



## **Holy Week Addresses 2025**

### ***The People of The Passion: Key Characters on the Road to the Cross***

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*Monday 14<sup>th</sup> April 6.30pm: 1. A Cast of Characters*

*Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> April 6.30pm: 2. A Gathering Storm*

*Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> April 6.30pm: 3. A Double Betrayal*

*Good Friday 18<sup>th</sup> April 12 noon:*

*4. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate;*

*5. He suffered death; 6. and was buried.*

*Good Friday 18<sup>th</sup> April 1.30pm:*

*7. Behold the Wood of the Cross*

*These addresses seek to illuminate what Michael Perham, a former Dean of Derby, termed "the Christ-like path", a path all Christians are called, no matter how imperfectly, to follow.*

In this series of addresses, we will be reflecting again on the momentous events of Holy Week; we will be walking again on the Road to the Cross with our Lord; we will be telling again the familiar story, but looking at it through a variety of lenses, both in terms of personality traits and leadership styles. It is a story told in two Acts: the People and the Passion. It is a story set across a variety of scenes, from Road to Garden, Cross to Tomb. It is a story with a cast of key characters, each of whom view it differently and contribute to it in different ways.

In preparing these talks, I have been influenced by two books. Firstly Hilary Mantel's magisterial trilogy 'Wolf Hall', which collectively spans nearly 2000 pages, chronicling the journey of Thomas Cromwell from humble beginnings as the son of a blacksmith to become Chief Minister to Henry VIII, before his downfall and execution for alienating the powers that be. Secondly the mere 1000 pages of Doris Kearns Goodwin's 'Team of Rivals', a political biography of Abraham Lincoln, chronicling a journey from humble beginnings as the son of an impoverished farmer to become President of the United States, with his capacity to bring his opponents together into collective cabinet cohesion and to marshal their disparate talents and opposing views for the greater good, before himself being assassinated for what he believed, exactly 160 years ago.

In these stories, there are clear parallels with the story we are telling this Holy Week. But in retelling it, from Mantel, I have learned that when telling a complex story, it is important to clearly identify the key members of the cast of characters involved, all of whom have differing personalities and backgrounds which influence the lens through which they view a situation and thus their behaviour in response to it. From Goodwin, I have learned that the art of good leadership is the ability to mould these characters with all their differing strengths and weaknesses into a team, more than a 'team of rivals', more than a complimentary team of 'yes-men', but a genuine complementary team working together to produce something greater than its parts.

This Holy Week we are telling again the story of a journey, similar to but far greater than Cromwell's or Lincoln's. It is a well-known story, and the gospel writers can tell it in little over 100 pages. It is the story of the son of a carpenter, who draws together a cast of characters, a team of disciples, and moulds their disparate talents into a team to advance the Kingdom, before himself being executed on trumped up charges by the powers that be, who cannot believe or accept the message he brings.

We are journeying this week with Jesus on the Road to Jerusalem: the Road to the Cross. We are journeying with the disciples, a diverse group often beset by rivalries, tensions, and misunderstandings. Amongst our cast of key characters are impetuous Peter and his calmer brother Andrew, the power-hungry brothers James and John, and Judas: all of whom have differing personalities, all of whom view on-going developments through different lenses, all of whom need to be marshalled by the skilled leadership of Jesus holding it all together. So we will also look at all this through the lens of his leadership.

The disciples: a motley crew, with various strengths and weaknesses, yet chosen by Jesus as a 'complementary team', called by him and commissioned by him to go out and proclaim his message, privileged to be taught by him and to share with him the intimate moments in his ministry. And of course it has all gone to their heads. They consistently manage to screw up, to say the wrong thing at the wrong moment, to inflame the crowds instead of healing them, to push themselves forward when they should be hanging back, to be anxious when they should be sleeping .....and sleeping when they should be anxious. In short, they manage to misunderstand or completely misapply what they are being taught.

As fishermen, they were good at reading the meteorological weather (a key skill on the Sea of Galilee where conditions can change rapidly and storms blow up out of nowhere). As “fishers of men” they were less skilled at reading the political weather, not recognising the storm clouds that were gathering as a result of Jesus’ actions.

So let’s look at the personality traits of the cast of characters who underlie all this:

*Peter and Andrew:*

Throughout the gospels, Peter’s interactions with Jesus and with his fellow disciples reflect the personality of one who is intensely loyal and extremely enthusiastic, but instinctively impulsive and inconsistent. He is slow to understand the meaning of Jesus’s words and actions, yet quick to commit. But he is unsteady in demonstrating that commitment in times of challenge and change. He is headstrong and hasty: often speaking without thinking, with a tendency to engage mouth before brain. Indeed it has been said of him that “he would walk into a room mouth-first!”. His restlessness, his hyperactivity and impulsiveness, his tendency to act excitably without thinking, would perhaps today have possibly led to a diagnosis of ADHD?

The natural socio-emotional leader of the 12, he is often the first to pipe up and answer Jesus’s questions, or even to question him in return. With eager enthusiasm, on the Road to Caesarea Phillipi, he is the first to respond correctly to the question “Who do people say that I am?” by asserting that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the long promised Saviour. And for this insight, he is highly praised. Yet as Jesus begins to show his disciples that the inevitable consequence was that he must go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering and rejection, be killed, and on the third day be raised, Peter with unbecoming familiarity and unconscious presumption, dares to rebuke his Lord, to question and seek to dissuade him. But Jesus turns and says to him, “you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on human things.” Good leaders know when to praise, but also when to rebuke.

Yet spare a thought for his brother Andrew: it was Andrew who was called first by Jesus; it was Andrew, who with characteristic self-effacement, went first to find his brother and to introduce him to Jesus. Yet again and again in the gospels, Andrew is identified just as “Simon Peter’s brother”. He has been called “the overshadowed saint” because he appears to be constantly in the shadow of his more ebullient and outgoing sibling.

Andrew was never one of the inner circle of disciples. When Jesus went up to the Mount of Transfiguration, it was only Peter, along with James and John who went with him, not Andrew. And on the mountain, it was Peter who instead of standing in silent awe, impulsively offers nonsensical suggestions. How embarrassing perhaps for level-headed Andrew to hear of his brother behaving like a star-struck fool, saying yet again the first thing that comes into his head.

Such scope for sibling rivalry here. Yet Andrew is content just to be the one who was always introducing others to Jesus. There are only three times in the gospel record where he is brought centre-stage: the bringing of his brother to Jesus, the bringing of a boy with 5 loaves and 2 fishes to Jesus, the bringing of enquiring Greeks “who wished to see Jesus”. So Andrew is the quiet, self-effacing one, content to stand back and let his brother have the limelight, whilst he himself took the humbler part. ‘Complementary teams’ need enthusiastic visionaries like Peter, but they also need safe pairs of hands behind the scenes, willing helpers and skilled networkers with good social skills and ‘the power of connection’, unobtrusively holding things together, like Andrew. Good leadership is to recognise, as Jesus did, the need for both.

*James and John:*

Humility was not however what the brothers James and John had a surplus of. On the Road to Jerusalem, they have heard Jesus spell things out to them. They know about the coming Kingdom, they have heard the promises made about it by Jesus in his teaching, but they do not understand. They do not understand his prophesy of crucifixion and resurrection. They are sure that Jesus is the Messiah, but they cannot reconcile that with his prediction of a criminal's death. So they instinctively react by blocking out the bad news and concentrating on the good: the Kingdom is coming, the victory will be won ....and we want a bit of it please. "What's in it for us?"

Nicknamed the Sons of Thunder, their short fuses reminiscent of some of our modern day politicians of whom it is said "they could start a fight in an empty room", they have long had a tendency to sound off at the slightest provocation, to crash and bang and blunder explosively, insensitively, and egotistically, into any situation. So here they go again. "Do us a favour, Lord. When all this Kingdom stuff happens, can we get to sit in state with you, one on your right hand and the other on your left?" How little they really understand.

It is not just the egotistical nature of this request, its sense of entitlement and elitism, its naked ambition to secure a big slice of the glory that's going to be going, it's also when it happened. It is the juxtaposition of Jesus' prophetic words about the detailed manner of his death with the demands of James and John for power and status that is so staggering. They cannot reconcile their concept of a Messiah of earthly power and glory, a Warrior Saviour, with the Messiah of the Cross, a Suffering Servant.

Good leaders know how to hold in check the egos of those who would be leaders themselves yet do not understand the art of it, not by confrontation but by diplomacy. Leaders must work with the tools at their disposal, and good leaders can take and diplomatically shape, modify and sharpen to make them fit for purpose. So John is shaped to grow to become the disciple whom Jesus loved, to become his closest confidante, to be entrusted by him at the Crucifixion with the care of his mother. And Peter is moulded to become the disciple called by Jesus to "feed my sheep", as leader of the Early Church.

Of course the other disciples are indignant at the power grab by James and John, their claiming of pride of place. It seems to them an attempt to steal a march, to take unfair advantage, to claim the privilege of being members of the inner circle. And so immediately the old human controversies about who is going to be the greatest in the new Kingdom spring up yet again in this 'team of rivals'.

So good leaders are also good teachers, as Jesus was, and know how to reinforce key messages again and again. Jesus tells them about the differences between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God: in the world 'greatness' is predicated on power, control and influence; in the Kingdom of God whoever wishes to be great must be the servant of others, whoever wants to come first must be last, must accept the baptism of suffering and the cup of the Cross, for "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve".

For his disciples, then and now, to follow Jesus is to fall in beside him on the Road to the Cross. It is to try to keep up and to understand, to think no more in worldly terms of importance or privilege, but to be prepared to take up the Cross and follow him in the Way. It is that Way we walk with him again this week.

We are on the road with Jesus, the Road to Jerusalem, the Road to the Cross. We have examined the cast of key characters on this Road with Jesus: the disciples Peter and Andrew, James and John, exploring their personalities and characters: impetuous yet insightful Peter and his more level-headed sibling Andrew; the arrogant bothers James and John, keen to claim their self-perceived privilege as members of an inner circle. We have seen how Jesus was prepared to rebuke Peter for some of his wilder excesses and to subdue the rampant egos of James and John in their seeking of pride of place. We have noted the leadership strategies of Jesus in seeking to mould his disciples, this community of conflicting characters all with their diverse strengths and weaknesses, but each chosen by Jesus for a reason, into a 'complementary team', destined to do great things for the Kingdom.

The leadership style which Jesus exemplifies seeks to develop discipleship and service not status and self-importance, with empowerment and not exploitation at its heart. It is about relationships not rivalries. It stands on foundations of community. It is visionary and inspired, yet is rooted and relevant. It combines radicalism with realism; it reconciles faith with work, power with compassion, hardship with hope. But it comes with a cost: the cost of the Cross.

It is possible to capture the leadership strategies of Jesus through a simple concept of three interlocking circles, each one encapsulated by a Greek word of theological significance. I have written extensively on this elsewhere in the context of school leadership <sup>1</sup>, but it is equally applicable to any other context in which team leadership is required and where a core message has to be preserved and promulgated, where a degree of self-emptying is required to keep everyone on message and on task, and where shared support is necessary to bind a disparate community together.

*Kerygma* is a sharing of the vision to secure coherence of direction. It requires the clarity of a core message; it requires constant repetition and reinforcement to embed it. So Jesus repeats to his disciples again and again the key message that the Messiah will not come as a Warrior King but as a Suffering Servant, and all that this will entail.

*Kenosis* is a supporting of the vision through self-emptying; looking not to one's own interests but to the interests of others. So Jesus reminds his egotistical, impulsive and self-serving disciples, then and now, again and again that whilst amongst the Gentiles, rulers lord it over their subjects and exercise authority over them, it should not be so amongst them; that whoever wishes to be great must become a servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be servant of all. Nowhere is this made clearer than in his own life, his own example, and his own self-emptying in the face of his forthcoming death.

*Koinonia* is serving the vision through building bonds of community. There is a 'fellowship of the road' that is to be had through walking and talking together; many problems can be sorted as the journey progresses. The reward is in the journey itself. This is captured in a Latin phrase: "*solvitur ambulando*: it is solved by walking". Walking calms the mind, releases creativity, reveals solutions. So it is no surprise that much of Jesus' teaching and community bonding was done 'on the road'.

And at the overlapping centre of these three circles lies *Metanoia*: a change of attitudes and behaviours by the transforming and turning round of hearts and minds. This is more than a *breakdown* of prior ways of understanding; it is a *breakthrough* into new understandings of each other, a process of release from past positions and rivalries into new vistas of insight and recognition, so that new ways of thinking and relating can emerge. It is this that Jesus sought for his disciples and seeks for us.

Complementary teams are by their very nature eclectic. They must hold together exuberant visionaries like Peter and unobtrusive networkers like Andrew, self-perceived natural born leaders like James and John, folk like Thomas the Doubter and Matthew the Tax Collector, quiet ones like Philip and Bartholomew, Thaddeus and James son of Alphaeus, but also Simon the Zealot, a political activist and the very antithesis of a collaborating tax collector (the equivalent of putting Jeremy Corbyn and Nigel Farage together in the same parliamentary working group). But all still part of a 'team of all the talents'. For complementary teams are not immune to tensions, and often putting nay-sayers and political antagonists together can provide the grit in the oyster that catalyses change and growth.

And of course there is one more key character, integral to this journey to the Cross, whose antagonism eventually went too far, but without whom the story would not be complete .....Judas Iscariot.

*Judas:*

But here there is a problem. Yes, all the gospel sources list Judas amongst the disciples of Jesus and he is known to history as his betrayer. Yet the gospel accounts of Judas are varied, inconsistent and influenced by the theological opinions of the writers: Mark doesn't even mention his name in his account of the betrayal that is to come; John describes how Judas was entrusted with the common purse as the group's treasurer, but then plainly describes him as "a thief", in a possible piece of post-event reputational blackening; Mark and Luke report that the Jewish authorities promised Judas money for his action, but only Matthew quantifies this as "30 pieces of silver", allowing him to cross-reference this with words from the prophet Zechariah. Such paucity and inconsistency of detailed information makes it difficult to assess the precise motivation for Judas' eventual actions. In personality terms, he remains something of an enigma. But at least let us try to unravel the personality and motivation of this complex character.

What we do know of him is that in some ways he was clearly a bit of an outsider, even a loner. He was apparently the only one of the group who came from Judea, with the others all having come from Galilee. This alone may have caused him to feel somewhat superior, as Judeans considered Galileans to be 'country bumpkins', whose coarse accents clearly demonstrated this. And when Jesus entrusted him as treasurer of the group's funds, this may have additionally boosted his ego and further fuelled his pride. This probably then made him secretly indignant at Jesus' selection of the three 'common fishermen' Peter, James, and John to be a kind of 'inner circle'.

Some commentators suggest Judas self-identified as a Zealot or 'freedom fighter'. Zealots were the most politically minded of the Jews. Although motivated by socio-economic and political factors, they had above all a burning desire to rid Israel of the hated Roman occupiers. Josephus described them as having "an insatiable passion for liberty" and they were prepared to use violence to secure it. At the heart of their theology was the conviction that the freedom of Israel and the redemption of the people of God could not come about unless the people of God themselves worked for it, and indeed were prepared to fight for it. And the time for fighting was coming. It was no good simply passively waiting for the Kingdom of God to come all by itself. Israel needed to rise up, and the Messiah needed to be there leading the uprising.

Other commentators however suggest that Judas was not a card-carrying 'capital Z' Zealot in this extreme sense, for why would he align himself with the radical but apparently non-violent group being gathered by Jesus? Perhaps he was simply just 'zealous'. The appellation 'zealot' (with a small z) would indicate his zeal and fervent devotion to the Jewish cause rather than membership of a specific political group. 'Zealous' personalities are dedicated and committed, motivated and energised, but can also often be mono-focussed outsiders, seeing things only in black and white with no shades of grey, rigid and unbending, obsessively single-minded in their drive to secure the goal in which they so passionately believe. If Peter's impulsive

behaviour would today merit a diagnosis of ADHD, would Judas' own neurodiverse traits have also earned him a place on the autistic spectrum?

Initially, Christ's message would have aroused great excitement among the Zealots and their 'zealous' sympathisers. His early public teachings, in which he rarely mentioned his having to die for the sins of the world, seemed to fit their expectations of a warrior Messiah who would rise up to cast out the oppressor and turn the people back to God. The accompanying miracles and healings only added to their belief that here was the Messiah, the descendant of David, who could lead them to victory over the Romans and usher in God's Kingdom at last! Judas was thrilled at the prospect!

Then Jesus' message had begun to change, and Judas began to be disillusioned. Jesus started to teach his disciples that he would die, by crucifixion, of all things, that this was the main reason for his coming not as Warrior Messiah but as Suffering Servant. Not revolution but spiritual revival, renewal and reconciliation. Judas began to notice that Jesus' references to the Kingdom contradicted his own ideas of it. His methods of achieving it would certainly be different from those espoused by Jesus.

So doubts must have begun to form in his mind: "Have I got this wrong? Is this just yet another one of these self-proclaimed False Messiahs who keep popping up? In which case I must bring him down, for the good of The Cause. Or have I actually got it right, and this *is* the Messiah, 'the real deal', but he just needs me to push him in the right direction to fulfil his role properly". A strange mixture of doubt and pride.

Judas certainly wanted to see more aggressive action. He had been trying hard to make Jesus into the kind of leader he thought he ought to be. He reckoned that if Jesus could be forced into national leadership, it would hasten the day of deliverance from the Romans. And on Palm Sunday it all seemed to be coming to pass. Jesus entered Jerusalem to Messianic acclaim (never mind this silly symbolism of riding on a donkey and not a stallion) and the crowds had tried to make him King. How bitter then the disappointment when Jesus declined the honour and escaped the crowd!

Jesus then enters the Temple and finds in its precincts those who sell 'unblemished' animals for sacrifice, those who exchange coins for the Temple Tax. Lots of scope here for sharp practice, lots of opportunities to fleece pilgrims, lots of bare-faced extortion, lots of profiteering on the backs of the little people. The reverence due in a holy place of worship reduced to the hubbub of the market place. And all this in the name of religion! Jesus, in righteous anger challenges the established order, symbolically enacts the Temple's forthcoming destruction, overturns the tables, confronts the injustice, drives out the perpetrators, undermines the power of the religious authorities. Actions speaking louder than words.

Speaking truth to power at last, thought Judas, and not just speaking truth to power but in the manner of so doing it, re-defining where power itself should lie. He must have hoped this could be the trigger for revolt. On his word, the disciples could have produced swords and daggers from under their cloaks, the crowds would have rallied to them, the revolution could begin at last. With the element of surprise, it could have worked, it could have established a new regime free from Rome and the stranglehold of the pseudo-aristocrats who held office as chief priests ..... if only Jesus had not slipped back into the shadows and sloped away safely to the security of Bethany. For Judas, there is now double disappointment and disillusionment.

A psychological storm is gathering. For months Judas has suppressed his criticisms and hidden his resentment at the vacillating ways in which Jesus is behaving. Now his doubts are growing, his pride is wounded. It will only take the weight of one final straw to tip him over the edge, as we will see in the next address.

Today, on the final stages of the Road to the Cross, we look at double betrayals, those of Judas and Peter.

*Judas:*

For Judas, the final straw which would carry him over the edge from disciple to betrayer has arrived. We have seen how Judas was a proud but bruised man: entrusted by Jesus with stewardship of the team's common fund but excluded from the inner circle, zealous to advance the cause of the independence of Israel but failing to influence Jesus in the direction of travel he felt was needed to secure it. His single-minded belief that there was only one possible way forward was threatened, his doubts were growing, his ego was bruised and he couldn't take much more. The final straw was to come in an unlikely setting: a dining table, a jar of perfume, a weeping woman, and a ritual anointing.

The gospels of Mark and Matthew both precisely locate this story two days before the Passover and at the home of Simon in Bethany, where Jesus had retreated after the events in the Temple to stay at the home of Mary and Martha. Some scholars believe that Jesus in his healing ministry had possibly healed this Simon of leprosy, and, in an act of gratitude, he had welcomed Jesus and the disciples into his home for a meal. As Jesus reclined at the table, an unnamed woman came in, broke open a sealed alabaster jar of expensive perfume and poured the costly oil over Jesus' head, anointing him in an extravagant and symbolic act of worship. The disciples react with indignation at a perceived waste of valuable resources. It is a gesture of excess which they do not understand, and which Judas as treasurer specifically resents: "Why was the ointment wasted in this way. For it could have been sold for more than three hundred pieces of silver and the money given to the poor".

Jesus gently rebukes him, for the anointing of his head has symbolically both marked him as indeed the Messiah, "the anointed one", and also has begun in advance the ritual preparation of his body for burial. Jesus tells him "she has done a beautiful thing to me. Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her". And indeed the story of her deed will be part of the eternal story of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection.

Her spiritual insight and generosity of spirit can be contrasted with the spiritual blindness and egotistical arrogance of Judas. He would have thought that if the woman had such an expensive jar of perfume to pour away like this, it should have been brought to him as treasurer first: he would have known better what to do with it, how to more effectively realise the worth of this costly asset for the greater good. For Judas, "patron saint of bean-counters" the world over, this was just too much.

Kathy Galloway in her book *"Imagining the Gospels"* puts into the mouth of the woman, thought-provoking words for all such "bean counters":

*"Everything was all right. Then that fool started to go on about the expense, and about giving the money to the poor. Well, I have observed that people who talk about the poor but have no capacity for a gesture of extravagance when the moment calls for it, rarely translate their words into deeds. To be of a generous spirit also requires the knowledge that there are times to celebrate, the need to mark something of importance, or simply to say that we have not lost our ability to make a sign of this one moment, to pour everything into it in a great overflowing of richness. To make a feast when the cupboard is all but empty, to do something of beauty in the midst of ugliness, to do the utterly unexpected, these are the ways we affirm our humanness and our freedom".<sup>2</sup>*

Yet again marginalised and concerns ignored, pride wounded and ego bruised by Jesus' rebuke, for Judas this anointing was the final straw. He knew that after the events in the Temple, the chief priests and scribes were looking for ways to get rid of this troublemaker Jesus completely. So from that moment on he began to look for an opportunity to betray him. But why? Surely it cannot have been just about a bribe to betray? Why then stay for so long suffering the privations of a poor itinerant group of disciples if you were only interested in the money? So was it greater frustration at yet another missed opportunity to advance the Cause?

Both Matthew and Mark confirm that it was immediately after Jesus was 'anointed for burial' by the woman that Judas first made his approach to the chief priests. It must have been at this point that Judas knew for certain that any uprising against the Romans in Jerusalem led by Jesus was unlikely to happen; Jesus was clearly still bent on heading towards his own death on a Cross. So did Judas betray Jesus, not for the money, nor just because he was frustrated by him, but as a last throw of the dice to try to steer him towards violent revolt against the authorities?

Did Judas never really expect Jesus to allow himself to be arrested without a fight? On more than one occasion he had evaded his enemies and escaped their traps, he could surely do so again. In Gethsemane, it would be confusingly dark, and Peter, impulsive Peter, has a sword! So Judas betrays his Lord ..... and Jesus does not resist. He is arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death, just as he had foretold. With the prophecies now fulfilled before his eyes, Judas the betrayer sees at last how he has misunderstood things all along, and so takes the only path open to him.

*Peter:*

And now with Judas, a second betrayer: Peter. In the Garden of Gethsemane, there is, as Judas predicted, darkness, chaos and confusion. After Judas' betraying kiss, the soldiers of the high priest seek to arrest Jesus, and Peter, shocked and scared, and characteristically acting in impulsive anger, seeks to defend his Lord, defeat his enemies and deflect his crucifixion. He draws his sword and strikes out. Only to be rebuked by Jesus for betraying the messianic mission, and told to put up his sword: for "all who take the sword shall perish by the sword".

Peter, like Judas before him, is trying to take control of a situation which is not his to control: it is Jesus's, and Jesus is prepared for it. Earlier in Gethsemane, Jesus had fought his own battle against despair and doubt, against the temptation of taking the easy way out, of resorting to the active aggression urged upon him by Judas and demonstrated by Peter. He had chosen yet again his close friends, the inner circle of Peter, James and John, and asked them to come and support him; he had opened his soul to them, asked them to watch with him ..... but they had slept. He had poured out his heart to his Father in prayer: "If it be possible to take this cup from me ....." but then went on: "Nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will".

In Gethsemane, he had shown his disciples, then and now, that there *is* another way, certainly not painless and not passive, but in active partnership with God, in full and willing acceptance of its cost of suffering and rejection, the cost of the Cross.

In his book *"The Cost of Discipleship"*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (executed in a Nazi prison 80 years ago this last week), makes the point:

*"Suffering and rejection sum up the whole cross of Jesus. To die on the cross means to die despised and rejected of men. Suffering and rejection are laid upon Jesus as a divine necessity, and every attempt to prevent it, especially when it comes from his own disciples, is in fact an attempt to prevent Christ from being Christ."* <sup>3</sup>

Peter had clearly failed to grasp this. He had heard all Christ's teaching about loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you, all the talk about passive acceptance of God's will rather than active resistance to it, but promptly forgets all this in the heat of the moment and by so acting, denies who Jesus really is, and betrays what he has come to do.

And another denial, another betrayal, was to follow, not in Gethsemane but in the courtyard of the high priest, where Peter's accent betrayed him.

I have lived in this Midlands city for over 50 years, yet I know I still retain much of the Northern accent of my youth. Some years ago, attending and contributing to a local community event protesting against an undesired development in Mickleover, I was accosted by the accusation: "you're not from round here are you?". I was flummoxed. Peter must have felt similarly when his accent betrayed him as a Galilean: "you also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth", but instinctively took refuge in an instant three-fold denial: "I was not with him; I am not one of them; I do not know the man". And the cock crowed twice. He remembered bitterly his earlier arrogant assurance that even if everyone else were to desert his Lord, he certainly would not: "even though I must die with you, I will not deny you", and Jesus' prophetic reply that "before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times" .....and wept.

Peter however has been called, albeit metaphorically, "the man with three swords" <sup>4</sup>; the first sword, "the sword of violence" which he drew in anger, cutting the ear of the high priest's servant; the second sword "the sword of sorrow" with which in bitter remorse he cut himself to the heart by his denials, and the third, "the sword of truth" with which, armed by the Spirit, he cut to the heart the crowds at Pentecost. For only a few weeks later, there is Peter in Jerusalem boldly preaching to the crowds the kerygma message, the message of the Cross and Resurrection. And as the Acts of the Apostles records: "when they heard this, they were cut to the heart" and three thousand were baptised on that day as a result. God moves in mysterious ways and through unlikely people.

We have now come to nearly the end of the road, but the last leg still lies ahead, the Road to the Cross itself. We have followed some key characters on this road: amongst them mercurial, impulsive Peter and over-zealous, mono-focussed Judas. We have examined the leadership skills of Jesus in striving to mould them into a complementary team.

Tomorrow, Maundy Thursday in the Upper Room, that team meets together for the last time before it breaks apart: one to betrayal, one to denial, one to death.

And on Friday, Good Friday, we will meet again at the foot of the Cross, where for Jesus, the final stage of the battle begins: a battle for which he has prepared in his teachings and his actions; a battle in which he has willingly engaged in accordance with God's will; a battle which will lead from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from defeat to victory.

Tom Wright in his book "*Jesus and the Victory of God*", sums it up for us:

*"Jesus, then, took up his own cross. He had come to see it in deeply symbolic terms: symbolic not merely of Roman oppression, but of the way of love and peace which he had commended so vigorously, the way of defeat which he had announced as the way of victory.*

*Unlike his actions in the Temple and in the Upper Room, the cross was a symbol not of praxis but of passivity, not of action but of passion. It was to become the symbol of victory, but not of the victory of Caesar, nor of those who would oppose Caesar with Caesar's methods. It was to become the symbol, because it would be the means, of the victory of God" <sup>5</sup>.*

In this series of addresses, we are considering again the momentous events of Holy Week and Good Friday, a journey to the Cross and to the Tomb. It is a story in two acts: *the People and the Passion*. In my first three addresses across the earlier days of Holy Week, we looked at the *People*: the cast of key characters who accompanied Jesus on his journey to the Cross. The following three addresses will look at the *Passion* of our Lord, structured around well-known words from the Nicene Creed: “*For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death, and was buried.*”

The journey to the Cross began with Peter’s insight at Caesarea Phillipi that this Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Messiah. It was a journey which would go on to reveal the nature of servant leadership, the cost of discipleship, and the meaning of Messiahship, on a Cross on a hill outside Jerusalem. On the journey, we have examined the personalities and psychologies of the key cast of characters who interacted with Jesus on his road to the Cross: from Peter, hasty and headstrong, quick to commit but slow to understand, hyperactive and unthinkingly impulsive, to John with his egotistical misunderstanding of the nature of power, to Judas, with his tendency to see things only in black and white and his zealous belief that there was only one possible way forward, active aggression not passive acceptance. But thwarted in securing this, Judas, the Outsider, betrays his Lord covertly with a kiss in a garden, and Peter the Northerner, exposed by his accent in a courtyard, betrays his Lord overtly through repeated denial.

The Jewish leaders needed to arrest Jesus quickly but quietly, to avoid a riot from the crowds. Judas gave them that opportunity. After the betrayal in Gethsemane, the Sanhedrin sought to convict him in a speedy show trial, behind closed doors and based on false evidence, but it was unconvincing. Yet challenged to declare if he is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus cannot hold back: “You have said so”.

And this is deemed enough for him to be found guilty of blasphemy, for which the punishment is death by stoning. Although legally prohibited, judicial execution being the prerogative of the Roman occupiers, it could have been carried out: they could have worked to whip up the crowds, as they did later with Stephen. But with an eye on any future comeback, and aware of the fickleness of populist sentiment, they followed that cynical leadership adage “it matters not who won or lost, but how you placed the blame”. So they sought to ensure that the Romans would carry the can: firstly to secure judicial legitimacy, but secondly to ensure as agonising a public death as possible (and crucifixion was certainly that) “pour encourager les autres”. Cleverly changing the charge from Messiahship to claiming Kingship (a political rather than religious focus and thus a seditious threat to Roman authority), they took him to Pilate.

*Pilate* the last of our cast of key characters left to consider; weak, vacillating, capricious Pilate: a man with a possible bipolar personality, prone to extreme mood swings, with delusions of self-importance, highly impatient and aggressive, keen on a quiet life but capable of much cruelty to secure it, he led an administration prone to sporadic yet bloody oppression. Pilate asks Jesus “Are you the King of the Jews?” and Jesus answers “You say so” but makes no further reply, makes no attempt, given his well-known eloquence, to talk his way out of it. With Pilate (as indeed with present day despots), the sensible strategy is simply to stay silent.

Yet after this questioning, Pilate does not think Jesus deserves the death penalty at all, he suspects he is innocent and indeed his wife has sent him a warning from a revelatory dream telling him precisely that, but he does not want to anger the Jewish leaders, and the last thing he wants is a riot on his hands. So he tries to have the best of both worlds. He invokes the Passover custom for a prisoner, chosen by the people, to be released and attempts to use this custom by offering the crowds a choice: Jesus or Barabbas.

And when Pilate asks the crowd what if any crime Jesus has committed, they tell him if he lets Jesus go, he is “no friend of Caesar”, and they simply shout “Crucify him!” So he abdicates all moral responsibility, puts political expediency before conscience, and publicly washes his hands to show that Jesus’ death is not his fault, the ultimate cynical gesture, an empty and contemptuous symbol from one seeking to evade any responsibility for something that lay completely in his power to prevent, if he had but the will to do so.

But to please the crowds, avert a riot and protect his position as governor, Pilate has a guilty man, the leader of an uprising, released, and has Jesus crucified. He has not only put his usual cynical power games against the Jewish leaders before justice, (that was normal behaviour from him to show them who was boss), but he has put his own naked self-interest in avoiding another riot before both.

There is much irony here. One irony is that he had only been appointed provincial governor through curried favouritism and had worked hard to retain the role come what may, yet he is eventually to be removed from office by the Emperor because his continued behaviour has resulted in one riot too far. Poetic justice.

A second irony is that Pilate must have recognised, as the chief priests must also have done, that this Jesus was not just one more in a long line of would-be, but failed and executed Messiahs, not a revolutionary leader of an uprising of the sort that Judas would have had him be. His preaching of a Kingdom not of this world was hardly a potent threat to the kingdoms of this world. The chief priests schemed for Jesus’ death: arguing that “it is expedient that one man should die for the good of the people”, and Pilate concluded “it is expedient also for the good of Pilate”. So he had him crucified.

Tom Wright in his book “*Jesus and the Victory of God*” tells us that:

*“Crucifixion was a powerful symbol throughout the Roman world. It was not just a means of liquidating undesirables; it did so with maximum degradation and humiliation. It said, loud and clear: we are in charge here; you are our property; we can do what we like with you. It insisted, coldly and brutally, on the absolute sovereignty of Rome and of Caesar. It told an implicit story, of the uselessness of rebel recalcitrance and the ruthlessness of imperial power. Crucifixion was a symbolic act with a clear and frightening meaning”.*<sup>6</sup>

So the greatest irony of all is that this mediocre man, Pilate, governor of a provincial backwater in the far flung reaches of the Roman Empire, is still remembered by name, 2000 years on, day by day, by Christians across the world as they recite their credal statement of faith: “*he was crucified under Pontius Pilate ...*”

So our cast of characters on the road to the Cross is complete. They have played their parts: a man is corruptly tried, unjustly condemned, and led away to be crucified. Our journey walking alongside Jesus this Holy Week has now reached its final destination: ‘The Very Narrow Bridge of Life’.

The phrase comes from the title of a book generously given to me by my colleague Michael Futers: a book of sermons by the late Peter Jenner, at one time a priest in this diocese, who died last year. In his book, Peter related a dream which he had:

*“One night, I find myself on the edge of a very high cliff. I am on one side of an enormous chasm, like the Grand Canyon on a giant scale. The other side is just visible, way, way in the distance. I walk along the edge and come to the end of a bridge. It is a strange bridge: no roadway, no flat surface to walk on, just an irregular array of girders. I wonder where it goes to. So I start climbing, hands and feet, through the girders, clambering my way out over the canyon. I wonder where I am headed and what is on the other side. Then halfway across the canyon, I suddenly find that the bridge is not finished. It ends abruptly as the final pieces of metal point over the other side with nothing more attached to them. Never mind. I sit on a girder and admire the view...”*<sup>7</sup>

A View from the Bridge. There is imagery here of the journey from life to death, the journey which Christ himself is on, a journey which has reached that very narrow bridge which spans the two, and an awareness that the end of the journey is here. Peter Jenner derived the title of his book "The Very Narrow Bridge of Life" from a piece of meditative writing by Rabbi Alvin Fine: "Life's Journey" <sup>8</sup>. Here is a part of it:

*"Birth is a beginning  
And death a destination.  
And life is a journey:  
From childhood to maturity  
And youth to age;  
From innocence to awareness  
And ignorance to knowing.....  
From fear to faith;  
From defeat to defeat to defeat –  
Until, looking backwards or ahead,  
We see that victory lies  
Not at some high place along the way,  
But in having made the journey,  
stage by stage,  
A sacred pilgrimage.  
Birth is a beginning  
And death a destination.  
And life is a journey,  
A sacred pilgrimage –  
To life everlasting".*

*"The whole world is a very narrow bridge,  
And the important thing is not to be afraid".*

Jesus now stands at the end of that "very narrow bridge". He sees that "victory lies ...in having made the journey"; the victory – the victory of God, lies in the faithful working out of God's purpose, in the willing embarking upon it, and in the seeing it through to its bitter end. He stands at what Tom Wright has called "the dangerous and exhilarating point where heaven and earth meet" <sup>9</sup>. He looks to the other side of the chasm, and he is not afraid. It is the journeying that has been important.

Standing at the end of that very narrow bridge of life, in the words of the Welsh priest-poet R.S. Thomas: "from receding horizons he has withdrawn his mind for greater repose on an inner perspective, where love is the bridge between thought and time". <sup>10</sup>

And so why are we here this Good Friday? We are here to give thanks for love displayed in self-sacrifice, to commemorate the cost of it willingly borne, and to share the Passion of our Lord, remembering the words of the Creed: "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate...."

At the end of my last address, I posed the question: “*why are we here?*” Michael Perham offers us three reasons: to ensure we do not forget, to express gratitude, and most importantly to become more like Jesus. He wrote:

*“I have sometimes wondered how people understand the Church’s call to celebrate Holy Week. I imagine that most consider it to be something we do **to ensure we do not forget**. By retelling the story .... we remind ourselves not just of an awesome truth that Jesus died for us, but of the details of an extraordinary powerful narrative. .... It is part of the remembering to which Jesus called us.*

*But that is not all. We also keep Holy Week and celebrate Easter in order to engender and **to express gratitude**. We want to say the most profound of thanks to the God who in Jesus walked the Holy Week walk, hung on the Cross and burst from the tomb.*

*But that is not the ultimate reason. We celebrate Holy Week **to become more like Jesus**. ... because to be like Jesus is to find the way to cope with all that life may throw at us... It is in his Passion that our identification with him is at its most formative”<sup>11</sup>.*

“*It is in his Passion that our identification with him is at its most formative*”. Let the story of someone who had considerably more life experience than I have had, not to mention far more theological expertise, illustrate what that can mean in practice: Paul Miller, once Canon Residentiary in this Cathedral, was held for four years as a prisoner of war by the Japanese and forced to work on the notorious Burma-Thailand railway. Writing later to a friend, he described his conviction that it is the *interior journeying*, the *sharing* in the Passion of Our Lord, that is important above all else. His letter was printed in our Cathedral magazine under the salutary title: “*Sharing the Passion: Pious Huddles versus True Christianity*”. He wrote:

*“It was Maundy Thursday, at the height of the Japanese determination to get the railway through the jungle finished, so that they could get munitions to Burma. We had been working all day on the track and the time for returning to camp and an evening meal was approaching. Two or three of us, remembering what day it was, decided that when we got back to camp, we would read the collect, epistle and gospel for the day and thus share the Church’s commemoration of the Last Supper and the coming Passion of Our Lord... Then the word got round that, on Japanese orders, we were not going back to camp, but a meal of rice would be brought out to us by lorry and we would then continue working all through the night.*

*You can imagine how we felt, but there was nothing we could do about it. So we ate our rice and carried on. It was then I realised that this was an immense privilege. Instead of a pious little group huddled together remembering the Passion, here we were sharing it. I don’t think I have ever felt closer to our Lord than I did that night and yet there was no chance to pray in the accepted sense but only to shovel clay on to an embankment. The only prayer I was capable of was ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’.<sup>12</sup>*

In spite of all he had endured, he was able to forgive his enemies and pray for those who had persecuted him. “*The only prayer I was capable of was ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’.*”

It is of course the prayer of Jesus on the Cross, one of the seven last sentences as reported in the gospels. Michael Perham observed these were “*exclamations more than sentences: cries for help or cries of accomplishment. How much it must have cost Jesus to speak as he hung there: Jesus struggling to say important things through the pain of the cross*”<sup>13</sup>. And yes, important things were said.

First see these from the perspective of the dying thief crucified with him. As the nails were driven into his hands and feet, he cursed and spat. But then he noticed that the strange man beside him, suffering the same agony is saying *"Father, forgive them..."* and something stirred in him, what John Donne called "the despatch of grace to the penitent". In his last moments he believed and prayed in faith "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom" and told *"Today you will be with me in paradise"*. Peter has fled weeping somewhere, John is there at the cross, entrusted with the continuing care of Mary (*"Behold your son, behold your mother"*) but in deep despair, all the other disciples have deserted him, and have given him up for dead. Yet here in the penitent thief is the first convert of the Cross; here is the first fruit of the kingdom: no wonder Jesus cried out *"it is finished"*, which it has been argued is not a cry of 'it is all over' but rather a cry of 'it is all accomplished'. <sup>14</sup>

*"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"*. The soldiers, as they hammered in the nails, did they know? It was a routine for them, just what you did on crucifixion duty, they'd done it many times before. If they were amongst the 20% of Romans who were literate, they would have read the titulus which their Governor had insisted upon being affixed to the cross: "The King of the Jews", not as the chief priests wanted it to say "This man said I am King of the Jews". Pilate sticking one on the Jewish authorities yet again. So they would do their own bit of sticking it on to this scurvy so-called king and his lousy henchmen by nailing them brutally to their crosses. Did they know that the hands they nailed to the cross had cured the blind, and healed the sick, and if they did, did they care?

And Pilate: did he know? Groping for the truth: "Are you a king?" "Truth, what is truth?" but then deciding he didn't want to know and washing his hands of the whole sorry affair, taking the easy way out to keep the Jews quiet and his position secure.

And Caiaphas: did he know? Perhaps as chief priest he knew better than the rest what he was about. He had his head screwed on, and it was a political one. And he had an eye for the main chance too. As leader, he had rebuked his colleagues: "it is better for you that one man should die for the people, than to have the whole nation destroyed." Was he convinced that Jesus was an imposter, just another run of the mill prophet destined for death? But he was convinced that this Jesus was a troublemaker, a threat to his priestly authority, and so best disposed of.

*"Father, forgive them"*: the key word here is the verb 'forgive'. All his earthly ministry Jesus was concerned with forgiveness. Right from the start he proclaimed it: "I am come not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance". In his relationships he showed it, in his healings he demonstrated it, in his parables he illustrated it. On the cross itself he prayed for it, for those who drove in the nails into weak and helpless bodies, and for all who continue to do so in our society today. And perhaps even for forgiveness for himself when, in a spasm of acute agony and existential despair he cried out *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"*, before perhaps recalling that these words of despair turn, in the psalm from whence this cry of dereliction, abandonment and utter loneliness was wrenched, into an affirmation of hope. And thus being able at last to say in faith: *"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"*.

Alan Horner, Methodist minister and modern poet, sums it all up for us in his poem "Dying Words" <sup>15</sup>:

*"We expect honesty from a dying man,  
there being no need to decorate the truth  
or seek to impress the hearer  
with his cleverness or wit.  
Such recorded words are fit  
subjects for our contemplation."*

*Even the sceptic may be impressed  
by the last words of the dying Christ,  
validating as they do his teaching and his life –  
forgiveness to his enemies, or those who carry out  
their duty through his pain;  
compassion to one like himself,  
punished as an outcast, by his side;  
understanding of a mother and a friend  
in mutual grief, given to each other for support;  
the temptation to sink in the darkness of despair,  
but drawing strength from psalmist's final praise;  
the need for drink to quench his human thirst;  
and then the final words of rest and faith.*

*These were his dying words,  
consistent with his words in life,  
and because the words and life are one,  
such become as living words  
to those who hear them now,  
and risk their all to walk the self-same path."*

We have walked that self-same path with our Lord again this week, and we now stand at the foot of his Cross, where the ground is level, for there is no inequality, no injustice, no privilege; we all stand equal there. And there is darkness: a darkness which covered the whole land.

Many others have walked before me in offering a series of Holy Week addresses. In 1997, in the year of his retirement, Ben Lewers, Provost of Derby and mentor of my early ministry here, delivered such a series with the characteristically enigmatic title "*The Holy Beckon*"<sup>16</sup>. In his Good Friday address he spoke of the darkness:

*"Then a darkness. A most threatening and terrifying thing. In May 1981, a darkness fell over Derby. Some will remember it. In mid-afternoon and it was so dark that the street lighting turned on. A bolt of lightning struck the Cathedral Tower and the rectifiers controlling the organ, housed under the Cathedral floor, fused... It was frightening. Also expensive. I have never forgotten it and never shall."*

On Calvary it was a different sort of darkness, and a different sort of light. For the darkness there was the crucifixion of the Son of God, and the light was his utter total acceptance and obedience in following the path selected for him by his Father, a path he was prepared to walk to its bitter end.

And at that bitter end, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom, the curtain which protected this Holiest of Holies from the common gaze, and the light poured in: the light of Christ. There are no privileges preserved, no barriers left, the dividing wall of partition between God and man has been swept away forever.

What words or phrases can describe this: none I can find can get anywhere near.

Our only real response must be silence.... a silence of awe and wonder.

After a death, there is a burial, and a body to be prepared for it: a body bruised and bloodied that has been taken down from the cross, to be held one last time in his mother's arms in heart-wrenching pity, a pietà; a body bravely begged from Pilate, and now to be laid to rest in a borrowed tomb; but a body that first has to be ritually prepared for burial..... and it is growing late.

First, a personal story: It is exactly 25 years this year, following 12 years as Cathedral Lay Reader here, that I was ordained. The final part of my ordination training on the East Midlands Ministry Training Course was a residential Easter School held at the University of Lincoln. It was the late evening of Good Friday, almost 25 years ago to this very day, and each student group had been tasked with preparing, enacting, and sharing a part of the Passion narrative. My group had been allocated the events in Gethsemane, yet that's not what still sticks in my mind so vividly some quarter of a century later, but rather the enactment of the ritual preparation of the body for burial.

We filed into a darkened lecture theatre, lit only by a spotlight on a table in its centre. On the table was a body, virtually naked, absolutely still, apparently lifeless. It was my friend: a man we all knew well, the leader of his group and a much loved senior member of our course. People gasped. The sense of shock was palpable. We had shared so much fellowship together with him, much spiritual fellowship in services and much secular fellowship in the bar. Then in the silence, into view came the rest of the group, all wearing surgical scrubs. They began to wash the body, with slow rhythmical movements, singing softly, so softly, as they did it. You had to really strain to hear the words, but eventually you could make them out: *"Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?"*

As they cleansed the body of its blood and dirt, the silence was broken only by their quiet singing, the sound of splashing water in their basins, and the sound of tears falling. All were moved, some openly wept, grown men had tears in their eyes, including me. At the end, we left in silence, the body left lying alone.

After a death, there is often a post mortem. There was this time. There was anger: some said it shouldn't have been allowed; some said there should have been advance warning; some said it was far too much, far too distressing. There were complaints too: some who had recently lost loved ones themselves and seen them prepared for burial found it brought back raw and painful memories: it was grief too much to bear.

I know this story suffers from historical inexactitude, for it wasn't quite like this after Calvary, except there too was the loss of the much loved leader of a group, the man with whom so much fellowship had been shared, through whom so much teaching by example had flowed. Palpable pain and grief too much to bear. The sense of a final ending, the knowledge of inevitable parting, the sorrow at what might have been.

For the disciples and followers of Jesus, distressed, demoralised, dejected, it must have been grief too much to bear. They had washed him and buried him and mourned him, and now hopelessly contemplated a life without him. *"Was that it? Was it all over? Have we given up everything – homes, livelihoods, security – just for this? What has it all been for?"*

The theological answers to "what has all been for", detailed theories of atonement or substitution, liberation or representation are not for us now, any more than they were for grieving disciples then. Suffice to say that the example of Jesus in his patient acceptance of suffering in the face of the overwhelming odds which led him to the Cross has been an exemplar for many who are meeting their own test of suffering now; that the example of Jesus in challenging the prevailing cultural orthodoxies even at the cost of his life, on the Cross, is an exemplar for those who are fighting the evils of oppression, injustice and poverty now;

that the example of the cost of servant leadership and self-sacrificing love shown in the willing acceptance by Jesus of his Cross is an exemplar for all who would call themselves Christians now.

J. C. Ryle, the first Bishop of Liverpool, once said that *“A religion that costs nothing is worth nothing. A cheap Christianity without a cross will prove in the end a useless Christianity without a crown”*<sup>17</sup>. Strip out the cross and its meaning and all you are left with today is the torture and brutal death of a pacifist Galilean carpenter a long time ago. The cross is not actually something that many folk wish to spend this bank holiday weekend thinking about, nor do they, because it challenges two of our most powerful contemporary taboos, death and suffering. In a competitive capitalist culture there is no place for these, for success is the primary preoccupation. We tidy death away out of public sight into hospices and crematoria, and we see little point in suffering, if at all costs it can be avoided. But Easter is above all else a celebration of the redemptive power of that suffering and death.

Christ’s Cross tells us that God shares our struggles, that God is with us in our own cross-carrying. In a passage which I have often quoted, John Austin Baker, former Bishop of Salisbury, put it like this:

*“There is only one way in which with the world as it is, God could show himself good in respect of man’s suffering, and that is by not asking of us anything that he is not prepared to endure himself. He must share the dirt and the sweat, the bafflement and the loneliness, the pain, the weakness, yes and the death too. That would be a God we could respect, a God who put aside all his magic weapons and did it all as one of us; a God who when we cry out in our misery ‘Why should this happen to me?’ can answer truthfully; ‘It happened to me too, not because I couldn’t help it happening, but because I chose that it should..... because it was right’”.*<sup>18</sup>

Jesus had taught his disciples all this: that the Son of Man must accept suffering, violence, rejection, and death, before it can lead to resurrection, that the Messiah had to suffer, be rejected, be killed, in order to redeem, that the Cross was a road that has to go through the pain of suffering not round it, in order to reach the glorious light of the Kingdom that is to come. But in the pain and grief of loss, the witnessing of his suffering and the fear that they themselves would be next, they have forgotten his words. They have forgotten that this is the cost of their discipleship.

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing on *“The Cost of Discipleship”*:

*“Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross. Costly grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life...”*<sup>19</sup>

But the disciples could not see it like that. All they could see was that their leader was dead, their hope was gone, and like Jesus in the tomb, they were left alone.

Like the disciples, we too are left alone. We will go home soon, and this cathedral, like many other churches and cathedrals across our land will be left bare. Tomorrow will be different, and Sunday certainly different again. But we will be different too, different in perception, different to the disciples: they had no homes to go to, they were in Jerusalem and Galilee was a long way away, all they could do was to retreat to the Upper Room and bar the door for fear of the Jews, and to remember that it was only yesterday that they had celebrated the Last Supper, a “first communion” in broken bread and wine outpoured, and now seen it tragically enacted in a body broken and blood shed.

In their anger, dismay and fear, they had many questions but no answers; they did not know about Easter Day, we do. My former colleague Tony Chesterman, consummate theologian, always said he couldn’t write his Easter Day sermon until he had experienced yet again the events of Good Friday. But we already know the answer, the answer revealed on Easter Day.

Peter Jenner has a wonderful story from the world of education. <sup>20</sup>

*'In a primary school exam booklet, a maths question had space in which to write the answer. Next to the space was a blank rectangle with the instruction "Show your working". On one paper, this space had been filled with a drawing of a boy sitting at a desk, pencil in hand. He was obviously working very hard'.*

I hope he got the answer right too! But in this Holy Week, we have already been given the answer. And if we had to "show our working", in our own blank rectangle we could draw a barren road leading to a cross on a hill, a large stone rolled away, and an empty hole in a rock face.

But as their Good Friday wore on, the disciples had lost hope. As we stand with them as all hope is apparently extinguished, and as we contemplate the challenges of our own contemporary world, with its wars and rumours of war, its thin-skinned despots and abusive tyrants in positions of power, its economic woes, refugee pressures and immigration prejudices, its climate crises and ecological disasters, we too may feel hope is slipping away.

But if, like defeated disciples, we ask ourselves is the struggle now hopeless, is the cost too much to bear, let us remember that the night is always darkest before the dawn, that pain and suffering often precede glory, and that the gloom of Good Friday will soon be chased away by the brightness of Easter Day.

Verses from a poem by the Victorian poet Arthur Clough sum it up:

*Say not, the struggle nought availeth,  
The labour and the wounds are vain,  
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,  
And as things have been, things remain...*

*For while the tired waves vainly breaking  
Seem here no painful inch to gain,  
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,  
Comes silent, flooding in, the main.*

*And not by eastern windows only,  
When daylight comes, comes in the light,  
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,  
But westward, look! the land is bright. <sup>21</sup>*

The victory of light over darkness.

The victory of love over death.

The victory of God.

*“Is that it? Have we come all this way from Galilee, given up 3 years of our lives, just for this?”* These must have been the thoughts of the disciples as they witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. Their mission in failure, their fellowship fragmented, their leader executed. Heads full of fear, hearts full of grief, they cannot rid themselves of the image of their Lord despised and rejected, publicly humiliated and brutally crucified, nor rid themselves of their own sense of cowardice and involvement in his betrayal.

They had completely forgotten his teaching: why he had to come to Jerusalem, why he had to die in this way: to reconcile us to God. *“For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death, and was buried”*. This is more than a satisfaction for sin, more than a substitution on our behalf, it is a fundamental re-stating of God’s relationship with us and our world. As my former colleague, the late and much lamented Canon Tony Chesterman put it:

*“The Son of God takes on not only our human nature but shares in our life-situation. As we experience alienation from ourselves, others, and perhaps even from God, as we experience suffering, vulnerability, victimisation and mortality... so Christ did in his life and death. Jesus took on and participated in even the most painful and tragic aspects of our human experience... The Cross represents the very climax of Christ entering into our human condition and thus the very climax of Christ’s atoning work”<sup>22</sup>.*

But this is more than atonement, it is “at-one-ment”. By entering into our life-situation as fully as possible, even unto death, Christ has made it possible for us to become reconciled to God, united with God’s very self, to be “at one” with God. This changes our world-view from one where God is lawgiver and judge, to one where he is parent and lover. It shows us that to receive God’s love through the one who opened wide his arms for us on the cross, we are called to participate in God’s life, and to share in His redeeming work by actively aligning ourselves with the poor, the outcast and the marginalised of our world, as Christ himself was. The disciples had not understood all this or had forgotten it. But we as present-day disciples, should not.

In a little while we will be invited to stand in silence and “behold the wood of the cross”. Unlike what we are used to seeing in paintings and altar pieces, Christ’s cross was not a thing of beauty made from planed and polished timber: it was rough and ready, probably made from logs simply stripped of their bark. So it is particularly apposite that the cross we will venerate today is similar. Commissioned by Provost Beddoes in the 1960s, it was made by the Derbyshire sculptor Ronald Pope using wood from a tree in his Melbourne garden.

Of Pope’s work, Ron Beddoes wrote:

*“The paradox of life is his theme – death and resurrection, light and darkness, order and chaos, vertical and horizontal man... Throughout all his work comes a clear message, inexpressible in words, but if we had to try, the nearest definition could only be called love”<sup>23</sup>.*

So it is fitting that the paradox of the Son of God crucified as vertical and horizontal man, crucified in love for us, is there in the wood of the cross before us. And in these uncertain times, some words from Alan Horner’s poem “Cruciform” may help us in our contemplation of it:

*“Behold the wood of the cross...  
Behold the body of the Christ, now lifted high.  
The cross itself is seen no more, absorbed into himself,  
leaving him cruciform, his arms stretched wide  
to reach the grasping hand of the uncertain world”<sup>24</sup>.*

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