

The Stations of the Cross

for the Fourth Friday in Lent *The Suffering Servant*

Isaiah speaks mysteriously of one who will accomplish God's will by enduring appalling, lonely suffering. Israel often suffered as a nation, but this figure suffers alone, and Israel looks on without comprehending. Jesus seems to have taken to himself this prophetic rôle.

1 Jesus is condemned to death

If this were simply another instance of an innocent man being rejected and condemned, it would be sad but unremarkable. What gives this moment its power is that Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect, represents all humanity, and the one against whom he pronounces judgment is Son of God. That makes this happening vital for all time. In it, we are revealing our enmity towards God, and God is revealing the true extent of his eternal love for us.¹

Here is my servant whom I uphold, my Chosen One in whom my soul delights. I have sent my spirit upon him. He will bring true judgment to the nations.²

2 Jesus receives the Cross

From this moment Jesus, the man whom we condemn, is caught up in our machinery of punishment. Even as his Cross is loaded on him, he takes the whole weight of our enmity, and the burden of God's patience, and carries them together, reconciling them, reconciling us, in his own dying heart.³

He said to me, You are my servant, Israel, through whom I shall show forth my glory.⁴

3 Jesus falls for the first time

If he had chosen a different way, God could have brought our salvation through his power as God. Instead, he chose to come to our side in weakness. Therefore we can contemplate the Son, who is carrying the story of redemption to its fulfilment, as he stumbles and falls on his way.

Which of you walks in darkness, and sees no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and lean on his God!⁵

4 Jesus meets his mother

At the Annunciation Mary was promised: *The power of the Most High will cover you with its shade.* She trusted God then. Now she must entrust the Son she conceived to the same power, for he is beyond any power of human love. In this moment she joins her Son in his discipleship, continuing to surrender her life, as he does, to the mystery of God's purpose.

The Lord called me when I was in the womb, before my birth he pronounced my name; he made my mouth his sharpened sword, he hid me in the shadow of his hand.⁶

5 Simon of Cyrene shares the burden of the Cross

Jesus has spoken of a disciple as one who comes after him bearing the Cross; Luke tells us that Simon does just this. He is from Cyrene, far away in North Africa. Perhaps, in this sad detail, Luke sees the hope of the world beginning to be born; even here, in this foreigner, Jesus finds a disciple.

For you to serve me, it is not enough that you should restore Jacob, and gather Israel: I shall make you a light to the nations, so that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.⁷

6 Veronica wipes the face of Jesus

Jesus' disfigurement and disgrace are unremitting; there is to be no abatement of this ruthless degradation. The sweat he suffers now is the sweat of his death. The face imprinted on Veronica's mind carries this meaning, and she draws our eyes to look upon the face of the suffering Messiah.

As many people were aghast at him – so inhumanly disfigured, he no longer looked like a man – so many nations will be astonished, and kings will stand speechless before him, as they see something unpredicted, witness something unheard-of.⁸

7 Jesus falls the second time

Depth of longing for the Kingdom to come is not enough to bring it about. Through the centuries the hard Way of the Cross is trodden by generations of humanity, disciples and unbelievers alike. Jesus needs not only a willing spirit, but length of endurance as he climbs the hill to the Cross.

Faithfully he proclaims true judgment: he will not grow faint, he will not be crushed, until he has seen right judgment established on the earth.⁹

8 Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

No woman was concerned in the arrest of Jesus, or raised her voice against him at his trial. These women of the City, however, mourn for him as he passes them. Jesus offers them a deeper sharing, warning them that they must share the suffering he bears. We must understand our afflictions as belonging to his Passion, and bear them generously as he did.

Forcibly, after sentence, he was taken off: which of his people is concerned, as he is cut off from the land of the living, as he is struck dead for his people's rebellion?¹⁰

9 Jesus falls the third time

A third fall seem to seal with fulness his acceptance of weakness. Despite all his spiritual power, and his complete innocence, he succumbs to the failure of the flesh, fully at one with the fallen world. In this weakness, he displays his most holy obedience to God, and his faithful ness to us.

We thought of him as someone punished, and struck with affliction by God; yet ours were the sufferings he was bearing: ours the sorrows he carried.¹¹

10 Jesus is stripped of his garments

There is a multitude of meanings in this moment. Jesus is being robbed of his last belongings. He is being cut off from the human family. He is being dishonoured and stripped. But he is also like one preparing for a Baptism: severing his last bonds with the unredeemed past, he is revealed as the new Adam, the Son who is truly the image of the Father.

I have taken you in hand and shaped you, I have made you a covenant to the people, and light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and those who live in darkness from the dungeon.¹²

11 Jesus is nailed to the Cross

In John's Gospel Jesus speaks of the meaning of this moment, when he says three times that *the Son of Man must be lifted up*¹³. Like the serpent in the desert he will be raised as a standard of healing and hope; he will draw to himself all who live; and when we see it, we shall believe.

*Look, my servant will prosper, will grow to greatness, will rise to great heights.*¹⁴

12 Jesus dies on the Cross

In different ways, Luke and John show us Jesus not alone on the Cross. Luke gives us his beautiful last conversation with a crucified criminal; John shows us Mary and the Beloved Disciple, formed into a new family as he entrusts them to each other. It seems that Jesus never turned from the work of uniting and building a new humanity. Let us receive with fidelity this legacy to us, forgiving and uniting to the last of our strength.

*It was the Lord's choice to crush him with suffering. If he gives his life as a sacrifice for sin, he will see his heirs, he shall have long life, and through him the will of the Lord shall be accomplished.*¹⁵

13 Jesus is taken down from the Cross

In this scene of mourning, and pure grief, the Church has *contemplated* the total love of Christ, poured out for us to the end. There are no more contests and arguments, there are no more parables or lessons. The silence Jesus kept at his trial is now total, the silence when everything has been said, and there is nothing to add: he has finished his work, and will rest on the seventh day.

*He does not cry out, or shout aloud, or make his voice heard in the streets. Nor does he break the crushed reed, nor snuff out the smouldering wick. We had all gone astray like sheep, each taking his own way: and the Lord brought all our rebellion to bear on him. Ill treated and afflicted, he never opened his mouth: like a lamb led to the slaughter-house, like a sheep silent before its shearers, he never opened his mouth.*¹⁶

14 Jesus is laid in the tomb

Here is the place where a human life is sealed and rolled up and put away. It is the end to which all will come. The psalm says to God, *To you all flesh will come, with its burden of sin.*¹⁷ His death, and his grave are as real as ours. Yet Jesus carried all the sin of the world, without the slightest guilt of his own. He leads us through the grave in his innocence, by a new way of return, to the house of the Father.

*He was given a grave with the wicked, and his tomb is with the rich, although he had done no violence, although he had spoken no deceit.*¹⁸

Pray for the intentions of the Holy Father:

Our Father....

Hail, Mary....

Glory be to the Father....

Final Prayer

Father, you have seen our affliction, and heard the cry of our distress.
In sending us your beloved Son you have reached down to us
with mighty hand and outstretched arm.

Teach us to read the book of your deeds,
and to believe in your promises of life:

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹ Rom 5: 10

² Is 42: 1

³ Eph 2: 14-18

⁴ Is 49: 3

⁵ Is 50: 10

⁶ Is 49: 1-2

⁷ Is 49: 6

⁸ Is 52: 14-15

⁹ Is 42: 3-4

¹⁰ Is 53: 8

¹¹ Is 53: 4

¹² Is 42: 6-7

¹³ Jn 3: 14, 8: 28, 12: 32ff

¹⁴ Is 52: 13

¹⁵ Is 53: 10-11

¹⁶ Is 42: 2, 53: 6-7

¹⁷ Ps 65: 2-3

¹⁸ Is 53: 9