



## **Stations of the Cross**

**A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly**

**Readings: Isaiah 43.16-21; Philippians 3.4b-14; John 12.1-8**

During Lent in many churches each week there are the traditional stations of the cross, where a small group will go to each of 14 stations depicting the scene of Jesus' passion and crucifixion, stopping at each one to pray and reflect on each part of the passion story; Jesus' trial, Jesus carrying his cross, falling not once but again and again a third time, Jesus meeting his mother, meeting the women of Jerusalem, being stripped of his garments, Jesus nailed to the cross, Jesus dying on the cross, being taken down and his body laid in the tomb.

At All Saints Margaret Street where I took part in these Stations on Friday, I was very aware this time of the physicality of the journey. Imagining the weight of the cross, the crowds, the brutality of the soldiers, Christ's footsteps, the violence of the nails, but also, in complete contrast, imagining the tender touches of the women, the gentle words, Jesus inviting his beloved disciple to take the hand of his mother at the foot of the cross, the generous hands of Simon of Cyrene against the rough wood as he carried a load he had never expected to bear.

I thought of the experience of those on their own journey of the cross today - refugees on journeys in Europe, the physical hardships they are suffering, the kind gestures from strangers, the brutality of wire fences and deaths at sea. And I was aware of the physicality of this act of witness - walking that journey with others - standing, praying, singing, kneeling on the cold tiled floor at the 12<sup>th</sup> station, as Jesus dies on the cross; travelling around the church as a small group, with the life of busy central London on a Friday night going on around outside.

For a few moments we were caught up in Christ's journey, walking on the way of the Cross here in this city. That witness matters, and walking back along Oxford Street I felt different. Being with Christ on this journey changes us.

On this Passion Sunday we enter Passiontide the season of the church that takes us to Good Friday, the journey of Christ's suffering to the Cross. And I invite you to find a way to enter the story yourself and to bring all that you are concerned about in our world, all that troubles you, all you are praying about with you on that journey to the cross and to respond with all your heart and soul, in touch and word and prayer, because being alongside Christ, and sharing in his suffering, as Paul reminds us, is the way to life for each one of us.

The scene of Mary kneeling before Jesus could well be a Station of the Cross, a prelude to the journey Jesus will take, a 'First Station' where you could start today.

Here we find Mary responding with her heart and soul in an extravagant gesture of love, reverence and worship. Her actions are a prelude to the anointing of Jesus at his burial, she truly recognises Jesus and understands the path he is about to take and responds in this overwhelming act of love and gratitude. The cost we hear, the equivalent of year's wages for an ordinary person; that, and the overwhelming perfume filling the room, a sign of the completeness of her gesture.

The raising of her brother Lazarus is a pivotal moment in the gospel and from that point on people are divided. 'Many of the Jews who had seen what Jesus did, believed in him,' we hear, but others

are determined that he should die and 'plan to put him to death.'<sup>1</sup> In this gesture we see that Mary understands the costly truth of this.

She instinctively knows where to be, kneeling and anointing Jesus' feet, disregarding social convention or propriety. She wipes Jesus feet with her hair, the same action that Jesus will make when he kneels and washes the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, instructing them to do the same for one another. In Mary, faithful discipleship is fully revealed. She crosses the boundaries of what is morally appropriate in this gathering, a woman touching a man, her hair loose (only mentioned here in John, not in the other gospel accounts). But by her actions she shows what being a truly loving disciple means; bold self-offering in loving response to Christ.

This is the place for us to start from this Passiontide, at this station, kneeling in humble gratitude and love for the ways in which we recognise Christ in our lives and say so by our words and loving actions; for the life he has shown us, for the suffering he faces for our sake, offering our lives for his life to work through us, through his extravagant grace.

True to the writer of this Gospel, there is contrast in this scene. Judas offers us an alternative response to Jesus. For Judas, life is calculated, selfish and his true motives are hidden from view. He is closed to the possibilities set before him. He focuses on the cost of the perfume and fails to see the meaning of Mary's beautiful gesture. In Jesus' journey to the cross, as the stations of the cross reveal to us, there is light and shade, some people step into the light, like Mary knowing the cross to be the way to life, and some like Judas, slink into the shadows, reluctant and fearful.

They show us the light and dark that we live with in our own lives, the mixed motives of our actions, our refusal to see the true value of what is placed before us, our reluctance to respond openheartedly when the opportunity to witness to God's love in Christ is revealed to us. These too are things for us to walk with on the way to the cross.

This 'new thing that God is doing' in Jesus, looks like loving service that goes beyond the appropriate or acceptable, it is greater even than the new life that Lazarus has experienced.

In the life of Paul this new possibility of relationship with Christ brings about radical transformation. Paul recognises that 'being known by Christ' is a gift of grace that is priceless. It comes through suffering, is costly, but Paul is prepared to risk his whole life on it and like Mary, in her loving actions, shape his identity around it. Past, present and future are all realigned through the gift of faith, of being found in Christ. It gives Paul new confidence and a new way of understanding his life.

It is the newness that we hear of in Isaiah, of God who forms his chosen people for himself and gives them a new identity, offering them a new way forward, a future of forgiveness unencumbered by the past, and their response is to sing God's praise. If our lives are aligned with Christ, then our response, in suffering and in joy, can only be loving, generous and faithful.

If we allow Christ to make us his own this passiontide our identity too will be shaped around his, we will be found in him and find our place in his story. I wonder what loving action you will make for your own station of the cross? Your own way of honouring Christ's new life that opens the possibilities for grace in your life and in our world. There will be something about it that is challenging, like Mary stepping beyond convention, risking her reputation, or like Paul, who faces his past and admits that it doesn't count for much, but it will unlock for you God's grace in your life, and be in some way part of Christ's challenge to the darkness of our world.

---

<sup>1</sup> John 11.45, 53

For inspiration you may find the Stations exhibition coming to St Martin's this week helpful. It is a contemporary photographic reinterpretation of the stations of the cross through the lives of refugees fleeing conflict in Syria, Iraq and the Middle East. I encourage you to use it for your own reflections. And our collection for the Diocesan Lent Appeal today for charities working in Syria and Iraq is a way for us to be alongside those for whom the way of the cross is a daily cruel reality.

Yesterday we saw a photograph of a baby born in a tent in the Idomeni refugee camp on the Macedonian border, being washed with water from a bottle, held over muddy earth. I wonder if that were a station of the cross whether it would be the station of the crucifixion – representing a people fleeing brutality and violence, giving birth in squalid conditions in an out of the way wretched place. Or perhaps it is a station of the resurrection, a sign of the radical new life Jesus suffering and death will bring. A life that overcomes the brutal causes of this situation and that brings hope where life is hopeless for those walking their own journey of the cross today.

Today we contemplate how both are true. The reality of the cross and the life of the resurrection.

And we commit ourselves to be a people who face the cross and live the hope of the resurrection, through the grace and love of Christ.