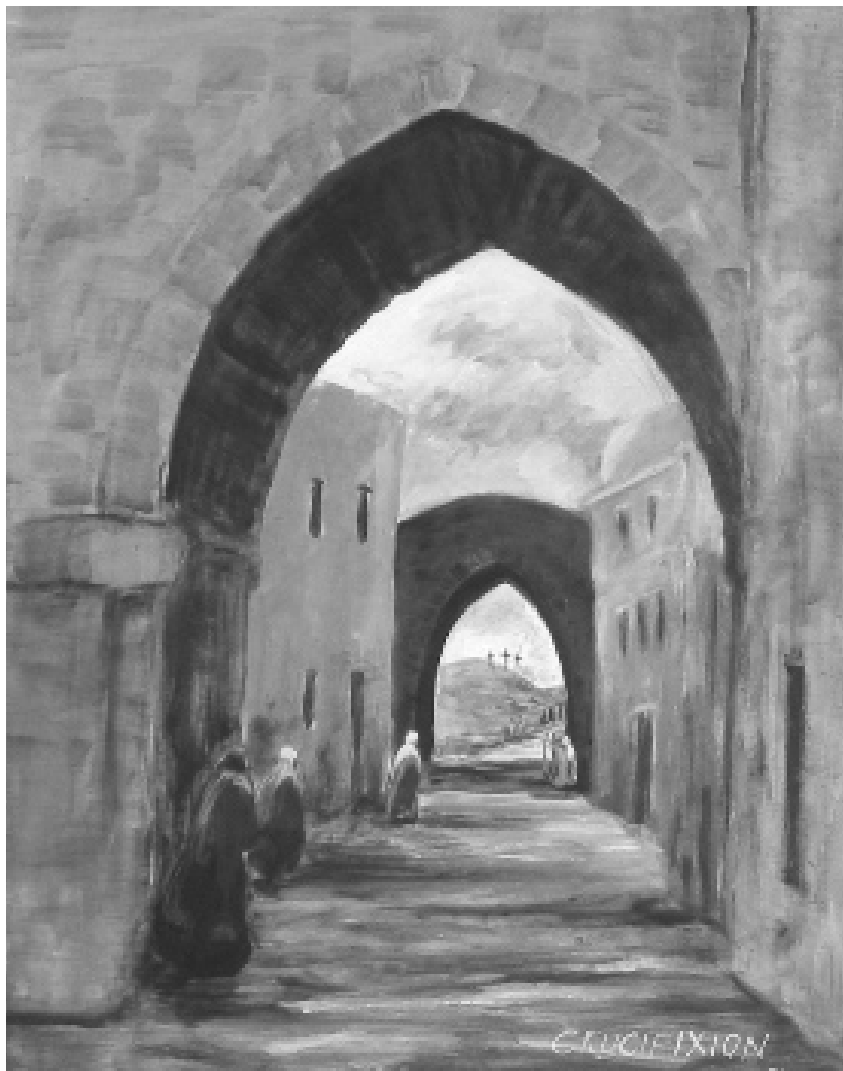


Meditations on The Seven Words from the Cross



Crucifixion by Eleonore Setterfield

Good Friday Service 2009

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do

The pain is terrible, I feel the muscles come apart, the tendons tear, breath choke, heart batter. And yet for a moment the scene out there is frozen clear as a picture. I see ordinary people in an ordinary event – brutal but part of everyday life. Two men are nailing up one of my fellow prisoners; someone takes the opportunity to punch the other in the face; a woman there is eating an apple.

They do know what they are doing.

You Sadducee watching in the background there – you know what you are doing. You know how you manipulated my arrest, the kangaroo court, the beatings and now this slow execution. Yes, I know you are defending your beliefs and culture – just as PW Botha defended his, against communism – with equal righteousness, and brutality.

And you, Pilate – you know what you did. You sacrificed me to avoid a messy confrontation. Yes, I know you judged it acceptable – just like Bush did in Iraq, or Sharon, the Israeli leader in the Palestinian conflict – who judged it acceptable to sacrifice a few innocent children in the pursuit of their version of a greater peace.

You soldiers know what you are doing, when you slash and cut and curse. Of course you are doing what you are told to do, in service of your country – just like Nazi exterminators

or apartheid hitmen.

You ordinary folk who spat at me and laughed, who I see now hurling insults and eggs at my companions, you know what you are doing. And of course it's understandable because we three are outsiders – crooked, corrupted non-people, not deserving of any mercy – like foreigners in xenophobic attacks. And you there simply watching – why should you get involved? It's none of your business, really.

They all know exactly what they are doing but they cannot really see it. O, the sadness of it. The blinded hearts.

Blinded by the quest for power – backed up by self righteousness and respectable society. Blinded by fear – of losing a job, of being ostracised, of being dragged into something really uncomfortable. Blinded by bigotry, that makes others inferior, unworthy, dangerous non-people. Blinded by not wanting to see, by avoiding things that disrupt the security of normal life.

Father, forgive them this blindedness, this tragic, human not-knowing. Free them of the fear, defensiveness, resentment, suspicion, paranoia, jealousy, envy that obstruct their vision so they can start again, fresh as the day they were born – recognise their brothers and sisters, be recognised, wonder at each other.



Julian Cooke

I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise

Paradise is a beautiful image of oneness and fulfilment, of a place where we are known and loved, and live in harmony with the creatures and the environment around us. It is a memory of bliss we have lost, and a promise of the new earth and of the joy of resurrection life.

But I would like to see it in more immediate terms: in terms of acceptance and relationship, as opposed to rejection.

Crucifixion is an image of the most extreme rejection, but the rejected man's appeal draws the astonishing answer, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise'. That extravagantly loving response opens Paradise for the condemned man.

Speaking of condemned criminals, my neighbour, Pearl, lived near Victor Verster prison. Her husband was Chaplain there, and when the murderers and rapists and prostitutes completed their prison terms, some of them had been rejected by their families, and had nowhere to go, so Willy would say to them, 'Well, come to us just for the night.' So they came, and they stayed, and Pearl cooked for everybody, and cleaned up after everybody and her husband led a bible study every evening, and fetched them from the lock-up because every time they got money they rushed off to get drunk. He brought them back again and patched them up. Through all this Pearl and Willy were quite clear that God enabled them to love these people.

One day Pearl, utterly exhausted, was kneeling at the communion rail. She said to God, 'Lord, my home is

just a doss house for murderers and prostitutes.' And she distinctly heard the answer, 'That's exactly what I want it to be!'

Obviously, not all of us are going to be able to go in boots and all to the extent of welcoming a houseful of difficult characters, but nevertheless, that sense of absolutely joyful blessing is poured out over us for quite simple gestures of greeting and affirming and respecting the people who feel so rejected. Love has the power to restore the loveliness lost to our world. Hopkins says, 'There lives the dearest freshness deep down things'. As we reach out in trust God floods and transforms our relationships.

Louise Cull



Mother, there is your son. There is your mother.

Mary stood watching her son die. She was there for him, when he needed her most. That's the love of a mother. But she was not alone. Her sister, her friends held *her* up so that she could be there to comfort Christ in a way that only a mother can.

That scene plays out thousands of times across South Africa every week, as groups of women hold vigils around the mats of the dead and dying – mothers watching their children die. Some onlookers speak of their stoicism, but they are wrong. There is no stoicism, but deep grief only made bearable because it is shared. No flowers. No condolence cards.

Only *being* there, sharing the pain. Are *you* there?

But where was Joseph? We don't know. We cannot judge. As John took Mary into his home after Jesus' death, it is likely that Joseph had already died. Jesus must have ached for his father on earth. At least, that's what I think as I listen to those who have grown up without a father, or whose father has been absent at critical times in their lives.

As I've spoken with hundreds of young people over the past ten years, I've been struck by the immense sense of loss most of them

have – either not knowing who their father is or being shunned by him because he has another woman and another child. In southern Africa, many men have children – but not so many are fathers. To stop Aids, to fight crime, to combat violence, we

need fathers. Are *you* a father?

Jesus lived in a community without walls between houses, much like the living spaces of poorer people in our country today. The wealthier we become, the higher we build the walls to protect that which we value,

both our goods and our immediate families.

There are now almost two million children and teenagers who have lost one or both parents. There are thousands of older people bereft of their children. Mother, is that *your* son? Father, is that *your* daughter? Son,

is that *your* mother? Daughter, is that *your* father? Will you take them into *your* home?

“across South Africa every week ... groups of women hold vigils around the mats of the dead and dying ... No flowers. No condolence cards. Only being there, sharing the pain”

“But where was Joseph?”

David Harrison

My God, my God,

When we experience suffering, the question 'Why' also comes to our lips. Why is God absent, inactive, not changing things? Does God not care?

When we confront pain and injustice; when the power in our world falls into corrupt hands; when thousands suffer daily in dehumanising poverty; when people exploit, terrorise and damage both others and the wider creation; when our own lives seem to fall out of our control into chaos and despair we too can feel forsaken, bereft of a God of loving power who can change things.

In these situations, we want a God who can give us a happy ending, a God who is a winner not a loser, a success not a failure, a leader not a servant. We want an Old Testament Jehovah God who crushes the oppressor, punishes the guilty, lifts up the righteous and shows that his power is greater than others.

Yet, instead we are confronted by a hidden God – an absent God – a God whose only manifestation is in his powerless, humiliated Son dying on a cross with an unanswered question on his lips. This is not the kind of God we want to encounter, but it is the one we get.

Instead of words of hope, forgiveness, compassion or of peace we hear words of desolation, of lament, a cry

for deliverance that goes unanswered. A man whose life and teachings had centred on a sense of God's presence faces in his final moments the seeming absence of all he has believed in as he is cursed and rejected as a blasphemer, hanging on a tree. As a human cry, it touches us. It reminds us of our own powerlessness, vulnerability, mortality. Yet many other humans have cried out in this way through history.

The unique claim made by Christians is not the humanity of Jesus, but – in a paradoxical way – the humanity of God. On the cross, the divine presence, the creator of all, experiences suffering, loneliness, humiliation, rejection and powerlessness.

On Good Friday it is not just the crucifixion of Jesus that we remember but the crucifixion of God. A God who forsakes, maybe not us, but our definitions of him as powerful, mighty, successful and in control. But yet, just at the moment where God seems most absent, a new way of seeing

God opens up – as the one who suffers with us, cries out with us and calls us to the hard path of powerlessness, vulnerability, failure and even death.

'Only a suffering God can help,' says Dietrich Bonhoeffer surveying the Holocaust. 'The cross requires a revolution in our concept of God,' says Jürgen Moltmann, imprisoned in a camp. Maybe resurrection newness begins not three days from

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why have you forsaken me?

now on Easter Sunday but right here, on Good Friday – when our human hope that our powerful God will protect, intervene, save us from suffering is itself put to death, enabling the seeds of a different hope to form. Maybe we are sometimes too quick to jump forwards to Easter Sunday, to the happy ending we want as a way of re-clothing God more comfortably in the garments of power.

The message of the cross is hard.

God's act of divine solidarity with all who suffer lays down a challenge to us to do the same. If we seek to bypass our suffering world in an act of compromise with the illusions of power that saturate our world, we also bypass the very crucified God that we remember here today.

Selina Palm



I thirst

Is it possible that He who claimed to be living water ... Is it possible that He who said, 'Come unto Me and drink ...'

Is it possible that He who told the Samaritan woman that He had water she knew nothing about ... Is it possible that this Man could mouth the words, 'I thirst?'

And because He did, the incarnation message of Christmas is voiced in this human cry of Good Friday. Jesus the divine Creator of life is now subject to the creation and the creature's basic needs. Yes, Jesus, the Son of God, actually needed water. For six hours He hung from a calloused cross on a hot barren hill beneath a darkened middle-eastern sky.

He was bleeding profusely and losing vital body fluids. What is more, without sleep the night before, without food or drink, He had been tortured, teased and tried before a tribunal before the crucifixion had even begun. His lips were parched. His tongue swollen as He managed to blurt out His human thirst ... A thirst that spoke of His total identification with all our needs, drives, hopes and sufferings.

Jesus' physical thirst only symbolised the deeper thirsts that every human being who has ever lived has felt: the thirst for companionship, the thirst for acceptance, the thirst for immortality, the thirst for end to suffering, and most important the thirst for relationship with God.

Augustine said it centuries ago: 'Thou has made me for thyself, O God. And I am restless till I rest in Thee.' But the Psalmist said it long before Augustine: 'As the deer pants for flowing streams, so thirsts my soul for Thee, O God.'

A restlessness, a panting, a thirst to end all thirsts, a thirst no water, no wine, no gall could ever quench. And for once Jesus knew that desire of all ages himself.

As the bearer of all sin of all people of all time, Jesus knew the separation and desperation that all creation has known apart from God. And He cried, 'I thirst.'

The Baby of Bethlehem. The Christ of the Cross knows the creature's cage. He's acquainted with our pain, our pressures, our panic our plight apart from the Father.

And because He's been there, He knows how to quench our thirst.

Greg Asimakoupoulos



It is finished

In an article of a medical journal we read: 'Human beings do not die in a theatrical way; instead of 'the last words' they speak as usual' (Jörg Baur). A medical comment on the banality of our own dying. Is it true? What will our last words be? Will we speak as usual?

What are Jesus' last words in John's Gospel? He does not speak as usual, especially not like someone who is experiencing what Josephus, a first century historian, described as 'the most wretched of death', reserved by the Romans for slaves accused of robbery and rebellion, an execution meant to hurt as much as possible (Bill Loader).

The one finished off by the Romans in the most cruel manner speaks the most unusual words: 'It is finished' – words from the lips of Jesus which convey an astonishing mood of victory and triumph.

It fits John's portrayal of Jesus: Jesus comes across as assured and confident throughout. 'There is none of the brokenness of Gethsemane and the cry of despair we find in Mark' (Bill Loader). Jesus is painted as an icon of faith. 'It is accomplished.' But what is accomplished?

It is often linked to atonement models as if Jesus is saying: I have made the sacrifice of my body which I came to make. This would certainly be the way the author of Hebrews would read it (10:5-6), but it is not John's emphasis (Bill Loader). The same Greek word for 'to accomplish' is used in John 4:34 where Jesus speaks about doing 'the

will of him who sent me until I have completed his work.' And in John 17:4 Jesus emphasises: 'I have glorified you on earth by completing the work which you gave me to do.' In John's world of thought it means: Jesus has completed the task given to him by God, which is making the Father's love known by offering light and life and truth to people.

The work is complete. But why at this very moment? Because now love is revealed even in the face of extreme suffering, injustice and hatred. Can there be any greater love?

That is why Paul can write to the Romans in chapter five: Christ loved us when we were still sinners (enemies!).

And it was at that moment when God's love was most fully revealed that also the world's inability to receive

and embrace such love was most fully shown.

I started off by saying that 'Human beings do not die in a theatrical way; instead of 'the last words' they speak as usual.'

But does it matter, that at our death-bed we speak as usual? If 'it is accomplished', if God's love has been fully revealed then my last words do not have to offer any new insight, wisdom or truth. If 'it is accomplished' then there is nothing I have to add, to complete or to finish. I can speak as usual, I can clothe and hide myself in Christ and know that whatever is left undone, whatever is left unresolved, whatever is but a life of fragments, I can offer it to Christ, for in his life and death my life and death are embraced, resolved, made whole and finished!

Robert Steiner

"when God's love was most fully revealed ... the world's inability to embrace such love was most fully shown"

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit

These final recorded words, probably spoken in barely a whisper, bring us along with those standing around the cross into the final moments of Jesus' life – the moment of release, of finally letting go. These words show us once again how utterly and completely human Jesus is. For we do not want to die and there is perhaps for Jesus even at this point a hope against all hope that there might be some miraculous intervention – could this cup of anguish and death not pass me by?

Those of you who have accompanied a loved one through the final stages of death may have witnessed this moment, the final moment of letting go of all that is and all that could and should have been. Sylvia Poss in her book *Towards Death with Dignity* writes about this as one of the steps towards death. This is the step of 'giving over' – the relinquishing process that follows on from the decision to let death happen. It is not giving up, which denotes failure, hopelessness and resignation. It is rather a proactive, courageous act on the part of the dying person to give over to a force beyond themselves. This is the moment when the will to live – which is our driving force from our day of birth – is reversed and we give in to the inevitability of death.

With these words Jesus places himself completely into his Father's hands.

These are in fact words that most likely come to Jesus from the Psalmist – where the Psalmist cries out in grief and anguish but ultimately gives himself over to God.

What is there for us in these words of Jesus and the Psalmist before him?

“These words show us once again how utterly and completely human Jesus is”

Is there anything for us as we face our end – whether it be death or whether it be some other

kind of end? Can we find a reference point, an anchor for ourselves in these words as we face a world, a country where so much seems to have gone so wrong? Counter to our own inclination, Jesus is not 'giving up' in frustration and despair. Neither is this the helpless shrug of resignation when we know we could have done so much more but did not.

May these final words of Jesus

“the will to live ... is reversed and we give in to the inevitability of death”

encourage us in our struggle against powers which seek to overtake us. Let us like Jesus, and so many

witnesses who have gone before us – and I think of my own father – choose the right battles, commit ourselves to being in the right place, at the right time, working with deep compassion and conviction for what is right – without regret, without guilt. Then when death is about to overtake us, we too like Jesus, like the Psalmist, can cry out, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.'

Suellen Shay



Rondebosch United Church
Belmont Road
Rondebosch