is easy to be melodramatic; but the drama is too great for that. This is no time for sentimentality, it is the time for seeing death and salvation with the clear eyes of responsibility and freedom. The whole world from the beginning to the end of time, is narrowed down to this single point; and so must our lives be. We were born to stand at the cross, to

choose to stand at the cross because sometimes we make wrong choices. We stand for ourselves and, as part of the mystery of the Body of Christ, we stand on behalf of the world's wrong choices. We are privileged to suffer; we bear the Christian responsibility of being here on behalf of all those who are not here. For just a fraction of time we have to bear the weight of this sorry death.

For now, for just a moment, there is nowhere else to go. For just a moment as we stand with Mary, Jesus is our dead child.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as You hang upon the Cross at the end of Your incarnational mission, we are sorry that we have lived irresponsibly as if You were not among us; may we remain at the foot of the Cross so that we, nourished by Your blood as the reservoir from which all Grace flows, be true disciples worthy to join You in Your heavenly home. **Amen.**

## Holy Week Reflection 2007

Recently, when I was writing a Crucifixion scene for 2007, I kept thinking of an image, no doubt a composite of vaguely remembered paintings and churchware, of a Crucifix with a Jesus in glittering gold set in the rubies of His blood. Apart from the incongruity of the materials, given his incarnational mission to the poor, what struck me was how this image represented the radical transformation from realism to a form of decorousness, almost decoratedness.

For my writing, of course, I had to concentrate on the language rather than the image but they share this reluctance to come to terms with reality.

Ever since I have been able to understand churchy language I have thought of Jesus not beaten so that the skin was roughly torn from his back but scourged; I have thought of Jesus not being cruelly assaulted with a thicket of wicked thorns but crowned; I have thought of Jesus not pulverised with coarse bolts but nailed by his hands and feet; and, O, that final mercy of not having his legs broken, nor being stabbed in the side with a blunt dagger or sword, but being pierced with a lance; and this last, at least, foretold so beautifully in the words of Jeremiah and Simeon, as if the narrative continuity, the inevitability of the cruel events, somehow made them better, as if the nobility of Jesus and the drama of His death somehow raises it above the physical pain that the cross involved.

When I came to buy my own cross so that it would always be close to my heart, I chose a simple design with no figure. I was not sure then why I did not want a graven image of Jesus; but I know now. It is more than fifty years since I began to live with the story of Christ Crucified, lived in churches and museums, in picture books and Bibles, in spectacular movies and passion plays, in Stations of the Cross and Seven Last Words, in painting and sculpture, in Bach and most recently in the rock re-telling in Manchester last Good Friday, annually focused on Holy Week but never far away. It was only when I went to Calvary last year that I realised how the reality had slowly lost its real life. The conclusion I drew for myself, not for anybody else, is that this murder in which I am complicit will die as a reality in me unless I can escape from all the reverential baggage and re-tell the story to myself so that the account makes me wince.

So when I started to think about the death of Jesus as it might take place this Good Friday, I thought about torture, about broken glass, glowing cigarette ends and sulphuric acid; and I began to think about humiliation, crouching figures dressed in orange jump suits, isolation cells and sleepless nights, extra rendition; and all the means of humiliation and torture we have developed as the physical manifestations of our complicity in the murder of all murders.

But, other than recognising and being sorry for our complicity, there isn't much point in bringing ourselves to a pitch of private, unbearable pain unless we are simultaneously, in the great mystery of the world's existence, on the watch for the new dawn of the Resurrection.

There is a liturgical convention, perhaps to keep us aware of our sinfulness, perhaps to pile on the agony, perhaps simply as an acknowledgement of the way our culture worked before the breach of the dramatic unities, that we don't mention the Resurrection on Good Friday; but I can't help it. For me there is always a faint glimmer of the new dawn on the distant horizon behind the Cross, making its outline yet more sharp and black.

And, like the cultural accretion that surrounds the Crucifixion, the Resurrection imagery and language almost totally lack immediacy. Only John's half line about Mary Magdalene mistaking Jesus for the gardener (a phrase frequently omitted from the Easter Day reading) and the Emmaus episode in Luke have any dynamism. It is as if the real link is between the Crucifixion and Pentecost when the Holy Spirit gets cracking. And, as for the images, I can't take seriously - and therefore cannot rejoice through - the fussily androgynous angels, the dazzling nappery, the European pastoral verdure and the general air of Olympian frolics and Holman Huntism.

As for the significance of the event, we can surely understand the somewhat flat-footed reactions of the Disciples and the women - I doubt we would do any better - but in our language today, with almost two thousand years to think about it, Jesus has not torn a massive post incarnational hole in the fabric of human time, he has risen; Jesus has not smashed the forces of evil and made an irreversible promise of salvation to all humanity, he has achieved a victory o'er the grave; Jesus has not lived the greatest transformational event in world history, he has risen indeed. Alleluia.

As a quid pro quo for acknowledging on Good Friday the glimmer of light behind the Cross to sharpen its impact, I would burn palm crosses in the fire of the Easter Vigil, the palms of fickleness which ultimately form the foundation of our penitential act on Ash Wednesday. After the Light of Christ is brought into church and the Exulted has been sung, we slowly climb towards our greatest joy, beginning with the creation and tracing the history of our salvation; O how easily we have forgotten the Cross as if we have had too much of it in Holy Week. Perhaps seen from the radically different liturgical angle of the Vigil, the cross might regain its true meaning.

We renew our Baptismal vows with St. Paul reminding us that in the Cross we have all died and in Baptism we are all brought into a new life. But as long as we are so full of the reverential baggage of history, art, literature and ceremony, it won't be much of a new life, just another personal metaphor dressed in corporate liturgy. For surely the point of the Easter Vigil is to remind us all of our life and death story in terms that will make us, like Jesus, suffer and die - and live again. Alleluia!