

Moses was the greatest glory of the Jewish faith, because he was the one who looked upon the face of God and lived. Some of the Jewish writings outside the Bible speak of him in superhuman, almost divine terms.

But Moses, as the first reading shows us, risked even his standing with God to protect and plead for his sinful people. He kept faith with them in God's presence. It is as if he is laying his own faithfulness and goodness on the line, willing to sacrifice himself in honour of his commitment to his people.

Here we have a tremendous example to follow. Moses shows us that it isn't enough for us to pursue a lonely path of sanctification, whose price is the leaving-behind of the sinful world, which must sink or swim by itself. This was not the way of Jesus Christ.

He is holiness incarnate, but his rôle in the world is to sacrifice himself in order to throw in his lot with the rest of us, sinners all, incapable as we are of standing before the face of God. We mustn't think that Jesus died because a few people who were near to him took a dislike to him, like one of those poor boys in London who are senselessly knifed, and left to die for no particular reason.

No: Jesus dies because of the distance between us and holiness, the distance he came to bridge. As Son of God he can reach across to his Father. As a faithful human being he knows it will cost him the sacrifice of his whole life. What gives the Way of the Cross its power is the awareness that Jesus is clinging to us, refusing to abandon us, even as we unfold the grisly mechanics of his execution, by which we try to loosen his hold on us. We are like angry children trying to escape from the care of their parents; he is patient, as he experiences in his own body the depths of our distance from holiness, from God.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells the crowd that if they want to keep faith with Moses, with John the Baptist, with the Scriptures, and with God the Father himself, they must accept him. A claim like that pushes them to the brink of their own judgment. When they say *No!* they will cross a terrible line; and Jesus will bear the consequences of it himself, to show them that even now, the mercy of God is more powerful than our faithlessness.