

In these Vigil hours we have rehearsed and re-told the story of the sufferings and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Hopefully we have glimpsed in passing at experiences and events that resonate with our contemporary world, and are not merely part of its history.

Immense progress has been made in the past two centuries of scientific and technological innovation, making us safer, healthier, more prosperous, better travelled and educated than ever before in history. An improved world for some, though not for all. Two thirds of the planet still lives in deprivation and poverty, and many of the one third possess quadruple the resources needed for a good life. Progress has been achieved at the cost of possibly irreversible damage to our environment, endangering survival of our species. These are issues of huge moral and spiritual concern, yet we haven't touched upon them. We've focussed entirely on one man's journey through betrayal, rejection, loneliness, doubt, exhaustion and pain into death's embrace. We've looked at people around him and the different parts they played, great or small, in bringing him to his untimely, unjust end. Now in the conclusion of this final hour our attention focusses on Jesus hanging on the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem, in a place of disgrace, shame and punishment. Yet this is nothing like retreat into solemn commemoration of a fallen hero.

At every stage we have been challenged to see how his story could equally happen today, how the same tragedy is still being played out in the setting of the modern world, with all its sophistications and achievements – any why? Because despite the progress made by humankind, despite knowledge and education, we are little different over two millennia, in essential characteristics of our being. Our response to life faced with uncertainty or change is governed by the same basic forces.

Jesus' ministry for those three years through Palestine expressed in his teaching and deeds a new way of thinking about God, and what it means to be human. In a world of cruelty, violence, injustice and fear, Jesus became a sign of hope, of healing and joyous freedom which attracted crowds to him. He was also a sign of contradiction to all who lived by fear, prejudice, faith in violence, loving power, rather than the power of love. Jesus rebuked religious hypocrisy in all its forms, and exhorted all who would listen, to enter a new world in which all people equally regarded themselves and treated each other as children of God - the God of compassion, goodness and mercy.

Jesus showed what it meant to live only by loving trust in God. In the end, his challenge to established ways provoked great anxiety in people. Those who had been attracted to him turned against him, or driven by self preservation, abandoned him to his violent fate.

All he taught, all he stood for was put to the ultimate test, by what he endured - rejection, abandonment, humiliation, torture, and a slow shameful agonising death, surrounded by contemptuous crowds. Is it any wonder that he cries out from the cross as the first three evangelists report "*My God my God why hast thou forsaken me*" ?

From the Book of Wisdom, written a century before his time, reaching back another six centuries to Amos, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah the prophets, scriptures that would be familiar to Jesus recorded how God's spokesmen met opposition and hostility from the wicked and foolish, how they were persecuted and rejected for their message and for the challenge they dared issue on God's behalf. Anyone following the path of a prophet would soon learn - they'd be put to the test for their trouble.

In accepting his Father's call, there's no doubt Jesus knew the risk, knew what he was letting himself in for, sooner or later. Some time before this week, John reports Jesus saying: "*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*" He was aware he'd have to lay down his life for his witness to God to be effective. He accepted it as a deliberate choice. He let himself be killed rather than kill. He saved others. He would not save himself. His love for God, his love for humankind is expressed by his embrace of such a cruel fate.

"*It is finished*" he cries out, before he breathes out for the last time – giving up his Spirit, as St John finely puts it, drawing our attention to the fact that the whole of Jesus' suffering is consciously chosen, a deliberate offering of himself as a victim of every kind of ill-will and wrong-doing. In Gethsemane he had to struggle, like any man with a healthy love of life, to accept the full consequences of his fatal decision - not only in what would happen to himself, but for his nearest and dearest friends, as a result

Peter, brave foolhardy Peter, broken by his own failure of nerve. Judas so sure he knew his master's mind, provoking this crisis by leading the authorities to Jesus, then killing himself when it all went terribly wrong. Jesus couldn't save them. And then there was his mother – Mary, who had known him to be a child with a destiny since before his birth. Mary, who thought her son had gone crazy when he first took to the roads of Palestine. In the end,

she was among the women who self-effacingly followed him and supported his mission, all the way to Golgotha. As he hung there dying, Mary came to see him, accompanied by John, the other disciple who kept himself out of the limelight and took note of everything to serve as witness. Can we imagine a mother's helplessness and grief, and Jesus' pain at being able to do nothing to comfort her, not even put his arms around her?

How many times have we turned away from terrible sights on the TV news of women grieving for slain offspring? How many stories have we heard of women crushed by the violence that war or street crime has done to them or their families?

Humankind's potential for impulsive savagery or cold calculated cruelty is undiminished by material progress and advance in knowledge. Nevertheless, humankind's capability for gentle compassion, protection and nurture is equally undiminished.

Jesus says: "*Mother behold your Son, son, behold your mother.*" In the depths of pain and failing strength, he thinks of others. He entrusts Mary and John to one another to re-make family life without him. In all his teaching Jesus insisted by word and deed that love is all embracing, inclusive, something which grows by being shared, something to say 'Yes' to, in the face of all our uncertainties and fear. There are two other women present also, and they help when it comes to his burial. Here at the foot of the cross a new community is forged, in witness to his suffering.

As he was nailed to the cross, Jesus prayed "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*", praying not just for those performing this cruel act, but for all those whose weaknesses and failures had contributed to this injustice. There was absolutely no room in him for revenge, or blame and shame – as much a habit of our modern secular world, as it has been in every religious culture the world has known.

The really blameworthy things we do to each other, we are blind to, ignorant of, when we do them. Those who experience shame and guilt know they are wounded, made helpless by their suffering. They already know their need for pardon, for a chance to make amends. Why make anyone feel worse? For Jesus, to forgive means also to heal the damage caused by sinning and being sinned against. Just as the worst evil is being inflicted upon him, He calls upon God, not to retaliate on his behalf, but to exercise compassion towards all who contribute to his suffering. The depths of faith are revealed here too, as Jesus calls upon heaven in a place where God is as far from evident as we can imagine.

The end of retaliation, and the start of overcoming evil with good starts here. Those who live as if the world can still be made safe by acts of reprisal have either not understood his story or wilfully disregarded it. For us to be here today, together at the foot of the cross is more than a witness to our faith, it is our protest against all those who refuse to renounce revenge, who seek reconciliation, whether in the family, or in the face of street crime, terrorism, or the geo-politics.

*“It is finished”* Finished is power of evil and sin to rule over human affairs. It cannot overcome the power of love revealed in this greatest ever act of self sacrifice.

This conviction must be freely and willingly taken by us on trust.

The catalogue of humankind’s wickedness is interminably long, but despite it all, goodness will prevail, through the lives of all who say ‘Yes’ to follow the way of love revealed on the cross. ‘Yes’ to compassion and forgiveness. ‘Yes’ to the power of God expressed in the raising of Jesus from death to life when his trial was finally over.

*“The evil men do lives after them”*, said Shakespeare’s Mark Anthony in his eulogy for Julius Caesar, *“But the good is oft interred with their bones.”* Nearly a century later, Jesus was unlawfully, unjustly killed in another corner of the same empire, and overturned this melancholic sentiment. Jesus left no legacy of evil, and the good of his life was not buried with him. Death could not contain him. There are no bones to contemplate in the place supposed to be his sepulchre. *“Why seek the living among the dead. He is not here. He is risen.”* is the message broadcast from there. His goodness couldn’t be confined there, nor to his circle of friends. It spread out from that place to the ends of the earth, through the centuries since – His challenging alternative to violence is the only way to a secure and fulfilling life, in this world and the next, such *‘love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life my all’*. God’s love revealed in Jesus, to Him be glory for ever and ever Amen