



Good Friday
18 April 2014

A Man of Sorrows: Three Hours at the Cross

By Revd Dr Sam Wells

1. Finished

Reading: John 19.28-30

Why are we here? Why are we gathered in a grand, baroque building to remember a man who died a criminal's death 2000 years ago thousands of miles from here? What on earth has that got to do with us?

I had a colleague who had an unfortunate habit of starting meetings by saying, 'Why are we here?' It would always lead to an awkward, shuffling silence, in which no one had the courage or the bluntness to say, 'I really have no idea, but you called the meeting and we were too polite to think of a good reason not to come.' This is a man who'd failed to learn the saying, 'Never ask a question to which you might get an answer you don't want to hear.'

So it takes courage to ask the question, 'Why are we here?' We're gathered to recall the most awful event in human history. Let's survey the scene. Here is a naked man. He's been beaten to pulp. He's bleeding hand and foot. His arms are spreadeagled so he can't fight off the flies or wipe away the sweat and the blood. He's practically alone. He's more or less isolated. He's totally humiliated. It's almost impossible to look at a picture of such agony and misery.

And at the climax of this ghastly scene, John's gospel tells us, this man says one single word. 'Finished.' Finished. Think for a moment about the host of meanings of that word. Finished. The dissertation's finally edited and handed in. Finished. The marathon's run and I'm totally done in. Finished. The relationship's over and she's told me she doesn't love me. Finished. The work of art is completed and ready for display. Finished. The counselling has run its course and I can face the world without fear or bitterness or anger. Finished. I've served my sentence and I can come out of prison. Finished. I've been told I've no longer got a job and needn't come back to work. Finished.

Surely Jesus' climactic words from the cross must be ironic. This isn't the way the story was supposed to end. Remember the heavenly host of angels in the skies above Bethlehem singing of peace on earth? Surely this wasn't the way they imagined it would all turn out. Remember the crowds on Palm Sunday waving branches and shouting Hosanna? Surely they weren't thinking of this apocalypse five days later. A lot of other words might capture it. Ruined, betrayed, wasted, lost, destroyed, devastated, ravaged, spoiled, wrecked... but not 'finished.' What might this word 'finished' mean? Let's look a little closer. Let's see if we can discover what is finished by Friday afternoon.

One thing that's finished is the blond Jesus with the constant smile, the loose-fitting toga and the baby lamb constantly around his neck like a primal life-jacket. That would be the Jesus whose picture perched above my bed as a child. The one that loves the little children. There's nothing sentimental about the cross. There's no guitar-playing, commune-dwelling, tie-dying, knitted-yogurt-eating, country-road-singing, long-haired-lover-from-Liverpool, John-Denver-bespectacled Jesus in the face of Good Friday. Jesus is mutilated. He's taunted. He's asphyxiated. The Jesus of our projections, the kind friend, the handsome suitor, the Mr Fixit, the husky organic farmer, the country sage, the wandering minstrel – they all die at the foot of the cross. The rose-tinted Jesus of soft-focused promotional paraphernalia is gone. Finished.

Another thing that's finished is the conquering Jesus with the righteous fist, the Jesus whom the Crusader thought he was upholding as he smashed the head of the infidel, the Jesus whom the Inquisition thought it was promoting by torture and cruelty, the Jesus proclaimed by conquistadores with colonial mind-sets and rapacious ambitions, the Jesus that demands to seize control of the government, the Jesus that obliterates other religions from the face of the earth, the Jesus whose name is invoked to justify one race or people or gender giving themselves sanction to oppress and marginalise and laud it over others. On Good Friday Jesus doesn't conquer. He's humiliated. He's defeated. He's dragged through the streets like a slave or a dog. The Jesus that gives credibility to human power-grabs is gone. Finished.

And that's by no means all. The Jesus that makes for good citizenship and stable social relations is finished too. Jesus died a criminal's death. We can plead his innocence as long as we like, but in the eyes of the Sanhedrin he was acting as if he was the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who was bringing Israel's long exile to an end. And that meant he had to die. And in the eyes of the Romans he was a rabble-rouser and a potential king, and that made him guilty of a capital crime. Jesus was a good citizen of the kingdom of heaven, but not a very reliable citizen of Rome. So the meek Jesus that believes in law and order, the mild Jesus that instructs children to be good and kind and to obey their parents, the Jesus that doesn't want to rock the political boat or disturb the neighbours – that Jesus dies in the face of the cross. That Jesus is finished.

And what about the Jesus of a mathematical equation – the Jesus that says, 'Take one drop of total human depravity, add one pinch of utter divine grace, mix with one broken law and blend in one innocent death, and then subtract one angry devil'? That Jesus, who seems subject to some extraneous logic invisible to the eyes of the disciples but obvious to the well-informed cosmic legal historian, that Jesus disintegrates in the face of the circumstantial detail of the cross. If Jesus were simply a component in a mathematical equation or legal formula that got us off the devil's hook, then why would the gospels tell us so much about the disciples who deserted him, the women who followed him, the mother who loved him, the sinners he forgave, the sick he healed, the poor he accompanied, the blind he led? By the time we get to the cross the gospels have shown us enough about Jesus not just to show us how much he loves us but to make us love him. You don't love a formula or an equation. The cross shows us not forensic symmetry but wondrous love. The Jesus of the divine bargain is finished.

And then there's the Jesus that watches idly by while earthquakes destroy countries, while AIDS afflicts a generation, while civil war becomes a way of life across the world, while loved ones develop cancer, while drought afflicts continents, while hurricanes and tsunamis wreck households and livelihoods and cities. Nero watched from afar and fiddled while Rome burned; but Jesus isn't looking idly through some heavenly telescope. Jesus is suffering an agony as bad as any known to human experience. Jesus isn't tucked up in the sky, peering down from a safe distance: he's in the middle of a human train crash, the glass and wheels and rails and twisted metal all contorting his body and piercing his soul. If you ever look up to the sky and shout 'Oh God, why?' you're looking in the wrong place. You need to be looking into the face of the crucified Jesus. That distant remote-control God has got nothing to do with Christianity. In the face of Good Friday, that Jesus is finished.

And here's a painful one. The Jesus that belongs to the church, the Jesus that gives an affirming thumbs-up to everything Christians set out to do, the Jesus that makes a congregation a circle of holiness and a cradle of wholesomeness – that Jesus withers in the face of the cross. It's not clear when the church begins. Maybe when Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom. Maybe when Jesus says to Peter, 'Feed my Sheep.' Maybe when Jesus breathes on the disciples and says 'I send you.' Maybe when the Holy Spirit comes down at Pentecost. But a good candidate for the beginning of the church is right here at the cross, when Jesus hands his mother over to the care of the beloved disciple. You can see Mary representing Israel and the beloved disciple representing the church, and Jesus' instructions portraying the inextricable destiny of the two. Not a glamorous scene, is it? This is two fragile figures amid a vista of apocalyptic devastation. Not exactly a mega-church bent

on growth. Lends a whole new irony to Jesus' words, 'Where two or three are gathered, I am with them,' doesn't it? In the face of the cross, there's no place for the self-congratulatory church that's holier than God. There's only a place for church that looks like Jesus. Any other church is like any other Jesus. It's finished.

But here's the most important one of all. The cross confronts us with the fragility of Jesus. He's no superman who leaps down and says, 'Only joking!' He suffers to the end. We wonder how this awful spectacle can possibly be necessary for our salvation. We're supposed to wonder that. We wonder whether this tiny, broken, wasted body can possibly be the body of God. We're supposed to wonder that. We wonder how any joy, any hope, any glory can possibly emerge from this hideous catastrophe. We're supposed to wonder that. We wonder why God doesn't utterly reject us after we've shown the very worst that we can do. We're supposed to wonder that. All of those wonderings should be part of our faith, our imagination, our daily prayer and our compassionate hearts. But for all our wondering and pondering, one thing is utterly clear. When we see the pain, when we feel the grief, when we look upon the loneliness, when we touch the wounds, when we hear the cries, we know, we know that God will go to any lengths for us, God will never be separated from us, that loving us is written into God's DNA, that there's no part of God that has any desire to be except to be with us, that Jesus is the embodiment of the way God's destiny is wrapped up in us forever. Any other notion of God, any other speculation about God's wishes, any other idea about what lies at the heart of God is gone. Over. Dispelled. Finished.

Jesus' final words: 'Finished.' His life is finished. His ministry's finished. The scriptures are finished. The reconciliation of God and creation is finished. And a host of misconceptions are dispatched at the same time. Jesus isn't a cosy companion. He's not a triumphalist conqueror. He's not a law-abiding do-gooder. He's not legal formula. He's not a heartless onlooker. He's not a pretext for Christian self-satisfaction. All those idolatries are finished. They're snuffed out like a line of candles, one by one. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished.

Everything's finished. Everything's desolate. Everything's laid waste. Everything's lost, except the heart of God laid bare. And if we're not seduced by a comforting saviour, if we're not mesmerised by a merciless hero, if we're not domesticated by a model citizen, if we're not obsessed by a mathematical equation, if we're not alienated by a distant deity, if we haven't fled from the cross like most of the church for most of its history, we might just get close enough to glimpse that sacred heart laid bare. And we might just get to read what's written on that heart, pierced and finished from love of us. And we might just believe these words we see written there: 'I swear to you our time has just begun.'

2. Betrayed

Reading: Matthew 27.3-10

I was once involved in a production of twelve plays that portrayed the life of Jesus. All the plays were performed in a parish church. The play in which Jesus was betrayed by Judas took place at 10 o'clock at night on Maundy Thursday. When Judas realized what he'd done, and that the chief priests and the elders had turned their back on him, he started to tremble, and shake his head. He ran out of the church shouting 'Unclean...unclean.' He ran down the road beside the church, all the way shouting 'Unclean...', his distant cries echoing amid the stunned silence of the audience. I'll never forget that moment.

I want to talk about Judas. I want to read his story with you three times – first as a story of one man's personal tragedy; again as a story of each one of us, this afternoon of Good Friday; and third as a window into the whole work of God.

So let's start with Judas himself. What can he possibly have been thinking? Let's imagine Judas saw himself as a sharper and altogether more significant figure than the journeymen disciples. You can see him as the one always looking to theorise, to analyse, to generalise – reluctant to take Jesus at face value, always looking to see extra interests and manoeuvrings at work whenever Jesus was healing or teaching. We can picture Judas, slightly to one side of the crowds following Jesus, as if to say, 'I have other options, you know; I'm following Jesus because he draws a crowd, but Jesus may not end up being the best way of getting what Israel wants and needs – I'm reserving judgement on that.'

And yet Judas loves Jesus. He is moved by the parables, inspired by the walk to Jerusalem, awed by the healings, and can't deny that in Jesus he has truly seen the kingdom of God. He's almost embarrassed by his love for Jesus. In a previous post I was once visited by a senior city official who hadn't been to church for years, but secretly wrote praise songs. He came to my house one morning and left with me a CD of a song he'd just written. He handed it to me for safe keeping as furtively as if he were giving me a brown envelope of pornographic photographs. I imagine Judas like this city official – embarrassed that a man of his intelligence should secretly love Jesus as much as the crowds and the poor and the common people did. Judas can't bring himself to worship Jesus – he always wants Jesus to be a means to some greater end.

And you can sense a mounting frustration as he sees Jesus failing to take his many opportunities to seize power. The defining moment is the anointing at Bethany: Jesus lets the woman's devotion to him be utterly wasted by pouring perfume out in a symbolic act of burial, while Judas sees that such devotion should have been harnessed for a popular movement, such resources should have fed hungry mouths, and a symbolic burial is pious nonsense when there's a resistance movement to organise. Judas betrays Jesus out of impatience at his style of leadership, jealousy at his magnetic personality, and fury that he seems to be making beautiful gestures rather than seizing the initiative. Finally Judas resorts to a clumsy effort at provocation, and, in as many words, says to Jesus, 'If you're not going to do what I know is good for you, I'm going to trap you in a position where you have no alternative.'

And so Judas leads the chief priests' henchmen to Gethsemane, and kisses Jesus. The kiss is a gesture of self-hatred, if you imagine that Judas resents how much he loves Jesus. Judas is literally trying to turn his love for Jesus into something he regards as more important. He contrives to bring the most powerful forces in Israel together – the chief priests and Jesus. He assumes the priests' pragmatism and the messiah's passion will make an unstoppable combination. But in no time at all he realises Jesus has been handed over to the Romans, which can only mean certain death, and all Judas has to show from the planning and scheming and devotion and analysis of three years on the road with Jesus, all he has left to bring about the kingdom of God single-handed, is thirty pieces of silver. Beside himself, he goes back to the chief priests and says 'It wasn't supposed to turn out like this. I was supposed to be the hero.' But the priests just laugh, and say, 'You thought Jesus could be

your tool. Turns out you were ours.’ Not just his discipleship, but the whole life project of Judas, to manipulate others to some unspecified greater end, is in tatters. Everything Judas stood for is exposed to himself and others as empty and cruel. It’s unbearable. He hangs himself.

We want Judas to be uniquely evil, because then we can know that we couldn’t have betrayed Jesus. We want Judas to be a monster because we don’t want him to be too much like us. But what we have already discovered is that Judas is all too much like us. Let’s tell his story again a second time, in such a way that makes clear why Jesus went to the cross, and how much Judas is like us.

There are many ways in which we put our lives in other people’s hands. When you step on a plane you put your life in the pilot’s hands. When you step in a friend’s car your life is in your friend’s hands. When you lie on the operating table, your life is in the surgeon’s hands. When you say to someone ‘I love you,’ you’re telling them that your life, or at least your heart, is in their hands. Half the time we crave this power and responsibility, half the time we want to live as if we didn’t have it. We crave the sense that we can hold someone’s life or destiny in our hands – a baby maybe, or a person we adore and desire who finally comes to return our passion, a person in authority perhaps who recognises us and gives us power. These people make us feel we really matter, matter because we hold their life in our hands and they matter. But then suddenly we discover we don’t know what to do with that power. We wanted the big job but we have no idea how to live into it. We wanted the warmth and pride of everyone’s attention but we don’t know what to do with the spotlight.

Be careful what you hope for. Judas wanted to ‘make a difference.’ He craved a life that mattered – a life that affected not just the destiny of Israel but the destiny of all humankind. And... he got one. He had his hands on Jesus’ heart. And he didn’t know what to do with it. When he got it wrong he went to see the chief priests and asked for another go. And they laughed at him. ‘That’s your problem,’ they said. So finally he had only one thing left he could control – the nature and timing of his end. He was so set on his life mattering that he decided he alone could determine the meaning of his own death.

And this, I think, is what betrayal means. This is what took Jesus to the cross. It’s when we don’t believe our lives matter so we go looking for ways to *make* them matter. And we greedily draw other people into our net, one maybe, or several, or possibly a great many. Perhaps we start by simply wanting others to have a good opinion of us. But soon we don’t just want their opinions, we want more. We can’t cope with our own lives being out of control so we reassure ourselves by controlling other people’s lives – emotionally, physically, sexually, professionally, subtly, clumsily, with coercion or manipulation, in public or in private, with charm or by force: and the moment they realise they’ve just been a pawn in our pathetic attempts to make our own lives secure, the moment they realise our real commitments lie not with them but only with ourselves, the moment they realise how much they had come to put their life in our hands, that’s the moment they see us for what we are and use the word ‘betrayal.’

Treason (or spying) is often a betrayal because it shows you care more about yourself and your own ideas than you do about your country and its people. Breaking confidence is often a betrayal because it shows you don’t value what someone else says to you until you can use it to amuse or impress a third party. Judas’ kiss is an agonising betrayal because his intimate gesture masks the fact that he regards friendship with God not as the ultimate privilege but as a mere means to a more important end. He can’t imagine friendship with God is everything. And so he loses everything greedily looking for more.

Jesus seemed to have a different approach. He didn’t draw others into his power. He gave his life into the hands of others. He loved his disciples, even Judas, and by loving them he gave them power over him. They could betray him, even to the point of death. One of them did. He began his life in human hands, the hands of Mary and Joseph. They had power over him. He’d been giving his life away since the very start. In Gethsemane he was given into the hands of those who were using Israel for their greater purposes. On the cross he literally gave his life away. The cross is the last word on our security systems, on our control-freakery, on our manipulation of others, on our

drawing people into our own web of affirmation and gratification and attention-seeking. Jesus doesn't seize the initiative. Quite the opposite. Jesus saves us *by giving his life away*.

Judas can't grasp this. The moment he realises he's become a pawn in someone else's game he commits suicide. For him, being under the control of people, especially people he now sees are empty, is the ultimate disaster. But for Jesus, life isn't a puppet show. He has no purpose beyond making, maintaining, and restoring relationships. These relationships are not a means to something more important. They're all there is. For ever. Jesus is God becoming our companion and restoring the whole creation's companionship with God, for ever. Period. *There is no other motive*. We aren't pawns on God's chessboard. We're friends God's seeking to make. And the only way to be a friend is to give your life away. Not usually all at one go; but here God fundamentally, comprehensively, definitively *gives life away*, from no other motive other than to become friends with us and all creation for ever.

The result is that God is in our hands, as we recognise each time we receive the bread of Holy Communion. Because God is in our hands, we run the risk of betraying God every day. And we *do* betray God. We *do* treat God as a means to our own more important ends. We *do* make God into an instrument of our pathetic misguided attempts to find our own security by controlling others. *But God never betrays us*. God's life is fully handed over to us. God cannot betray us. It's impossible. It's unimaginable. It's not in God's nature. That's what the cross means.

And that brings us finally to Judas as a window into the whole work of God. When Judas returns the chief priests their thirty pieces of silver, there's a painfully ironic scene when these men who haven't hesitated to shed innocent blood are reluctant to hang onto the blood money. So they buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. 'Potter's field.' In this phrase we hear two echoes of the prophet Jeremiah. First we remember Jeremiah's field, the one he bought just before the Assyrians invaded Jerusalem. We remember his unbelievable, prophetic gesture that said after a time in Exile the Jews would indeed return to Israel. And we sense that after a time in the exile of the tomb Jesus will indeed return to risen life. And second we remember Jeremiah's potter, the one whose pot was broken in his hands, who then fashioned a new pot from the clay. And we see that the clay of Jesus is about to be broken in our hands, but that God will refashion a risen Jesus out of this same clay. And we step back even further and see that the clay of Israel has been broken in God's hands, and that God refashions a new destiny for Israel out the same clay. That's the story of Israel. That's the story of Jesus. That's the story of the Bible. That's the story of God.

And Judas, the man of all the apostles whose name bears the name of the nation, Judah, is at the heart of this story. Judas shows us that the worst possible thing we can do is only made possible because God's life has in Jesus been given away to us, because God's life has been placed in our hands. And even the worst possible thing we can do can still be drawn back into the story of God. In fact, without the worst possible thing we can do we would never have seen the heart of who God is. It took Judas' betrayal and Jesus' consequent crucifixion for us to see that in Jesus, God's life really had been given away. So Judas is a microcosm of the whole gospel. God calls us, trusts us with heart and life, and even when we betray, even when we crucify, even when we are a broken pot or in self-imposed exile, even when we shout 'Unclean...' and our plans are in tatters, God finds a way of bringing even our worst betrayal back into the story, of making us part of this saving work, and, in giving life away, gives life to us for ever. That was the good news of the first apostles. That's the good news today.

The chief priests betray the betrayer Judas when they say to him, 'See to it yourself.' We too betray Jesus. But God never betrays us. God never says to us, 'See to it yourself.' That's what we learn from Judas' story. That's what we learn from the cross. Whatever it takes, whatever we've done, whatever it costs – God never has and never will say to us, 'See to it yourself.' It's never just our problem. It's always God's problem. That's the good news of Good Friday. God will never leave us alone.

3. Pierced

Reading: John 19.31-37

One of the most privileged and tender moments you get invited into as a priest is to be with a person and their family at the moment of death. What I try to do is to touch the person's five senses and gently offer each one back to God. I touch their eyes and think about what those eyes have seen, their ears and reflect on what those ears have heard, their nose and savour what that nose has smelled, their mouth and dwell on what their tongue has tasted, and finally their hand and consider what their hands have touched.

I wonder if you've ever touched the skin of a person's body after they've died. It's an awesome and intimate thing to do. It's terrifying, because it makes you realise how vulnerable each one of us is, because this moment will come for us all. But it also makes you ponder the intricate wonder of this person, how all the capillaries and nerve ends and organs and brain cells that are now silent and still were once so busy and creative for so long. Our physical bodies depend on two things above all. One is water – for we're each made up of about 60% water. The other is blood – for without the blood running around our bodies, nothing would function for more than a second.

Jesus has no nursing home or hospital side ward to die in. His execution is an extended and merciless form of relentless torture. Once Jesus has died, John's gospel records a significant event. It says, 'One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.' It's an awesome event, of atonement and salvation, judgement, death and sacrifice, but it's also an intimate story of love and betrayal, physical pain and emotional heartbreak. What's going on throughout the passion narrative is an interweaving of awe and intimacy, of the grand cosmic story and the intense personal drama. I want to look at how all these things appear in this brutal moment shortly after Jesus' death, when the spear pierces his side and out come blood and water.

The first strand to weave is the background of this spear story in the ritual shape of Israel's life. The Day of Preparation falls every Friday, and ends at sundown on Friday night. Passover falls once a year, on the fourteenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar, which can be any day of the week. John's gospel points out that the day Jesus was killed was an unusual day, because the way the calendar fell it was *both* the eve of Passover *and* the day of preparation, a coincidence that only occurred every ten years or so. The fact that it was the eve of Passover meant that the blood that appeared as the soldier pierced Jesus side gushed forth just as the blood of the Passover lambs was being spilt. The fact that it was the day of preparation meant that those who had condemned Jesus wanted his body removed before the day of rest began. And all of this is told with repeated reminders that those who wanted Jesus dead could do nothing without the Romans' authority. Even the final spear thrust into Jesus' side is carried out by a Roman soldier. So already we have the grand context of sacrifice and deliverance and the earthier context of meeting legal requirements and avoiding the 24-hour sight and smell of a crucified corpse. But all of these are focused in the reality of a Roman soldier who has control over Jesus' body as surely as Rome had complete control over the land of Israel. Already we have themes of politics, personal passion, and providential purpose all converging at this moment.

And then the next strand to weave is the resonance of these events in Israel's scriptures. Most obviously we recall the words concerning the suffering servant in Isaiah chapter 53 – 'He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; ... and by his wounds we are healed.' But more subtly we might reflect on the Greek word for 'side,' which is sometimes translated 'rib.' It appears only here in the New Testament and only once in the Greek version of the Old Testament. But that single place is very interesting. It's the moment in Genesis chapter 2 where God takes the side (or rib) of Adam and shapes it into a woman. The creation of Eve in Genesis chapter 2 represents not just the creation of woman, but the creation of society, of diversity, of the whole idea that human beings can share and give and pass on life to one another. So what we've got in this piercing of Jesus' side with the spear is not just the fulfilment the prophecy of the suffering servant,

but also an idea that what comes out of Jesus may be the beginning of new life, a new society. When we recall Jesus' promise that from him will come streams of living water we begin to wonder if this is precisely what he was referring to.

And this invites the weaving of another strand, which we might call the significance of these events in the life of the church. What exactly is the meaning for the church of the account that out of Jesus at his death came water and blood? Water and blood... It's hard to avoid the most obvious connection of this event to the two central acts of the church's life: baptism and Eucharist. We've already seen that this moment on the cross is like Eve emerging out from the side of Adam, like a new birth – almost a new creation. Now it seems like this is like the birth of the church at the moment of Christ's death – and in its birth it's given the two sacraments that shape its life, the water of baptism and the blood of holy communion. Just a few verses earlier Jesus has commended his mother to the beloved disciple and the beloved disciple to his mother with the words 'Woman, here is your son,' and, 'Here is your mother.' So here at the cross we're witnessing the foundation of the church, with a new community, a new birth, and new sources of life.

And that brings us finally to the last strand in understanding what the piercing of Jesus' side and the blood and water are all about. I've talked a bit about blood and I've talked a bit about water. I want to talk a little about the word 'and.' John's quite fond of the word 'and.' In John chapter one we get word *and* flesh, grace *and* truth. In John chapter two we get water *and* wine. In John chapter three we get spirit *and* truth. Later we get resurrection *and* life. You get the idea. Here we get 'blood *and* water.'

I believe that 'and' is the clue to how we're to interpret Jesus' life and how to interpret Jesus' death. Remember what I said about what it's like to touch a dead body. You get the delicate intimacy of realising you are close to the vulnerability and fragility of another human being, maybe one you deeply loved. But you also get the shiver of awe that this is death, cold, numbing, unavoidable death, and it's as scary close up in flesh and blood as it is far away in the language of oblivion and judgement. Well I think we can take these twin feelings to this moment of the death of Jesus. There's water – there's the way Jesus' death gives life, gives hope, gives trust in the promises of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit. And yet there's also blood – there's pain, and horror, and brutality, and ugliness, and violence, and deep, deep fear. And John's account says '*at once* blood and water came out.' In other words they came out together. The cross is about water *and* blood.

And the same is true if we look back at Jesus' life through the lens of his cross. There's water – there's fountains of life, living water, healing, forgiveness, joy and gladness. But there's also blood – there's hostility, betrayal, hatred, pain, adversity, and finally what looks very much like defeat. On Good Friday it's easy to make one of two mistakes – to look just on the watery Jesus, who saved us from our sins and made everything right between us and God, or to look just on the bloody Jesus, who suffered in agony and at the last believed God had forsaken him. That's why the *and* is so important.

Which is why the last strand in understanding the water and the blood of Jesus' pierced side is the kind of life you and I are to live in faithfulness to the moment of Jesus' death. We could live a life that airbrushes out the blood, and just sees the water – a sunny life that insists everything always turns out for the best, that won't tolerate gloom in ourselves and chases it out of everyone else, that fits the Jesus story into a positive and upbeat outlook on the world. Or we could live a life that airbrushes out the water, and just sees the blood – a life of struggle, and anger, and bitterness, and a recognition that there really is hatred and enmity in the world and death comes to us all. But to follow the saviour from whose side at once came water *and* blood is to believe *both* that suffering and death are real *and* that Jesus' death and resurrection have transformed suffering and death so that they no longer have the last word. Because of the blood, what we see taking the place on the cross is terrifying: it's real human death. But because of the water, we can look upon it with hope, and not have to turn away our eyes in fear and despair. It's not the end of the story.

And so now that we've learned how to look at the glory and horror of the cross, look with me at the most agonising sight in your own life. Look with me at what you've brought about by your own foolishness, at what you can't put right for all your attempts to ignore it or deny it or distract from it or resolve it. Dare to look with me, this one most truthful day of the year, at what you dare not look at very often, the truth about yourself, your life, your love, your fear, your faith. And this one day look with the searing honesty brought about by Christ's blood and the unflinching courage brought about by Christ's water. Bring with you the tender intimacy of your own closeness to whatever it is and the profound awe of how it connects to the suffering of Christ. And dare to stay in that still place, a place of awe and intimacy, a place of water and blood, a place of grace and truth. This is the place of the *and*. In a couple of days we'll fling wide the doors and feel the joy of glory. But right now stay in the place of the *and*.

This *and* is the overlap between water and blood. It was a place the disciples couldn't occupy, which is why they scattered at this crucial moment and weren't around to witness the scene. They scattered because they wanted reality to be all water, and when they saw the blood, they turned to fear and despair. But the heart of being a Christian lies staying still right in this moment, where water and blood come out together. Being a Christian means remaining in the place where hope and suffering meet. This place, the place of water and blood, is the place where faith and fear overlap. It's maybe the most difficult place to be. But this is the place where the church was born. And this continues to be the place more than anywhere else where the church still belongs. The church is and always has been most truly itself not when soaring in success or when plunged in despair but when success and despair are mingled like water and blood. That's the place where we've gathered around. It's a place of conflict, horror, and agony, but also of new birth, new community, and new sources of life. This place has a name. It's called the foot of the cross.

4. Forsaken

Reading: Mark 15.33-37

Hundreds of years ago when I was a bachelor I was having a drink in a park with a girlfriend and we were locked into what I now look back on as one of our interminable disagreements. There was a band on stage close by and the lead vocalist was finishing her song. She looked hard at the drummer with the unforgettable words, 'No matter what you do-oo, ah only, ah only, ah only, ah only, ah only wanna be with you.' To which the drummer replied, 'Da-nah nah nah.' My female friend looked at me winsomely and said, 'Do you think they argue as well?' It was a sweet moment. (Although not enough to save the relationship.) But ever since then this song's been one of my favorites. It wasn't till maybe a decade later that I realised it expressed the essence of Good Friday, and the heart of the Christian faith.

The Gospel of Matthew begins with the angel's promise that the Messiah will be called Emmanuel – God *with* us. The Gospel ends with Jesus' promise to his disciples, 'Remember, I am *with* you always, to the end of the age.' In between we get Jesus' promise to the church, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there *with* them.'

The Gospel of Mark says Jesus 'appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be *with* him.' When the scribes and Pharisees criticise Jesus, they say, 'Why does he eat *with* tax collectors and sinners?' And when Jesus gets really fed up with the disciples, he says, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be *with* you?'

The Gospel of Luke begins with the angel saying to Mary, 'The Lord is *with* you;' when the father of the prodigal son is comforting the elder brother out in the field, he says, 'Son, you are always *with* me, and all that is mine is yours.' On the Emmaus road the disciples say to the risen Jesus, 'Stay *with* us.'

And, perhaps most significantly of all, the Gospel of John begins with the words, 'The Word was *with* God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning *with* God.' Most famously it goes on to say 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt *with* us.' Later, Jesus says, 'You always have the poor *with* you.' And on the night before he dies, Jesus says at supper, 'I am not alone because the Father is *with* me.'

In other words, if there is one word that sums up all four gospels, that word is '*with*.' Jesus' ministry, above all else, is about being *with* us, in pain and glory, in sorrow and in joy, in quiet and in conflict, in death and in life.

And that same '*with*' is even more evident when we turn to the relationship within the Godhead itself, the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is three, which means God is a perfect symmetry of *with*, three beings wholly present to one another, without envy, without misunderstanding, without irritation, without selfishness, without two ganging up against the third, without anger, without anxiety, without mistrust. So present to one another, so rapt in love, and cherishing, and mutuality, and devotion, that they seem to transcend *with* and become *in*.

That sense of so relishing and rejoicing in *with* that you long for and aspire to *in* is a yearning human beings know well. It's integral to sexual desire. For many people sexual desire is a longing to translate *with* into *in*, to intensify the joy of being in another's presence into a physical and spiritual experience of mutual indwelling. But sexual desire has complications and limitations. It's full of envy, misunderstanding, anxiety, and mistrust. So much sexual expression is a grasping at *in* that's not preceded, surrounded, accompanied, and followed by a profound and lasting *with*. Can there possibly be a kind of mutual indwelling that's beyond such human limitations?

The indwelling of the Trinity is exactly that. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are so *with* one another that it seems they are *in* one another. And, to the extent that they are *in* one another, we call God not three, but one. These three are so *with* that they are one, three persons in one

substance, always affirming one another's difference and distinctness in person and presence, but always bearing within one another the whole being of the other two persons. The Trinity is the perfect equilibrium of three persons so *with* that they are *in*, but *in* in such a way that they are still *with*.

Given this perfection of being, this intersection of being *with* and being *in*, the astonishing mystery is why the Trinity's life is not simply self-contained, but becomes open to creation, to fragile existence, to life, to human beings – to you and me. Surely the grasping, mistrustful, anxious and small-minded human spirit would ruin the perfection of the Trinity. Or could it possibly be that God's grace is more infectious than our folly? Could it possibly be that the mutual indwelling love of the Trinity could outlast and ultimately transform our human fragility and perversity? That's the dynamic behind the whole Bible, the whole of history, the whole gospel. If God's life opens up to us, will it destroy God – or transform us? And if it ultimately transforms *us*, how much will it cost *God*?

Today is the day that focuses this question more than any other. For Good Friday is the day we see the very heart of God and the very worst in ourselves. When I was 17 I went to hear a well-known evangelist speak at the big theatre in the town where I lived. I knew my sister had heard him and I remembered she'd said he was quite something. He preached what today we might call a Mel Gibson gospel. In other words he gave us the third-degree, gruesome, vivid, and unforgettable detail of the cross. In sweaty language and wincing imagery he described what the process of crucifixion did to the heart, the lungs, the rib cage, the wind-pipe, the face, the eyes, the cheeks, the hips, the feet, and the hands. When 45 minutes was up and he'd made our nails curl, and our stomachs wail, and our throats dry, and our eyes weep, he invited us all to come to the front and make a commitment. I didn't go. The next day I called my sister. She said, 'D'you feel guilty about not going forward?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'You shouldn't. You see, it's not the gospel. If you look in the Bible, the gospels tell us almost nothing about the physical details of the crucifixion. Jesus suffered terribly, don't get me wrong, but lots of people suffered then, some even worse than him, and lots of people have suffered since, and still do, some of them probably more so than he did. The gospel isn't about some contest of pain in which Jesus came out the winner. The gospel is not that Jesus physically suffered. It's that he was forsaken.'

Forsaken. Jesus' last words, in Mark's gospel, are, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' At first sight, this is simply the last in a chain of abandonments. The disciples flee, Peter denies, Judas betrays, now the Father forsakes. It's a litany of desertion. And there's something in this litany. Remember, as we saw at the beginning, if the crucial word in the gospel is *with*, then the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion are a heartless and wholesale dismantling of that *with*. Jesus is left *without* all those he worked so hard to be *with* – the disciples, the authorities, the poor – and all of them have not just disappeared, but actively deserted or betrayed him. Jesus is still *with* us, but we, at this most precious moment of all, are not *with* him.

But these abandonments are nothing compared to the one that really matters. The cross isn't just an extreme version of a generic human experience of being alone and in pain and unjustly punished and cruelly ridiculed. The cross is a unique event. It's not unique because of how much pain Jesus felt or how much love he'd previously expended. It's unique because the Holy Trinity is the utter presence of unalloyed *with*, and at the moment of Jesus' death, that *with* is, for a brief moment, and for the only instant in eternal history, lost.

We've seen that *with* is the very essence of God's being within the life of the Trinity, and the very essence of God's being towards us in Christ. And yet, at this unique moment, that *with* is obscured. Like the clouds coming across the sun, shrouding the earth in shadow, the essence of God, always three persons in perfect relationship, always God's life shaped to be *with* us – that essence is for a moment lost. This is the most poignant and terrifying moment in all history. The two things we think we can know for certain – that God is a Trinity of persons in perfect and eternal relationship, and that God is always present *with* us in Christ through the Spirit – these two certainties are, for a moment, taken away. The universe's deepest realities have become unhinged. The Son is not *with* the Father, even though he desperately wants to be. The Father is not *with* the Son, breaking our

whole notion of their eternal presence one with another. This is the most vivid picture of hell we could imagine: not just our being separated from God, but God being separated from God, God being out of God's own reach.

The cross is Jesus' ultimate demonstration of being *with* us – but in the cruellest irony of all time, it's the instant Jesus finds that neither we, nor the Father, are *with* him. Every aspect of being *not-with*, of being *with-out*, clusters together at this agonising moment. Jesus experiences the reality of human sin, because sin is fundamentally living *without* God. Jesus experiences the depth of suffering, because suffering is more than anything the condition of being *without* comfort. Jesus experiences the horror of death, because death is the word we give to being *without* all things – without breath, without connectedness, without consciousness, without a body. Jesus experiences the biggest alienation of all, the state of being *without* the Father, and thus being not-God – being, for this moment, without the *with* that is the essence of God.

And Jesus' words at this most terrifying moment are these. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' He's still talking to the Father, even at the moment of naming that the *with* has gone. He's still talking in intimate terms – calling the Father 'My God.' These words come out of the most profound level of trust, the most fathomless depth of *with* and *in*. It's sometimes pointed out that this is the first line of the Twenty-Second Psalm, and that the psalm as a whole is one of hope. But to suggest that really this cry from the cross is an elaborate word of triumph and trust, and that Jesus' recognition of abandonment is all part of a tidy plan, is simply to shield oneself from the unique horror and wonder of this moment. The most tantalising thing is that Jesus' last words are a question – a question that doesn't receive an answer. The question should rattle us to our bones.

The question shows us that Jesus has given everything that he is for the cause of being *with* us, for the cause of embracing us within the essence of God's being. He's given so much – even despite our determination to be *without* him. And yet he's given beyond our imagination, because for the sake of our being *with* the Father he has, for this moment, lost his own being *with* the Father. And the Father has longed so much to be *with* us that he has, for this moment, lost his being *with* the Son, which is the essence of his being.

These two astonishing discoveries, the Father's losing the Son for us, and the Son's losing the Father for us, rattle our bones because they make us wonder 'Is all then lost?' – not just for us, but even for God. Has the Trinity lost its identity for nothing? If we don't experience a shiver of this greatest of all horrors at this moment, then we haven't allowed ourselves truly to enter Good Friday. But this deepest of fears is what will find an answer in two days' time, when we find that neither sin, nor suffering, nor death, nor alienation has the last word. *With* is restored at Easter, and, on the day of Ascension, *with* has the last word.

Is our alienation from God really so profound that it pushes God to such lengths to reverse and heal it? We don't want to believe it. But here it is, in front of our eyes. That's what the cross is – our cowardice and cruelty confronted by God's wondrous love. Is being *with* us forever really worth God going to such lengths to secure? Now that is, perhaps, the most awesome question of all. It takes us to the heart of God's identity, and the heart of our own. Can we really believe God thought we were worth it? Are our paltry lives worth the Trinity setting aside the essence of its identity in order that we might be *with* God and incorporated into God's life forever?

At the central moment in history, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, has to choose between being with the Father or being with us. And he chooses us. At the same time the Father has to choose between letting the Son be with us or keeping the Son to himself. And he chooses to let the Son be with us. That's the choice on which our eternal destiny depends. That's the epicentre of the Christian faith, and our very definition of love.

Can you hear the distant strains of the simple words of the Holy Trinity, singing to you more passionately and fondly and sacrificially than you can ever have known? 'Ah only, ah only, ah only, ah only, ah only wanna be with you....' What are you singing back?

5. Mocked

Reading: Matthew 27.35-44

The film *Priest* introduces us to Fr Greg, a young and rather earnest Catholic priest, new to parish ministry. The film centres around two issues that torture and dominate his life. The first is that he's gay. Finding no legitimate outlet for this emerging part of his identity, he begins a secret relationship with a man he meets in a bar. The second is that he hears the confession of a teenage girl called Lisa. He learns that she is regularly being intimately abused by her father. Later the father comes to confession too, and the priest is horrified to realise that this man bears scarcely any remorse for what he is doing. The seal of the confessional means Fr Greg cannot communicate this information to anyone. But he struggles with that fact just as he wrestles with his own sexual identity. The power of his ability to pronounce or withhold forgiveness feels like nothing compared to his powerlessness to stop this terrible domestic tyranny.

The two traumas of his life come to a crisis at much the same time. He faces the humiliation of being arrested for behaving improperly with another man in a public place. He has the book thrown at him by his bishop, and is forced to leave the parish. Meanwhile the truth of Lisa's domestic ordeal suddenly comes to light. In a harrowing scene, Lisa's mother emerges from an angry crowd, and, squaring up to Fr Greg, with a tearful, bitter and unforgiving gaze, says to him 'You knew.' Fr Greg has no idea what to say. Lisa's mother, now in disbelief and with her fury momentarily diverted from her husband and focused on her fragile and despised priest, says, witheringly and vengefully, 'You *knew*.'

This is the church Jesus died for. A church with lots of rules designed to keep us just and make us holy. Sometimes those rules are such that, try as we might, we can't keep them. Other times those rules are ones the keeping of which opens us to bitterness, fury, and even hatred. The movie shows us both dimensions in the life of Fr Greg. Either way the church is exposed to public hatred and ridicule.

Public hatred and ridicule is the way the people of Jerusalem receive Jesus' crucifixion. Everything around the cross happens in threes. There've been three predictions of the passion earlier in the gospel. Then Jesus makes three predictions of who'll betray him – first Judas, then all the disciples, then Peter. Jesus prays three times in Gethsemane. Peter denies Jesus three times. After Jesus dies, three kinds of witnesses cluster around him: the soldiers, the women, and Joseph of Arimathea.

Here at the foot of the cross, there are three kinds of mockers. The first are the passers-by, who say, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' Then there are the chief priests, along with the scribes and elders, who say, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" Finally there are the bandits who are crucified with him who taunt him in the same way. This threefold taunting at the climax of Jesus' ministry echoes the threefold temptation at the outset of his ministry. In case there's any doubt of the connection, we get the same phrase used on both occasions – 'If you are the Son of God.' Both the devil and the mockers goad Jesus with his apparent inactivity. Surely a real divine being would offer fireworks and spectacle, not silent resignation? Come on Jesus, you can do better than this! How can you be the Messiah if you do nothing?

But the secret of the crucifixion scene is that there's many a true word spoken in jest. Between them this array of mockers gathered around Jesus succeed in summarising and affirming pretty much every truth the gospel seeks to communicate. Let's take them one by one.

The passers-by say, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days.' There's two ironies here. One is that this of course is exactly what Jesus is about to do – have his body

destroyed and rebuilt in three days. The other is that the temple seemed the most indomitable feature of Israel's life. It had been destroyed once upon a time and it had taken a hundred years to rebuild it. It had been severely damaged later and had taken two hundred years to restore the second time. By the time Matthew's Gospel was written, it had been destroyed a third and final time.... But Jesus was very much alive. The mockers take for granted that the temple is permanent and Jesus is transitory. It turns out it's the other way round.

The passers-by continue, 'Save yourself and us.' But Jesus has already said, 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' There's almost nothing the mockers can say that Jesus hasn't anticipated in his public ministry.

Both the passers-by and the temple authorities say 'If you are the Son of God,' and 'He said 'I am God's Son.'" But the ironic truth is, nowhere in the Gospel of Matthew does Jesus describe himself as the Son of God. The angel says it, the voice from the cloud says it, the centurion at the cross says it – but Jesus never says it. Somehow the mockers have intuited something Jesus has never said, and in trying to deride him they are in fact speaking a true word in jest.

Then the passers-by say, 'Come down from the cross.' But Jesus has already said, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' Once again, the mockers simply highlight the gospel Jesus has already proclaimed.

Of all the ironic statements at the foot of the cross, the most poignant are the words of the temple authorities, who say, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself.' This perfectly sums up the story the gospels tell. It's a double irony because the authorities think the joke's on Jesus, and that they're identifying the irony that Jesus can't do for himself what he can do for others. But meanwhile what they *can't* see is that the joke is finally on them, because first of all they've been drawn into identifying that Jesus has *indeed* saved others, a major acknowledgement for them to make, and secondly that there's something unique about Jesus that makes both him and his suffering different from others. And that pretty much sums up the gospel. Jesus saves us but at terrible cost to himself.

When you look at your life, whether you're a religious authority, a convicted criminal, or a passer-by, what do you see? Do you see a mockery of Jesus? That's what Fr Greg saw in the film. He saw a bunch of well-intentioned rules, designed to guide people on the right path and restore them when they went astray. But the rules designed to keep him on the path he found he couldn't keep, and the rules designed to restore his parishioners when they strayed seemed to make him powerless when he most needed strength. Lisa's mother pointed her finger at him when he was down, with all the uninhibited hatred the mockers aimed at Jesus on the cross. 'For a moment there I almost trusted you, I almost believed in you, you useless, pretentious, hypocritical creep.'

Our lives are indeed a perpetual mockery of Jesus. Our work is a parody of the self-sacrificial other-centred example of our Lord. Our relationships are a parody of the mutual-indwelling abiding trust of the Trinity. Our discipleship walk is a parody of the disciplined fraternal correction and compassionate forbearance Jesus commends. Our mission is a parody of humble and constant presence among the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner. Our congregational life is more like a squabble between self-righteous elder brothers than a welcome reception for prodigal sons. We are constantly at the foot of the cross, mocking the suffering Jesus.

But here's the irony. The more we mock, the truer Jesus becomes. The worse we fail, the greater grows our admiration and wonder at Jesus. The more pitiful our attempts to be faithful, the more necessary is our need for grace. The more we shout and scream at Jesus to come down from the cross, the more essential it is that he hangs there. The more we deride him and taunt him to save himself, the more we need him to save us. The more the church fails, the more we highlight the truth and urgent necessity of Jesus' person and message.

Holy Week contains two great miracles. One is obvious, the one that God did – the miracle of resurrection. The other is more subtle, and it comes right at this moment. It is the miracle of what

Jesus *didn't* do. He didn't come down from the cross. He stayed there. He outlasted our hatred and cruelty and enmity. After everything we could throw at him, physically and verbally, he was still there. His endurance demonstrated the love that will never let us go. His perseverance showed that nothing can separate us from the love of God. For ever after we can connect to God, not through our striving, but through Jesus' suffering, not through our longing, but through his lingering, not through our achieving, but through his abiding.

It's not the Jesus we want. We want the Jesus that comes down from the cross, the Jesus that rights wrong, ends pain, corrects injustice, sends the wicked away empty, sets the record straight and makes all well with the world. We want answers, we want solutions, we want a technological Jesus who fixes the problems. And we want those problems fixed now. We want the Jesus that comes down from the cross. This Jesus will not come down from the cross. This Jesus bears all things, endures all things, and never ends... This is not the God we want.

But it's the God we *need*. Oh how badly we need that God! Answers, explanations, solutions – they don't give us what we fundamentally need in the face of suffering and sin. What we need is love. What we need is a wondrous love through all eternity. Sure, what we *do* is show our inability to express that love. So we wash our hands like Pilate or run away like the disciples or lose patience like Judas or settle it with a sword like Peter. And so all the more what we *need* is a love that abides, that perseveres, that remains present to us, however bad things are, for however long it takes. What we *need* is a love that sticks around, a love that stays put, a love that hangs on. That's what the cross is. A love that hangs on.

I've taken countless funerals in working-class communities, and spent many hours trying to extract from mourners nuggets of wisdom and insight to give a personal touch to a funeral sermon. Of all those cameos, the most perennial is 'He was always there for you.' I've long pondered this ubiquitous phrase. Does it mean he was never out when you called? Does it mean simply you can't imagine life without him? I've come to the conclusion that it means what mattered was this man's presence, his wordless permanence, his abiding touch. 'He was always there for you.' I used to mock this phrase as a banal cliché that had no purchase in any specific personal quality or characteristic. But I've come to understand that this invariable description of the deeply mourned, 'He was always there for you,' is none other than a description of the crucified God. We look at Jesus on the cross, and we say to one another, 'He's always there... for *you*.'

The end of the film *Priest* contains the most moving scene I've witnessed in the cinema. Fr Greg returns to the parish after his time of humiliation and exile. The anger and hatred still smoulders in the neighbourhood and the parish. Lisa's mother's incandescent words, '*You knew*,' are still ringing in his and our ears. Lisa hasn't been seen in the church since the truth about her household came to light. The senior priest, Fr Matthew, implores the congregation to receive Fr Greg back as their father in God. When it comes to receiving communion there are two stations for taking the bread, one from Fr Matthew, the other from Fr Greg. Every single worshiper at the service lines up to receive from Fr Matthew. Fr Greg stands alone, the body of Christ in his hands, totally shunned and visibly humiliated by the whole congregation. Seconds tick by and his isolation is ... crucifying. Somehow he finds the courage and defiance to continue to stand alone – to hang in there. And then slowly but purposefully one solitary figure shuffles forward and stands before him to receive communion. It's Lisa.

Their eyes meet as she receives the communion bread. Her eyes say, 'I know that you knew about my dad. But I know that you couldn't do anything about it. I understand your present powerlessness. I know it's because you believe in a greater power. You show me that by your courage in being present here right now. You're being crucified, but you're showing us a love that will not let us go.'

That's the irony of the cross. If Jesus had saved himself, he couldn't have saved us. His powerlessness shows us the endurance of God. Jesus hangs on the cross to show us the love that hangs on. Hang on to that love. It will never let you go.