

# Good Friday

Why is this death the heart of our religion?

Because it is the ultimate and greatest *act of God* on the face of the earth; and we cannot understand this death unless we remember that *it is a deed of God*.

In order to understand this, we should clear our minds of other ways of understanding the Cross, even though they may have some truth in them:

- We shall not understand it if we concentrate on it as something the Jews did to Jesus. The Gospel is not a recipe for anti-Semitism, nor is it just a tract against mob violence; besides, he escaped the malice of crowds in the earlier parts of the Gospel, and could have done so again.
- The plots of the priests were their downfall: they were led to deny the kingship of God, and Pilate was free to crucify Jesus as their king. The Crucifixion does not draw its meaning from the priests.
- Nor can we understand it as a deed of Pontius Pilate; he crucified Jesus out of weakness, not power; he himself wanted to release him. And Jesus said, *you would have had no power over me if it had not been given you from above*. We are not here to think about Pilate.
- Nor should we see the Cross merely as an ikon of sin itself. Our religion is not built on a meditation about evil.
- We should not think of it merely as a great example of *man's inhumanity to man*. Millions of us have suffered and perished from that without redeeming the world. Few of us especially deserved this fate; many were (and are) quite innocent. Good Friday is not a time for guilt-trips.
- We should not look at Judas, and try to hang the whole business on him; there are few human beings who do not suffer from false friends, and we might expect Jesus to accept that as he becomes one of us, just as he accepted the capacity to weep or to bleed.

In all these ways, and many more, we try to make the Cross into a human reality with a simple human explanation. On Good Friday we try to fill our minds with human feelings like pity, even though Jesus said *weep not for me, but for yourselves and for your children*. We seek for a key in ourselves, wondering whether we should be filled with guilt, or revulsion, or anger. But none of these human feelings is the point.

Jesus himself showed us, in his Agony in the Garden, that human feelings are not the point, not even *his own* human feelings; and that there was, even in *his* humanity, something which fell prostrate before this mystery; and the only key to it remained *in the heart of God the Father*. His ultimate state of mind is: *Thy will be done* - not because his humanity was *unwilling*, but because it isn't for humanity to grasp the divine dimensions of the will of God. All through the Bible it has been the same: *you are thinking like a man, not like God*. The Cross is the moment where the will of a man, the understanding of a man, the whole human dimension of his life, is annihilated *in favour of the will of God*. It is because Jesus perfectly wanted to let this incomprehensible thing happen in him that his death becomes the centre of the human universe, the ultimate deed of God. He gave his life to be the human frame in

which the divine mystery could happen. In its depths, the will of God *took flesh* on Good Friday - took the flesh of Jesus, and made it into the most significant gift anyone has ever handed over. Humanly, he gives everything up; and suddenly the sinful, this condemned, convicted, exposed and crucified nature which is ours is ablaze with divine charity. It is the sign of nothing - *except* the love of God for the world. Jesus is dead, because there is nothing in earthly life left for him to be:

- not the glory of the kingdoms of the world (*my kingdom is not of this kind*), nor
- any question or agony of this partial and vitiated state of life (*when that day comes, you will not ask me any more questions*), nor
- even the most beautifully human goodness (*no looks to attract our eyes*);

all the goods of humanity finally dissolve in the mystery of the Cross.

The sacrifice of all these things is to make room for a *man's* receiving of the pure love of *God*. This Cross is not teaching us how to *live* better, or to *live* happily. The only present it offers is a new, radical understanding of *dying*.

Despite all the frantic efforts of politicians, advertisers, thinkers of all kinds, our way of life here on earth is not finally healed by any meditation about re-arranging human things. Our life is transfigured by a new way of dying, which opens us totally to God, who is the maker and designer and lover of all things human. It is a way of making all that we have and are into a sacrifice - and that is a way to become holy. When we do that, our humanity begins to look like God, who offers himself to us totally.

That is why it costs everything to follow this way. But we say of it that it is the only way. This is the only truth. Everything about us must be re-aligned on the Cross of Christ. This is our one true way to life: to find the One who wants us to give him our all, and to give it to him generously, selflessly. What he will do then is in his hands, not ours; but he is God, the Creator and sustainer and lover of our being. We shall come to all goodness, and no harm, when we are totally in his hand.