

The Stations of the Cross

for the first Friday in Lent

In these first days of Lent, we come, as it were, with the ashes still on our foreheads, aware that we are dust. The Son of God wanted to be with us in our mortality, so that he could bring us immortal promise. Lord, teach us the depth of our need, and the immensity of your gift to our ruined humanity.

1 Jesus is condemned to death

Jesus has to suffer many different assaults as he goes on his way to Calvary. This is not a simple walk that he takes. It is a way that is alive with meanings, terrible and dramatic.¹ Pilate's act of washing his hands is a particular moment of revelation: this man, who "has power to release or crucify" Jesus, is hoping to bear no responsibility for the choice he makes. Even as he sends him out on this last journey, Pilate tries to withdraw from him, to wash Jesus from his life, from the record of his deeds. Instead, it is for this deed alone that he is remembered.

Give us a Lenten fidelity, Lord of the Way. Free us to remain with you on this journey, through death, to life.

2 Jesus receives the Cross

At the beginning of the journey, Jesus is loaded with the penalty he is to suffer. He will pass through the crowds of his countrymen, gathered in the Holy City for the festival, bearing on his own life their curse², which will sever him from community with them. Yet he is still their Messiah, and it is on this Cross that he will be enthroned, and display to them the glory of the Father.

Jesus our Master, give us to share the cup you must drink, to be baptised in your death.

3 Jesus falls for the first time

As soon as the Cross is delivered to him, Jesus knows with a final certainty that he will die of it. At the beginning of this last walk he stumbles and falls. He knows, in a new and final way, the limits of his human body, and its destiny to lie in the grave. Increasingly, his human will is losing the power to sustain the failing strength of muscles and joints. He is already dying for us.

Jesus, give us the hope to survive the knowledge of our weakness, as we struggle to follow in your steps.

4 Jesus meets his mother

It was Mary who gave Jesus his limbs, his body and blood. It is right that as he carries them to the place of sacrifice, she should come to be near him. But here too Jesus experiences a special pain, as he sees in his mother the grief of all who watch the ruin of the humanity they love.

Lord Jesus, give us the courage not to hide our eyes from human grief.

5 Simon of Cyrene shares the burden of the Cross

The Gospel tells us the soldiers compelled him to help Jesus. He was not invited to understand, he did not have anything explained to him. He was enlisted by the Roman occupying power, to help turn the inexorable wheels of their punishing system. The help Jesus received was conscripted.

Jesus, our brother, use us for your Kingdom, even when we do not understand.

6 Veronica wipes the face of Jesus

Here is an unexpected act of compassion, from one who could pierce the cordon of soldiers, and ignore the contempt of the crowds. She has the pity to go to Jesus; and the face she sees when she reaches him stays with her, the true ikon of God. What she gives is little; what she receives is priceless.

Jesus, give power to our compassion, to save us from futile sentimentality.

7 Jesus falls the second time

The humanity of Jesus' body asserts itself again. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak³. In our eyes, the Son of God seems almost emptied of glory. He has come into the world to lift up the fallen; it is necessary that he should join us, face to face with the dust of which we are made. Like our Lenten journey, this is a road to a death: "to dust you shall return".

Lord, help us not to shrink from this truth: that we are dust.

8 Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

Jesus does not want us to weep for him, but for ourselves. In this way we shall truly be *suffering with him*: because it is entirely *for us* that he has come so far on this road. In Lent we should accept grief for our failings, which we see mystically embodied in the figure of Jesus, who not only knows, but shoulders, all the weaknesses, all the sins of the world.

Lamb of God, form in us the priestly prayer of sacrifice and reconciliation with God.

9 Jesus falls the third time

In this station let us contemplate the closeness of Jesus to all who fail and fall. His acceptance of human nature is not pretended or partial. He knows of what we are made, he remembers that we are dust⁴. With him in our midst, we can be confident in approaching the throne of grace, because he has been tried in every way that we are, but did not sin.

Saviour, falling under our Cross, do not let our sins separate us from you.

10 Jesus is stripped of his garments

Naked he came from his mother's womb; naked he will return. No earthly raiment can adorn the second Adam⁵; no earthly honour is fit to enhance him. He inherits a title that is higher than the angels', and no worldly standing will accompany it. He accepts the loss of all other things, to receive the one pearl of great price, the love of the Father.

Jesus, Son of the Father, may we seek our bread this Lent in the Word that comes from the Father.

11 Jesus is nailed to the Cross

Here is the final attitude of a human life: raised up, tall, awake, arms stretched wide, and fixed with nails. They believe that he is forced into this posture as an ultimate, slaughtering punishment. But every detail speaks of the truth of his calling: from the piercing of his body to the crown of thorns, the crucified Jesus speaks the truth about God, and about us.

Word of God, let us see with our own eyes, and bear witness, that the world may believe.

12 Jesus dies on the Cross

The ultimate mystery deepens before us as Jesus' life ebbs away. Those who look on from afar abandon their last hopes for any stupendous escape. The signs of death gather in his body. Yet, John tells us, he raised his head, and spoke his last words with calm assurance: "It is accomplished". Here, surely, is the peace of Christ which he leaves to us: in the turmoil of dying earthly hopes, the peace of the eternal covenant is struck, our Way to the Father.

Jesus, dying for us on this Hill of the Skull, where all human roads lead: give us perseverance, so that we may continue in this Way that leads to life.

13 Jesus is taken down from the Cross

Here is Jesus, mourned by those who loved him. As we look on, we know that the dead figure who is lowered so tenderly is the figure of a hero in his triumph. But they cannot see past the agony and loss of their present moment. They weep, however: because they could not come with him on this final path. In this very grief they are nearer to him than they know.

Jesus, bless us with grace when we mourn, that we may be comforted in truth.

14 Jesus is laid in the tomb

Now he is laid in the bosom of earth, dust to dust; his journey into humanity is consummated; as he accepted no barriers between himself and the living – even the sinful, the outcast, the leprous, the possessed - now he is at one with the dead. Here, as Lent begins, we, who are dead through our sins, can meet him who came so far for us.

Jesus, make us know this tomb as our gateway to eternal joy; may we accept without fear our death to sin, so that we may rise with you.

Pray for the intentions of the Holy Father:

Our Father....

Hail, Mary....

Glory be to the Father....

Final Prayer

Lord, look on us who begin our Lenten penance. Re-open in us the fountain of living water. Call us by our own name, and sustain us with your word and sacraments. Guard us by your Spirit, as we try to share in the mystery by which we are reborn: you who live and reign with Father and Spirit, God for ever and ever.

¹ The background to this meditation may include the Sacrificing of Isaac (Gen 22), David's departure from Jerusalem (2 Sam 15:30ff), the scriptures describing the Exile (Deut-Is, Jer, Ezk, the Penitential Psalms). The Way of the Cross is, for Christians, the ultimate "prophetic deed", where an increasingly wordless Jesus "allows the Holy Spirit to speak in him" (cf Lk 21:14).

² Deut 21:23

³ Mk 14:38. Usually interpreted as a rebuke to disciples, this might also be a plea for their care: Jesus too shares in the weakness of the flesh during his Passion.

⁴ Ps 103:14

⁵ Jn 20:5-7. The grave-cloths of Jesus are his final earthly raiment. They are abandoned within the tomb itself.