

The Stations of the Cross

for the Sixth Friday of Lent

In the last days of Lent we approach the heart of the mystery of Christ. It is in this dreadful and humble story that we shall find the truth of God uttered. May God make us fluent in the language of the Cross, so that we may read it for ourselves, and proclaim it to the world.

1 Jesus is condemned to death

Every hour, in some way, we pay our homage to the powers of this world, working for our place in it, doing its bidding. Jesus never belonged to this obedience, but lived every hour in obedience to his Father. In this trial, Jesus finds condemnation in the world, as he obeys his Father perfectly.

If the world does not acknowledge him, it will not acknowledge us either.¹

2 Jesus takes up the Cross

Insofar as the Cross means punishment, it is not Jesus' Cross, for he has done nothing wrong. But then, it is not God who administers the Cross: it is a tool of human policy. In some way, Jesus deserves the Romans' Cross. He is for God, and not for Rome. He is for the Kingdom of Heaven, not for the empire of the earth. He does not look for help from the legions, even the angelic ones. Nevertheless, in laying hands on the Cross, he is inaugurating a Kingdom that will outbid every other authority.

He has stripped the authorities and the ruling forces, and paraded them in public, behind him in his triumphal procession.²

3 Jesus falls the first time

We say we are a fallen race, and that this is the reason why Jesus comes to us. He comes a great distance from the glory of God; and obediently lets go of his glorious life, to become what we are, though he does not sin. Here in the Way of the Cross, he joins us in the dust. As he rises, resuming his path to the Father, we must rise with him.

He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as we are; and being in every way like us, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a Cross.³

4 Jesus meets his Mother

Mothers do not grow out of their bond with their children. To see them full-grown and responsible does not take away their mothers' memories: of their birth, their suckling, their cradle, their falls and hurts, the lessons and crises of childhood. The helplessness of Mary in this Station is the bitter lesson of which she was forewarned, it is the sword in the heart. But in this moment too, God is becoming man. Mary was vital to his birth: and in Mary our condition is laid open to the will of the Father.

You are privileged, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.⁴

5 Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry the Cross

Was Jesus grateful for the presence of this pressed man? Surely his challenged body was. But if Simon had the bodily strength Jesus lacked, how much more did Jesus have a spiritual gift which Simon needed! That his name has come down to us implies that he received the gift.

Lord, make us generous with all that we have, make us know all that we lack, and help us to share in the work of salvation.

6 Veronica wipes the face of Jesus

Who can truly see the face of Jesus? Not only Martha and Mary, in their quiet home, or the listeners to his preaching, in the great days of his ministry: but also a woman who pushes through the jeering crowd, to clean from him some of the marks of his agony. She reveals a special insight, and a great and compassionate courage.

Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate.⁵

7 Jesus falls the second time

Jesus shares mysteriously in the fate of his people. Foreseeing their Exile, the prophet Jeremiah warned them:

Listen and pay attention: do not be proud; the Lord is speaking!

Give glory to the Lord your God before the darkness comes, before your feet stumble on the darkened mountain. You hope for light: but he will turn it to shadow dark as death, he will change it to blackness. If you do not listen to this warning, I shall weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, and stream with tears, for the flock of God is being led into captivity.⁶

8 Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

When war or disaster break on a people, its women and children have their special suffering to bear. The voice of the daughters of Jerusalem is used to speaking through tears, then as now. Jesus' heart is open to this voice of grief: but he does not add to their pain on his own account. He is bearing it for them, and for us too. It is for us that he dies; and for us he will rise. When we have learned to mourn, we will qualify for consolation.

You will be weeping and wailing, while the world rejoices. You will be sorrowful: but your sorrow will turn to joy. A woman in childbirth suffers, because her time has come. When she gives birth she loses her pain in the joy of a new-born child. You are sad now: but I shall see you again, and your hearts will be full of a joy that no-one shall take from you.⁷

9 Jesus falls the third time

Three times evokes fullness; once may be accident, twice leaves room for doubt; three times carries assurance. Jesus is determined to persevere in the cancelling of distance between God and fallen humanity. When he finishes his course, it will be because he has nothing left to lose, nothing which has not been poured out in our service. Like children who do not understand, we fail to recognise what he gives for us. Let us ask the Father to show us, through his Spirit, *the height and depth, the breadth and length of the love of Christ.⁸*

10 Jesus is stripped of his garments

Our clothing represents our individuality, that cloaking of the person which symbolises the privacy of our inner mystery. Sometimes it is a uniform, replacing our individuality with allegiance or function. The taking of Jesus' clothes is the beginning of the taking of his life; they will be won by a soldier, on a throw of the dice. But for us who see, it is also a moment of disclosure, the moment where the true Jesus is revealed.

What we are to be will be revealed, when we see him as he is.⁹

11 Jesus is nailed to the Cross

Jesus longed to be one with us. He is destined, instead, to be united to a Cross, nailed to it in his last hours. It is in this spreadeagled state that he becomes our Saviour. As *people condemned to die*,¹⁰ we should see in this his ultimate fidelity to his mission. He bears our condemned condition with complete faithfulness, down to the last drop of blood. He told us:

This is my blood, poured out for you.

12 Jesus dies on the Cross

We cannot know what it is to die, but we know what it is like to begin to lose consciousness. The Gospels tell us what filled Jesus' mind on his way to Calvary, and from these hints we can imagine his last moments. Perhaps as agony began to freeze into numbness, the surrender of his mind approached with his knowledge and consent. *Into your hands, Father* is the line Luke gives us from the Psalms. In the death of the first martyr, a faithful Christian makes the same line his own.¹¹

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

13 Jesus is lowered from the Cross

Jesus has been raised up, as he promised he would be. Now he is to be lowered, taken to the earth. We speak of his descent into Hell, meaning the last lap of his downward journey: old pictures show us Jesus opening the gates of the underworld, releasing Adam and Eve from the power of death. Let us ask him to come to our own closed hearts, to open for us the door to life.

*You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.*¹²

14 Jesus is laid in the tomb

He said, *The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*.¹³ Now they have found him a place: Pilate and Caiaphas, Judas and Peter, his own people who would not accept him, the world that would not know him:¹⁴ and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take him and lay him in a new tomb hewn from the rock. God has handed over to us his only Son; and we have handed him over to death.¹⁵ Here, in a place of burial, the Father will call into being the New Covenant, the forgiveness of sins, the glory of a Temple not made by human hands: the Body in which we will inherit eternal life.¹⁶

*He was given a grave among the wicked, his tomb among those of the rich, although he had done no violence, although he had spoken no deceit. After the ordeal he endured, he shall see the light and find peace; by his knowledge, my righteous servant will make many just, by taking on himself their guilt. So I shall give him multitudinous reward, and he will share the spoils with the mighty, for exposing himself to death, for being counted as a rebel, whereas he was bearing the sins of the multitude, and atoning for the rebellious.*¹⁷

Pray for the intentions of the Holy Father.

Our Father....

Hail, Mary....

Glory be to the Father....

Final Prayer

Father,
Your Son trod the far paths of sorrow, in search of the lost sheep.
May he find us, and take us up, and carry us home,
to know the rejoicing in heaven
when the lost ones are found.
We ask this through Jesus Christ, the Lord.

¹ Jn 15: 18-19; 1 Jn 3: 1

² Col 2: 15; 1P 3: 22

³ Phil 2: 7-8

⁴ Phil 1: 29

⁵ Lk 6: 36

⁶ Jer 13: 15-17

⁷ Jn 16: 20-22

⁸ Eph 3: 18-19

⁹ 1 Jn 3: 2

¹⁰ Ps 79: 10-11

¹¹ Ps 31: 5; Lk 23: 46; Ac 7: 59

¹² Ezek 37: 12-14

¹³ Lk 9: 58

¹⁴ Jn 1: 10-11

¹⁵ Jn 3: 16; Mt 21: 37; Jn 5: 23

¹⁶ Rm 8: 11

¹⁷ Is 53: 9, 11-12