

Good Friday Addresses

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Good Friday

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The Mind of Christ

An Introduction by the Very Revd Jerry Lepine.

In the next three addresses I want to explore what was in the mind of Jesus. This is not an attempt at psychoanalysing Jesus but rather understanding his purpose as he explains it on the approach to Jerusalem and Good Friday. Our first three passages are from the Passiontide section of the set Gospel of the year, St Matthew. In each passage Jesus makes some significant statements about his own self-understanding but there is also an interaction with others that draws us into that picture, about the yearnings of Jesus for God's community. As has been said so often. We are not outside this story. We find ourselves, our faces within it, looking out at us. As we reflect on the significance of this day we are drawn into an invitation to be formed into the likeness of Christ.

In each of the three sections, the passage will be read and an address will follow. Then the passage will be read again in the style of Benedictine Lectio Divina (I invite you to focus on a word or phrase) and there will be silence for you to prayerfully reflect, to let the Spirit of God become our teacher. Then brief said prayers and a hymn.

Good Friday 1

Matthew 20.17-28

A Third Time Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

17 While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, 18 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; 19 then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.'

The Request of the mother of James and John

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. 21 And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.' 22 But Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' They said to him, 'We are able.' 23 He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.'

24 When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

This passage comes just before the Palm Sunday Entry into Jerusalem and Jesus leaves us in no doubt as to what is in his mind as he approaches the city. Like the prophets of old, he will be rejected by his own, bullied, abused and executed and on the third day raised. This is a statement of trust. He cannot raise himself. He is in another's hands.

This is not the first time that Jesus has referenced this. It has happened at least twice before. Whilst there was an expectation of a time of suffering prior to the Messiah coming the idea of linking the Messiah personally with suffering and death was unusual. That's why Peter challenges it, only to be told to "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." A few days later the disciples witness Jesus transfigured. Another moment of high expectation is compromised by Jesus speaking again about betrayal, death and resurrection. This time the disciples are recorded as being "greatly distressed." Uncertainty and insecurity are creeping in. They thought they knew what was going on but Jesus seems to be saying much that does not fit with their expectations. Our passage also speaks of 'the cup', an image in Jewish history that references the suffering around the destruction of Jerusalem and exile of leaders in 6th century BC. He appears to be placing himself within this tradition of Israel's suffering. Clearly, the 'cup' is on his mind at the Last Supper and in Gethsemane as well.

None of this will be heard by the disciples as victory language. Catching up with the way that God works is a constant, for every generation. There is this tension between what we want God to be and the way that God is. And of course, the really interesting point is that this is the way God is – for us and for our salvation.

Jesus says that he has come to serve and "give his life a ransom for many." It is fair to say that that this one word 'ransom' has given birth to a vast library of texts over the centuries. This is not the time to review the theology of St Paul, Origen, Anselm, Calvin and Aulen. Our aim is to explore how Jesus would understand this. At the time of Jesus, the term 'ransom' was connected with the payment that would give freedom to a slave. Jesus saw his death as the payment that would set free those enslaved in the kinds of way of being human exhibited by the status seeking of James and John. His martyrdom was about 'release'. Release from a way of being human that puts me at the centre of the universe, release into the dream of a God centred universe. Release and forgiveness were two sides of the same coin. And forgiveness was understood as the Messianic gift that would end the exile of God's people. So, joining all this up - release had this connotation of forgiveness and coming 'home', belonging, connected, communion. God in Jesus commits to the human project and affects something in his suffering and death that cannot be done by us. Nobody has asked for this, few are expecting it to happen like this, nobody can do the same. It is a once for 'all' eternal moment.

The reference to the cup of suffering, to the life of service and giving himself as a ransom for many comes out of a toe-curling incident where a mother wanted a favour for her grown up children. Clearly this is about status, honour and the family. It was not abnormal behaviour. In his book 'The New Testament World' Bruce Malina goes into the Cultural Anthropology of 1st century middle eastern life. He underlines that as far as 'men' were concerned, attaining authority, defending family honour, concern for prestige and precedence, aggressiveness, daring and boldness were all key values. So, it is at least arguable that the ten disciples are angry with the two who set their mother up with this, not because it's an unsound question but because this bold mother got there before they did. They sensed them trying to get an advantage.

Jesus uses this moment to tell them about how it is to be in his community. It's about service, humility and laying your life down. That's the kind of leadership I want he says. To "lord it over" is a very strong term. It refers to the cultivation of honorific titles, the handing out of gongs. Jesus is all about 'self-giving,' not self-aggrandisement and his model of service is inspired by the servant passages in Isaiah. That's what it looks like.

Ambition is totally recast as generous self-giving that the other may flourish. There is a right kind of ambition that is always looking out for the wellbeing of the other. It provokes a searching question that is asked of all of us and particularly those in leadership.

Good Friday 2

Matthew 21.33-46

The Parable of the Wicked or Usurping Tenants

33 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' 41 They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

42 Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;[a]

this was the Lord's doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes"?

43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Years ago, I remember running a faith exploration group. People would read a section of the Gospel during the week and then we would discuss it. We had someone from a Buddhist background. At one point, she said, 'I am really struggling with this level of conflict in the atmosphere and the verbal aggression. It's not what I expected of Jesus.' This text is in a highly combative section of Matthew's Gospel. If you are looking for a meek and mild Jesus, you won't find him here. But Matthew Chapter 21-23 is critical to our understanding of what is in the mind of Christ during Passiontide.

The Parable of the Usurping / Wicked Tenants appears after Jesus has entered Jerusalem and cleansed the Temple. Both of these actions were in line with Messianic expectations, especially the symbolic renewal of the Temple. But a stand-off develops between Jesus and the Temple authorities. There is now an alternative gathering in the Temple surrounding Jesus, namely, those who used to be blind and lame but also children doing what children do, copying the adult's line 'Hosanna to the Son of David.' The Temple authorities protest because this is a Kingship claim. Jesus looks at them and says 'out of the mouths of infants and babes...'

The next day he returns to the Temple and this time the authorities are prepared for him. By what authority are you doing these things? What qualifications do you have to cleanse and teach? Who gave

you that authority to behave like that in the Temple? Who do you think you are? That 'cleansing' of the Temple action by Jesus would have made them very twitchy. Jesus counters with a question. Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin? They are stuck. To admit to missing a true contemporary prophet sent by God would be to admit a profound and disastrous failure as religious leaders. Maybe they genuinely don't know but perhaps self-interest lies within their answer. So, there is stalemate. Jesus poses another question that backs them into a corner, questioning their ability to see what is happening before their eyes. Then he launches into the Parable of the Usurping Tenants, adding insult to injury. They counter by trying to trick him into saying something that he will regret. He drives a wedge between two theological stables and then launches into a series of critiques of the religious establishment. It is, frankly, exhausting stuff.

The whole scene finishes with Jesus in a state of lament for the city, its people and leaders "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" 23.37. This is what is going on in the mind of Jesus. That's the context.

The parable is as pointed a story as you could expect. It concerns a landlord and the tenancy of his vineyard - a term symbolic for God's people in the Old Testament but also recognisable in the local social setting. Isaiah's Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard (5.1ff) is in the background here as well, except that the landlord is complaining not about the quality of the produce (wild grapes) but because the fruit / produce is being kept back from him. In true prophetic tradition this is an attack on the stewards of God's vineyard, the religious leadership. And this is how they apparently heard it themselves 21.45.

What have they done though which is like the tenants? They have kept the fruit of God's vineyard to themselves. There is an alternative gathering going on in the Temple - those who were blind and lame and the singing children... those who have been seen as outsiders are now insiders, courtesy of the ministry of Jesus. Both John the Baptist and Jesus expressed Israel's vocation to be a blessing to the world. This takes us back to Genesis 12 and the purpose behind Abraham's call, "for in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

They are to be bearers of the blessing not sole beneficiaries. They stand accused of keeping the goodness of God to themselves. Here are the fruits of the kingdom in the Temple now.

We exist for others. This is what is in the mind of Christ at this time – God's original blessing that creates an open, transformative, joyous gathering of difference, and leadership that recognises the words and work of God when they see and hear them. Even as Jesus dies on the Cross, he continues this gathering ministry with the thief on the cross, the centurion and the grieving women.

Good Friday 3

Matthew 26.6-13

The Anointing at Bethany

6 Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, 7 a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. 8 But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste? 9 For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.' 10 But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. 11 For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. 12 By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. 13 Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.' This action of a woman anointing Jesus happens in Bethany where Jesus is lodged. It is two miles east of Jerusalem. He is in the house of Simon the Leper who St Mark implies was healed by Jesus. Bethany is also the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. St John says that it

is Mary who anoints him. Bethany is clearly a place that Jesus felt at home in, a place of friendship and welcome. We know this kind of place – full of goodness and encouragement. The kind of place that nourishes us.

This is a rare moment of kindness shown towards Jesus within the Passion narrative. A very expensive ointment is poured on his head. The oil may well have come from the Himalayas on the trade routes and it is thought that a family could have lived for a year on the price of the perfume. The extravagance of the gesture is contrasted with the follow-on story in Matthew's Gospel, namely the thirty pieces of silver that Judas took. The contrast of the taking versus the giving is clear. Of course, if it was Mary, she would have been showing her love and gratitude to Jesus for raising her brother Lazarus.

There is a negative reaction from the disciples which is totally understandable. Not only 'why waste this?' but probably 'why have you spent your money on such expensive perfume?' Hadn't Jesus told the rich man to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor? But they have not understood the moment. Hence 26.10-11.

The way of the cross is the way that Jesus will fully identify with the poor. Stripped of everything, excluded, on the receiving end of injustice, left to die, Jesus will embrace the way of those who are suffering, needy and poor. To follow the way of the cross is to enter a deeper solidarity with the poor than just the giving of money need be. To love Jesus' now with Mary's extravagant devotion is to love also the poor with whom he identified himself throughout his ministry and supremely on the cross. Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Matthew 25.37-40.

Jesus sees the anointing in terms of the tradition of preparation for burial. It seems likely that Mary has a sense that this might be the last time that Jesus comes to Bethany. Does she grasp what is going to happen? Does she accept that this is the way that Jesus must go? Is this why Jesus says that she is to be remembered? What Jesus says about her he does not say about anyone else. Her response is part of the gospel – the good news. Almost certainly she will not understand the full implications of what is unravelling but she has a hunch and in this act of devotion, even love, she is expressing faith in him. This is the nature of faith. It is not about 100% certainty or complete understanding but it is about a conviction that the way of Jesus can be trusted even when events are messy and the outcome unknown.

The anointing points us to the beyond death moment, the helpless state. His vocation has led him into the place where he can do nothing.

But someone somewhere is remembering an old song. It goes something like 'Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it.'

Good Friday 4

Philippians 2.1-11

Imitating Christ's Humility

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8 he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death

even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

10 so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

For the first time this week we move from the Gospels to perhaps thirty years after the events in Jerusalem and the Song of Humility in Philippians 2. It is possible that part of this text is an early Christian hymn. The section focuses on who those early Christians thought Jesus was as well as underlining the key mark of all those who have been baptised into the life of Christ. It is a stunning, joyful piece of writing written from a prison cell.

Be of same mind that was in Christ Jesus... who being found in human form, humbled himself, emptied himself, became obedient even unto death. Humility is the word that unlocks what it means to have the mind of Christ.

That should be an enormous relief to us because self-justification is such a burden. Humility is not to be confused with false modesty, the gamesmanship that gets played out in communities and workplaces. In her commentary on St Benedict's Ladder of Humility Joan Chittister comments that Humility is a proper sense of self in a universe of wonders.

We ascend by humility – winning, owning, having, consuming and controlling are not the high posts of the spiritual life.

So, humility is knowing who we are, whose we are and why we are. And at the heart of humility is obedience, in the Latin 'ob-audire', literally, listening towards...the One who is at the heart of all things. Like a seedling pulling towards the light, we yearn for and listen out for the word of life, we learn, we wonder, we are open to new possibilities, we are challenged to change, perhaps even to recognise that truth is bigger than we ever imagined.

And the fount of this is Christ. It is Christ's Self-emptying, pouring himself out, listening towards the One who calls that he might look to the interests of others. Christ, the 'magister humilitatis', (the teacher of

humility) who shows us how to live and guides us towards a realistic knowledge of ourselves. Christ does not clutch at his rightful position, doesn't leverage or take advantage of his identity for his own benefit but rather he chooses to empty himself. It is a way of life. If we learn humility from Christ, we will become the terrain upon which grace can develop and bear its fruit. Humility is the soil of kingdom fruitfulness and the basis for all right relationships. And if Archbishop Ramsey is right that "God is Christlike and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all" then humility is the way God is.

This is 'love vast as the ocean' – the authentic love at the heart of the universe that is limitless, precarious and vulnerable. (W. H. Vanstone) The kenosis of God means that, for the being of the universe, the being of God is totally expended, without residue and without reserve; expended in endless and precarious endeavour of which the issue, as triumph or tragedy, has passed from his hands to depend upon the response which his love receives... for the sake of another all is expended, all jeopardised and all surrendered. God offers and waits, like the artist or composer awaiting a response to their creation. And on Good Friday, Jesus' arms are wide open before a waiting world.