

The Cross

Gathering

Introduction

We gather on this Good Friday at the foot of the cross
which calls us on, not in shame, not in fear
but more deeply into the costly journey towards life.

There is wounding,
there is weeping.

In Jesus Christ, God is not separated from that.

D. McRae-McMahon



Call to Worship

The prophet Isaiah said:

He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held no account of him.

Isaiah 53:3

What makes this day good?

If you have ever believed that love inevitably leads to betrayal,
this day says it doesn't.

If you have ever believed that some people are unlovable, irredeemable,
this day says they aren't.

If you have ever believed that there is a limit to forgiveness,
this day says there isn't.

If you have ever believed you aren't worth saving,
this day says you are.

If you have ever believed that you don't deserve freedom,
this day says you do.

If you have ever believed that fear, anger, hate and despair will always win,
this day says they won't.

And this day is good for you.

Cheryl Lawrie, Hold This Space Pocket Liturgies, 2008, Proost, p.118-9

Readings and Reflection

God in Christ,
you travel with us in faith towards the hard places in our souls.
What waits within our hidden places?
Sometimes, Jesus the Christ, we never fully know.
We dread to search our souls,
in case we cannot bear to touch the wounds which lie there,
and the betrayals of our hopes,
or the grieving we cannot bring ourselves to enter.
Stay with us as we stay with you, we pray. Amen.

Betrayed and Abandoned

Reading: John 18:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. ²Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. ³So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ⁴Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' ⁵They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. ⁶When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they stepped back and fell to the ground. ⁷Again he asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' ⁸Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.' ⁹This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken, 'I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.' ¹⁰Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. ¹¹Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?'

Betrayal comes in disguise - here, in the kiss of a friend.

A friend's betrayal - perhaps the deepest hurt of all.

When we betray another's trust, it hurts us all.

When have we betrayed another either through our words or actions,
or in our silence?

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

Accused and Denied

Reading: John 18:12-27

¹² So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. ¹³First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. ¹⁴Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, ¹⁶but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷The woman said to Peter, 'You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?' He said, 'I am not.' ¹⁸Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing round it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

¹⁹ Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. ²⁰Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. ²¹Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.' ²²When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?' ²³Jesus answered, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?' ²⁴Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, 'You are not also one of his disciples, are you?' He denied it and said, 'I am not.' ²⁶One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, 'Did I not see you in the garden with him?' ²⁷Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

Starkly visible in our world are the voices of religion when it betrays God and leads people into judgment of others;
words and acts of violence against people who are different coming from entrenched positions of privilege;
the sounds of the power of money,
and of greed beyond description;
the exploitation of the powerless
and temptations to endless consumption;
the shrieks of pain and fear in war and violence,
amid the threatening sounds of military action pretending to be the agents of peace.
Whether spoken or silent, our complicity...

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.
Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

Traded

Reading: John 18:28-40

²⁸ Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' ³⁰They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' ³¹Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' ³²(This was to fulfil what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)
³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' ³⁴Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' ³⁵Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' ³⁶Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' ³⁷Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' ³⁸Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'
After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, 'I find no case against him. ³⁹But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' ⁴⁰They shouted in reply, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Powerful people blame each other,
they accuse others when they themselves are threatened.
Truth becomes a by-line.
Why worry about what is true or right, when a bargain can be done?
We, too, get too easily drawn into questionable politics where truth seems no longer relevant.

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.
Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

Mocked

Reading: John 19:1-6

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ²And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. ⁴Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I

am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.’ ⁵So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, ‘Here is the man!’ ⁶When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.’

It is easy to mock when we do not understand.
It is easy to mock when someone is different.
It is easy to mock when they are not talking about me.
It is easy to mock when we are part of a crowd.

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.
Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

Questioned

Reading: John 19:7-16

⁷The Jews answered him, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.’

⁸ Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. ⁹He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, ‘Where are you from?’ But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰Pilate therefore said to him, ‘Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?’ ¹¹Jesus answered him, ‘You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.’ ¹²From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, ‘If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.’

¹³ When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge’s bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. ¹⁴Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, ‘Here is your King!’ ¹⁵They cried out, ‘Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!’ Pilate asked them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but the emperor.’ ¹⁶Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

Ahh “the law” - we’ll apply it when it suits us,
and we will avoid it to protect ourselves.
With power comes responsibility.
Loud voices apply pressure.
When it all becomes too hard, it is easy, once again, to give in to the crowd.

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.
Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

Crucified

Reading: John 19:17-22

So they took Jesus; ¹⁷and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. ¹⁸There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. ¹⁹Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’ ²⁰Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, ‘Do not write, “The King of the Jews”, but, “This man said, I am King of the Jews.”’ ²²Pilate answered, ‘What I have written I have written.’

And so Jesus carries his cross.
He is stripped.
And is lifted up.
For all to see.
"The King of the Jews".

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.
Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

Gambled

Reading: John 19:23-25a

²³When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. ²⁴So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.' This was to fulfil what the scripture says, 'They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.'
²⁵And that is what the soldiers did.

What possessions do we value or treasure?
How often do we desire something that someone else has?
We will also throw the dice when there is something to be gained.

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.
Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

Loved

Reading: John 19:25b-27

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

The women remain around him.
He entrusts his mother into the care of another.
He loves and is loved.

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.
Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

Death

Reading: John 19:28-30

²⁸ After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' ²⁹A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. ³⁰When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

As we find the courage to enter the darkness,
the cross rises before us.
It is hard to watch but we are compelled to look at this cross of human deadliness.
Jesus the Christ has moved into all human life.
We are never, ever, left alone.

Extinguish the Candle

This candle burns during our services to remind us of the presence of God and the Christ who is the light of the world. Today is the only day when that candle is extinguished deliberately to remind us that Jesus died our death, his life was given up. The disciples were alone...

Peace

May the peace of Christ be with you all.
And also with you.

Reflection

It is never easy to place ourselves in the midst of this part of Jesus' story. Here we are confronted with a violent collision of religious, political and military powers. It is physically violent - you only need to watch Mel Gibson's interpretation in the movie, *The Passion* to see that. But it is also violent in terms of its social outcomes that radiate from this event. Jesus will not be the last to be executed by the Romans or governments through the ages for proclaiming freedom for the captive and sight for the blind.

A week or so ago, I encouraged you to try and enter this story without the explanations that often go with it - to try and simply hear for yourself what is going on as the events unfold. There are volumes written about what this all means - not the least, beginning with our own New Testament writings. Even the earliest written accounts of Jesus' death, in Paul's writings and from the gospel writers, are all beginning to place their understanding into the record.

I want to suggest that in its rawest form, this story is about the collision of powers - the collision of God's dream for us and the powers of the world that need to keep control and maintain the sense of order that keeps them in the power they have enshrined.

And in this story, at this point, the powers of the world have won.

The one who proclaimed another way, who spoke about a God who does not condemn but embraces, a God who loves all of creation so much that he sent Jesus to remind us what that loves looks like in human, fleshly form. And it cost him his life.

And yet - this is the God who meets betrayal with grace;

this is the God who does not retaliate to the mocking;

this is the God who meets power with love;

this is the God who meets violence with forgiveness.

The reality is that this Jesus shows us how costly it can be, when the vision of God's realm that we proclaim, clashes with the carefully constructed orders of power in our religious, economic, political and social systems. The result can be catastrophic.

It is also hard for us to speak about death - partly because, like the early followers of Jesus, we are no closer to understanding what lies beyond our last breath. So our own death and that of our loved ones remains shrouded in silence, fear and pain.

The followers of Jesus, then, are left wondering, what were the past years all about? This Jesus, who promised them the wonders of God's kingdom, who healed and fed and embraced and preached; this Jesus was now hanging from a Roman cross.

Is this where it ends?

As the followers of Jesus who know the answer to that question is a resounding, "no!", we can sit carefully in the silence and waiting of today and tomorrow.

We can enter this liminal space, the space in between, and allow God's Spirit to move in our hearts and minds, revealing to us those parts of us that need to die, to be released, to be left behind.

We can sit with the unknowns and the unknowing.

We can offer comfort to those who mourn.
We can offer hope to people who feel like hope has abandoned them.
We can embrace the darkness, sit in the silence.
And we can sing words of comfort - to ourselves, to one another...

Buried / Cherished

Reading: John 19:31-42

³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. ³²Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

³⁴Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. ³⁵(He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) ³⁶These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.' ³⁷And again another passage of scripture says, 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced.'

³⁸ After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

And so we gently bind the wounds of living.
We cover our pain, our grieving, our unforgiven failures - with the love of Christ.
We cover the injustices and rejections of the world.
We cover the violence of the world.
We cover the struggling life of our planet - with the love of the Christ.

Like the friends of Jesus in his day,
we will gently cherish the Christ.
We will lay down the difficulties of life.
We bring these burdens to this, the Body of Christ,
for healing, comfort, forgiveness, and new life in the future.
We will place it into the tomb of love and care.

Silence

Meditation

Let's pray...

*So here we are,
standing where we never thought we could,
at the foot of death,
crushed under the fickleness of humanity.
The heart of heaven has stopped.*

*All that hope,
the dreams of peace,
the promises of justice you so burned with,
snuffed out,
with a few nails and a cross beam.*

O Jesus,
what do we do now?
What is there left to do? [Silence]

*It is a cold place
where the breath of heaven stops.
It is a frightening place.
It is a lonely place.*

*This is what the world does,
to love,
and then turns its back,
rubbing its hands,
finished with its final enemy.*

O Jesus,
what do we do now?
What is there left to do? [Silence]

*The Saviour has died,
and the future can seem lost,
out of our grasp.*

O Jesus,
what do we do now?
What is there left to do? [Silence]

*What do we do now?
We wait beyond eternity...
We hope beyond every hope we've ever had...
We trust beyond belief...
in a God who cannot leave it here. Amen.*

Affirmation of Faith

***We believe in God who always surprises us,
who creates life from death,
who brings good out of evil,
who leads us from despair to hope.***

***We believe in God who is faithful to us,
who shows mercy when we run away,
who shows patience when we deny the truth,
who gives reconciling love when we betray.***

***We believe in Christ Jesus who lived and died as one of us,
to take the fear out of living and dying,
to open our eyes to death, within us and around us,
and open our hearts to new ways of living.***

***We believe in God who forgives us,
who sets us free from past grief and failure
and calls us into a new day.***

Dorothy McRae-McMahon

*Rev Kath Merrifield
2 April 2021*