

“Father forgive them, they know not what they do.”

We begin, as inevitably we must go on by jumping about a little. The tradition is to preach on the seven things that Jesus himself said from the cross. Another tradition is that we read the passion narrative right through. But the words from the cross are scattered through the gospels and don't align all that well with the passion. So we go from hearing about Jesus in the garden straight to “Father forgive them, they know not what they do”. Though perhaps they are connected anyway.

The truth is, the Church has tried for centuries to fit together the gospel accounts of the last hours of the Saviour, the better to answer the question, what happened? What was it really about? What took place in Jerusalem? What did it all mean?

Yet the gospels don't at first appear to add up. The compilers of the gospels remember different things happening, different words being spoken, different characters in the drama, and different time sequences. Four gospels emerge in the early church as being agreed on by Christians as being authentic. But why not one? Why did the church not distil what we have into one gospel, one certainty, one definitive account of what took place on that terrible day?

Perhaps a clue is there in how we are to keep this time together. The gospel writers seem, so far as I can tell to have remembered what was important to them or to their communities. Whether it was the young barely clad man running away in the gospel of Mark or the account of Mary and John being plighted to one another by the Lord from the cross, the compilers have all remembered their own bits, the things that were significant to them.

So it will be with us.

The question to ask this afternoon through all that takes place is not simply what happened then. No, ask what it happening to you now. Let those two questions mingle and intertwine.

The nature of the faith that I know and the faith in Christ that I preach is that Christ came to earth and is involved with us all. This is not a mere remembering of what folk have called a passion long, long ago. No. This is a day of passion today. The world is shot through with the archetypes and symbols of the passion of the Lord. We believe that he is with us now in and in every place forever. Right now, we call to mind the remembering of the gospel writers of what they thought important as a way of connecting with the passion of our own lives.

We recall and remember in order to make sense of the life which we find ourselves living today.

So, Father forgive them they know not what they do....

Take that phrase to yourself and make it your own prayer. But ask yourself now, where do you find yourself in that bidding. Are you one who needs forgiving, are you one who has done wrong without realising how much harm you have done to another? Or are you the one interceding to God and asking God to pass over the faults of those who wrong you?

We might think that the former is the more pious, ever thinking about what we have done wrong.

But it is Godly sometimes to pass over wrongdoing. Jesus taught us that. Father forgive them, they know not what they do.

It is Godly, holy, Christlike to see people as blameless however guilty they might first appear.

Does he really know what is in their hearts? Does he know what is in yours today?

Father forgive he says. Father forgive, he pleads. Father forgive he cries, what ever it is that you have done to hurt him.

But can we connect this to the Passion Reading we just heard. Jesus in the garden when they come to arrest him.

There is something in the story of the slave getting his ear cut off and then being healed which does illuminate "Father forgive, they know not what they do,"

It was not the soldiers that Jesus seemed most put out about – it was the fact that Peter had got things all wrong and was turning to violence.

I've no idea whether Jesus can be regarded as a pacifist, but I do know that he used ways which we would now call non-violent protest, sometimes. At a time he would be expected to lash out against those oppressing him, he reaches out and heals one of them. He meets violence with kindness and turns expectation on its head, an experience we will encounter again before the day is out.

Those crucifying Jesus did not realise that he was the Son of God. But Peter did not realise what the Son of God stood for. He had yet to grasp all the gospel realities of the Christ whom he had been travelling with.

However well he thought he knew the Lord, he had a lot more to learn.

I find it hard not to be sympathetic to Jesus at that moment. He might have expected better of Peter by now.

Yet that is not an uncommon experience.

I used to be involved in politics, and I remember someone once saying that people in other parties were not the enemy, they were merely opponents. Your enemy was much more likely to claim to be on the same side as you.

I've thought a lot about that recently. I'm engaged in the struggle for gay rights in the church and I know full well that my enemies are not those with whom I disagree. They are merely opponents, people with a different view to my own about how to bring in the kingdom of God. No, my enemies are all people who claim to believe the same things as me, but who murmur, "not yet, not yet".

Jesus's enemies were not necessarily those who came to take him away. They were opponents, people who did not see things the same way as he did. The greatest enemy to his mission was that those whom he had loved and nurtured most in his time on earth had not got the message yet and did not see what it was he was trying to do.

Father forgive them, they know not what they do might just have much been a prayer in the garden as on the cross.

Being betrayed by a disciple was a terrible thing.

Being led into the hands of a murderous gang was a hideously traitorous act.

But which hurt the Lord more. Being betrayed by Judas or completely misunderstood by Peter who turned violent when cornered?

Each was a part of the Passion. Each of us has been betrayed, no doubt. Each of us misunderstood at one time or another. Or perhaps most of the time for some of us.

Father forgive them, they know not what they do.

Take that prayer and sit with it a while. Can you pray it yourself or do you need the Lord (or the kindness of someone else) to pray it for you?

Father forgive them, they know not what they do.

“I thirst”

The simplest of phrases. It is obvious what it means. People who are crucified in the noonday Sun in Palestine thirst. They thirst, I imagine in a way that I cannot imagine. Thirst must become the dominant pain. Water relieves. Water heals. Water refreshes.

But there will be no relief for the Saviour as he hangs there. There will be no healing neither healing from him nor healing of him.

He is dying. He is thirsty and he is dying.

Water is one of those things which we can only bear in balance. Too much and we drown. Too little and we wilt and die.

The public ministry of Jesus began with him being plunged into the Jordan river. Baptised. As it happens, I was baptised by full immersion as an adult.

I once asked someone how much water you needed to baptise someone and they replied – enough to drown them.

A reminder that we are baptised into Christ's death. That sharing in his death and burial as we do today, the hope is that we shall rise with him if he should rise on Easter day.

He was plunged into water to begin his preaching. Now as he struggles for life in the sun he has no water at all. He thirsts. He is parched and he thirsts.

Thirst. Something we all know. The man whom we have been told could turn stones into bread seems to be helpless today. They will cast their jibes at him in just those terms. He was capable of doing what must have seemed like magic whilst out on the road. Now in Jerusalem he seems capable of nothing. He is fully in the power of others. He is completely given over to their control.

They have taken him and strung him up in the sun and now he thirsts.

We know nothing of what that feels like really. How are we to enter in to this part of his passion?

Well, I enter into it by asking what else he thirsts for than the simple thirst for water. And I ask myself what it is that makes me thirsty today.

As I look on that man alone on a cross I'm sure he was thirsty for more than water.

What desires cross his consciousness?

Does he hope as he hangs there. Does he expect an intervention? It seems as though he does not.

It seems as though he is resigned to share everything with us. It seems as though out God is determined to share the worst and the most dreadful. His sojourn on earth will not be complete, will not be finished until he has gone through this horrible dry death.

But what else does he thirst for?

Alone and abandoned by most of his people I feel sure he must have thirsted for friendship, for comfort, for companionship.

It is a natural human urge to want there to be someone there when someone dies. It is natural to want to touch them and hold their hand. Anointing people when they are dying as we do is an extension of that.

Someone asked me just recently, does it make any difference to anoint someone before they die?

I said yes

He said, What, so they don't go to hell?

No, I replied, that is not to understand it at all. Hell doesn't come into it. It is about touch, comfort. It is about doing what can be done when there is nothing else to do. It is about murmuring to the dying that God loves them. When treatment is all but over and it seems that there is nothing else that can be done, it is about going to be with someone and putting fear aside. It is about going into a place that is most frightening and bringing calm. Speaking words of peace. It is about being present when all that might have been expected is pain. It is about unexpected care, unexpected comfort, unwarranted kindness.

I don't believe that people are destined for hell. I do believe that lots of people go through hell. Sometimes it seems as if there is no relief from it. Sometimes it seems as though nothing can heal what ails us.

Yet human touch, human kindness are ways in which we can know God's presence with us through other people.

As I imagine Jesus dying on the cross, I imagine him thirsty for comfort, thirsty for being touched with kindness. He has been raised up above a point that anyone caring can reach.

What else does he thirst for.

As I see look on the cross and see him dying in the dust and the filth it makes me thirsty. I can feel my throat parched like his. But I feel thirsty for something other than water.

I thirst for a world in which innocent people are not strung up to die a cruel death in the sun.

I thirst for

I thirst for a world where political prisoners are not scapegoated for the failings of political leaders.

I thirst for a world where death squads roam no more.

I thirst for a world where people are treated with equal dignity.

I thirst for a world where people are treated with equity before the law.

I thirst for a world where all people have enough food in their bellies and water to slake their own thirst.

I thirst for better health for all of us.

I thirst for better care for the dying.

I thirst for a better understanding of those whom I find most perplexing.

I thirst for prosperity for all and a world that looks out for the outsider and those who are vulnerable.

And I thirst for peace in the streets of Jerusalem.

And I thirst for peace in the streets of my own city.

And I thirst for a time when I don't thirst for these things.

I thirst, in short, for a world worth living in.

Amen

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”.

My God, why does it hurt?

My God, why do people suffer?

My God, why do I feel abandoned and alone?

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

I have a hunch that the question, “Why do we suffer?” is one that is peculiarly endemic in the Western World.

There is something about Christianity which can make some people idolise suffering in a way I’ve never understood.

They say,

“If it doesn’t hurt, it can’t be good for you....”

“You just have to find the meaning in the suffering...”

“Perhaps this suffering has been sent to teach you something....”

No. Suffering is always wrong. If someone is in pain it is our vocation as fellow human beings to do what we can to stem the pain to stop the hurting, to tend the afflicted, to bind up the wounds. We can’t stop suffering, but we must do what we can.

There is no meaning for me in suffering. It is horrible.

There is no meaning for me in pain. It is always wrong.

I find that I stubbornly cannot believe that it has any meaning. If I’m sore, I just want it to stop.

I never manage to make it through Good Friday without reflecting on the teaching of the Buddha who said that Life is Suffering.

I don’t think that is fundamentally different from Jesus bidding us to take up our cross and follow him. There is something of the same sentiment at work.

Life is suffering.

In a way, I prefer the Buddha’s bald statement of fact. His followers teach simply that life is suffering and that it is only once we accept that fact that we gain wisdom and ultimately enlightenment.

Life is suffering. How we all know that to be true. Yet often Christians want that to be the start of a dialogue. Why though, they want to know.... Why does life hurt.

Life is suffering. It just does hurt.

That is what we are discovering this afternoon as we spend time with the saviour, who cries from the cross My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

It is a reminder that sometimes we encounter God through knowing the absence of God. Jesus feels abandoned as we sometimes feel abandoned.

Yet the question, “my God, why have you forsaken me” is a question of unmistakable faith. To cry it is to believe in God. To cry it may be to despair of God, may be to be angry with God, may be to be abandoned by God. But it is to deal with God all the same.

Christ is crucified this afternoon. My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me he cries on the cross.

But he cries it in other places too. The same Christ cries in bitter agony under the dictator in Zimbabwe. the same Christ wails the same prayer when caught up in the actions of terrorists who can strike not only in Jerusalem these days. The same Christ feels yells My God, My God why have you forsaken me when medical interventions seem to have failed and all that we can comprehend is the mind bending pain of it all.

Pain seems to have taken Jesus's wit and wisdom away.

So recently, he stood before the High Priest and Pilate – the clever rabble rousing rabbi is now reduced to a mere body, wracked with pain.

Yet there is something inherently Christian about telling the truth about how things are. Sometimes that means witnessing to how bad things are. But the truth shines clear. We have to keep on telling the truth.

People sometimes characterise religious people as believing in fairy stories, in magic, in imaginary friends.

To them I say, look at a man dying on a cross. There is nothing imaginary about that. It is real. And telling the truth about the way the world is, deception dropped, deceit swept away is who and what we are.

Yet there is yet hope.

You hear the cry, My God, My God Why have you Forsaken me.

I remember thinking about it when Jade Goody was first diagnosed with cancer. She said she was terrified, she said she was frightened. She knew that she was likely to die.

Who would have thought that such an unlikely character would die such a Christian death in the end – putting all her affairs to rights, drawing other people to herself, making hard things public to get treatment for others and dying, apparently reconciled to everyone? I found it incredibly moving in a way. Jade came from the genre of what we call Reality Television. So often we don't experience it as anything like reality.

Yet at the end of her short life, everything became startlingly real. The truth did shine clear. Reality. Perspective. Focus.

In the end, a most unlikely person taught us quite a lot about how to die.

Let us not forget for a moment whilst Christ is on the cross crying in his alienation and abandonment that sometimes we will share his pain and share his cry. But let us forget neither that this was not his last word that day. Hard though it is to be with him in his agony – and these three hours are not an easy devotion, hard though it is, this is only a part of the story.

We will learn more about what it means to be ourselves, if we only wait and watch. We know the truth, that life is suffering.

Baptised into that truth, we can share in other things which happen to him too. Our ultimate hope is that death is not the end. Our ultimate truth is that we are already loved.

Our ultimate reality is that God is with us in all things. Utterly committed. The pain of love. The agony of tears.

Amen

“Mother, behold your son – son behold your mother”

I am fascinated by the ways in which people manipulate family life.

I was preaching earlier this year on friendship and I said, “You can't choose your friends, it is only your family that you can choose. That's counterintuitive for most people and has got me into arguments several times. Yet people bend and manipulate family life in endless variations. Marriages, partnerships, inheritance, disinheritance, IVF, civil partnerships, conception, affairs, adoption, bigamy etc are going on all the time; people choosing whom they will regard as family. Friendship is different somehow. A friendship chooses two people and can't really be forced or faked.”

Here at the cross, there is one of those strange manipulations taking place. Jesus takes a moment to speak to the Beloved Disciple and his mother. From now on they are to be family. He calls on them each to adopt the other as a family member. To look out for one another. To care for one another. Perhaps, as church tradition has it, to make a home together.

At funerals, one of the prayers that we often pray in the Scottish Episcopal Church is, “by this death may we who were close to the one who has died now, because of her death, be even closer to each other, that we may, in peace and friendship here on earth always be conscious of your promise to be faithful to us in death.

Here at the cross, two of those closest to him in life are commanded to do just that. To bind. To cleave. To join their hearts in mutual comfort and support.

I'm someone who is bewildered by those who campaign for what they call family values in the name of the church and who in doing so seem determined to denigrate someone or other, sometimes people like me.

I've worked this through in recent years by realising myself that what I want is friendship values. I want the values of friendship brought into all kinds of areas of life. I want friendship values to be at the heart of the discourse about what it means to speak about families.

When we speak about those who set up home together, who commit to one another, who cleave, who bind, who unite, I want to embed friendship into that experience. If friendship takes root – other values will blossom forth themselves, I suspect.

But back at the cross, Mary and John must look at one another in utter despair. He whom they have loved is lost.

They stay there when others have fled.

I think that their sticking around is greatly to their credit and no doubt they already find some strength in one another.

Others have fled but they remain.

Mary has known disgrace before of course, yet she has always stuck around.

She knew the disgrace of his birth the timing of which was hardly convenient for her. She knew the odd incidents in the temple when he was a child. She was singled out when he was only a baby as someone who would be caused particular pain by this particular child. Mary, a sword will pierce your heart, Simeon had said.

As she looks on, a sword will pierce her Son's body soon, but already that sword long prophesied has come to pass, splitting her peace and harmony asunder. Tearing at her own wellbeing as his body is torn into pieces by the torture.

It is her love that keeps her there. It is her love that tears her to pieces too.

And what of John. It is surely his love that keeps him there too. Love that must rip his own heart into shreds.

Can it have been so recently that the last supper has been celebrated. What last night when one lay his head on the other's breast. Here stands beloved John who last night was snuggled up to the man he loved beyond all others. Here he stands and watches that same breast beaten and torn by the scourging and lifted high for all to see.

Too many men who have wanted tenderness from one another have been treated like this. Too many men rewarded with violence for their kindness. Too many souls tortured by seeing their loved ones torn to pieces in public.

John and Mary. Mary and John.

He need say no words to bind them together after this. They have shared in his own passion. They have travelled great journeys with him, each in their own way. And now they stand. Mary and John. John and Mary.

Bound forever by just having to be there. By having to last it out to the end.

Their friendship takes flight in that moment. Do they choose one another or is it chosen for them.

The best friendships I have are always with people who I've gone through a lot with. People whom I've chosen to be with either in their passion or who have chosen to stick around through mine.

Friendship is one of the things that does last out the crucifixion experience. Friendship gets tried in the fire this day. It was a friend who betrayed him. It was a friend, Peter who denied him. It was friends who generally fled and put distance between themselves and danger.

But it is friendship and fondness and fearlessness that pins Mary and John to the spot. They stay.

They are rewarded no doubt with harrowing despair. But they are rewarded too with a relationship which seems to have gone on, which seems to have lasted.

Son, behold your Mother. Mother, your Son.

Beloved Mother. Beloved Disciple. Here they stand and we with them. Gazing on his afflictions. Moved by his compassion. Hoping that we will last the course and, tried in by the fires of this life have friends that will stay with us through anything.

Mary and John, John and Mary.

Let us pray this day for friendships tried in the fire. For those who sail the waves of married life, for those who suffer the loss of a child and struggle to find others to share that loss with, for those who feel betrayed, misunderstood, denied.

Let us pray for them and the blessing the peaceful blessing of friendship for them as we pray.

Amen

“This day you will be with me in paradise”

We have to journey away from the passion of John for this one. Once again, it is another gospel writer who notices this detail. This time it is Luke.

Remember the story. Jesus is taken and crucified not on his own but between two thieves. He was treated as a common criminal, yet a little snippet of debate is recorded by Luke.

One thief derides and curses Jesus. Are you not the Messiah he asks? Save yourself and us! Self interest wins out in him to the end.

The other is a different character. He sees someone who is in the same boat as himself but whom he knows does not deserve it. It is this man who is rewarded by Jesus saying, “Today you will be with me in paradise”.

Or is it? Well, there is no doubt that Jesus says this to the man. But does that mean that the other one goes unredeemed that day. Is one saved and the other damned.

You see, I don't see the great scheme of heaven as a court to law where one will be judged and sent one way or the other – to freedom if you made the right choices or condemned to punishment if you didn't.

It seems to me that the main different between the two criminals is that one is clear enough in mind to recognise Christ for who he is. He is rewarded by that recognition by the comfort of being told he will see the Lord in paradise.

Does the unrepentant criminal lose out on paradise in that moment. I can't believe it is so. I don't think the ultimate destination of one was any different to the other.

One of the great truths that the presence of Jesus on earth was all about was that we are in this together. The same fate will ultimately fall to us. Death surely. Salvation certainly. The hope of grace, well, the hope of grace if we recognise it.

The difference between the criminals was not where they were going that day but in what they perceived.

One was self centred to the end. In his passion he knew no kindness.

One was thinking of someone else and was rewarded with kindness, grace and promise.

Kindness is one of the themes of these addresses this afternoon. It has popped up in most of them. Odd that. In amongst all the grit and the tear, the pain and the agony, there is much kindness to be found.

I find that in my own ministry too. I know the reality of pain in other people. I know that life is tough for people. I know we share in the passions of Christ.

We are together, the body of Christ. We are commissioned to love others in his name but the darker side, the shadow side of that, the crucified side of that is being honest about the reality of pain too. We share in his passion as well as in his love.

In my ministry – in the ministry of any priest, you encounter the best and the worst of people.

You encounter the jealous, the frightened, the self seeking. But you also encounter acts of incredible courage, moments of great kindness, scenes of unexpected, surprising grace. Times and places where God breaks through.

I don't doubt that you can call them to mind now.

Unexpected pleasures.

Unplanned for moments of gift.

Unexplainable moments when something just gets to you. Is it God breaking through? Moments of kindness when you need it. Moments of grace.

Times when you see things as they really are. Glimpses of goodness in other people. Glimpses of goodness even within yourself.

God is near you.

God was near the criminals on the crosses. But only one managed to recognise him.

There are those who think that the Christian life is about knowing a single moment of conversion – times when you chains fall off and you follow Jesus redeemed and loved and free.

Well, that glimpse of grace does happen to some of us. And to others the perception of God dawns slow and sure, creeping up on us, catching us out.

For lots of us it is about dawning reality. Coming to the conclusion that those glimpses of grace are actually related to this talk of a God.

Conversion happens in my life all through my life. The spiritual life seems to me to be about the recognition that there is holiness, there is truth, there is grace, there is love and that somewhere, in the cradle formed by those graces, God is born in my life.

Two criminals. One recognises him. The other doesn't.

They argue. They fight over him.

Are those two criminals two sad characters a long time ago who probably got what they deserve, or do they represent more than that.

Are those two characters fighting away inside you as you try to work out who this person is who is crucified today.

On the one hand, he is a charlatan who promised indeed that he could save others. Why can he not save others. Why can he not just get on with it and save me too without me making any effort?

On the other hand, he seems not to have deserved to die. Can we not cut him some slack. I deserve condemnation sometimes but he doesn't seem to have deserved any.

Two criminals. Two moods inside me fighting for dominance.

Will I let despair win? Will I let cynicism win? Will I let bitterness win?

Or kindness?

I'll look to Jesus, seeing him sharing in suffering with me and murmur "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

So will I pray, and think on these things.

“Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit”

Let us just pause a moment and think about our place in all of this. Just before the Lord draws his own agonising last breaths, let us think about what we are doing here.

I am struck every year in Holy Week by the story of the crowd – the rabble in Jerusalem. We sang as we entered Jerusalem on Sunday – Songs of triumph. Songs of joy. Songs of victory.

But the atmosphere changed by the time we got to today. The same crowd which sang Hosanna cries Crucify on the Friday.

Last Sunday, here in church we read through the Passion according to the Mark – the gospel of the year. As is often my custom, I asked the whole congregation to read the words of Jesus – the rationale for this being that now, we are the body of Christ. Together, we are his hands and his feet in the world – therefore it is appropriate to read, as one people, his words.

There is a tradition of the passion being sung in church on Palm Sunday – something which we might try one year. There are other more modern ways of doing it. Some people like to do it with a cast of thousands – someone gets to be the narrator, someone Peter, someone Jesus, someone Pilate and so on. If you do it that way, the congregation get to take the part of the crowd. It's rather uncomfortable, to find oneself shouting crucify, crucify. There is something authentic about that cry from the crowd – which is a fickle mob at the best of times.

This congregation here which now goes by the name St Mary's Cathedral was once subject to the fickleness of the crowd – more than once in its history, the meeting room that the congregation was using would be torn down by a mob – what was called in good Glasgow parlance, a rabble.

We were rabbled out of our worship places because we kept the faith as we saw it and were not prepared to compromise on that faith to the angry majority.

When we read the passion today with each of us taking the words of Jesus it changes things. We step out of the mob and start to enter in to the experience of someone who was himself rabbled from place to place on his way to where we find him today, on the cross.

I'm struck every time I do the reading of the passion this way by the women who come to me and say that it was important for them to get to say the

words that Jesus said – they tell me that never to get to say those words and only ever get to shout crucify, crucify was horrible.

So now we all say them together.

And yet right now at this moment, we hear the cry come from one who is alone.

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

When I was looking at those words getting ready to preach them, they seemed very familiar. I felt that I had said them myself very recently.

Was it a funeral perhaps, I wondered? Is it part of what I say when someone has died.

But it isn't funerals where we say, Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my Spirit. Rather, it is Compline. The old service that the church has for Night Prayer uses that phrase as one of its responses.

Compline is one of those services which people just seem to love for its own sake. You don't need an orchestra or banners or trumpets or servers or any jamboree at all. Singing it is quite fun, but it works for a lot of people as a said service.

Into your hands I commend my spirit.

It is part of the last prayer of the day in the church. Something which people can still murmur to themselves before drifting off into sleep.

Odd, isn't it, that the words that Jesus used in great agony and after such an amount of pain should themselves be capable of such comfort so many years later.

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Tender. Calm. Holy words.

There is a lot in this afternoon's remembering which we take hold of through the year. What comes together in an extraordinary way today as we remember the cross, we scatter across the rest of the year. A patchwork of passion. A quilt to comfort us.

Night time is often the time when our fear level rises. Night time is often the time when we feel that things are too hard or too difficult or we just can't let go and be at peace.

Jesus's prayer at this time is a letting go. When he says, Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit, he lets go of any pretence that he is in charge of everything. He lets go of any notion that he can act. He lets go of being able to do anything other than be.

Sometimes the Christian journey is all about taking up things. Taking up fair trade, or equal rights campaigning. Taking up devotions and practises that will bring us closer to God. Taking up other people's concern and making them our own to bring to God in intercession and prayer.

These are all holy things. Taking thing up is a part of the journey.

But now, at this point in all we learn about Christ on the Cross, we have to acknowledge that sometimes it is about letting go too.

Letting go of pretentions.

Letting go of being in control.

Letting go of being in charge.

Letting go of being right.

Letting go of being able to influence and control.

Sometimes we have simply to sit and to be with God. Sometimes we have to sit and accept that things are the way they are.

Doing and non-doing.

Being and not-being.

There are paradoxes a plenty this afternoon.

But still a man hands on a cross.

He is no paradox. He is hurting. It is almost done.

From on hear, the onlookers, the crowd hear him speak.

His passion, is real. His compassion is holy. His time is almost done.

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my Spirit.

“It is finished”.

But what is finished? Listen to this poem from RS Thomas.

The Coming

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

I am convinced that something was finished on Good Friday, but it is worth just pausing before we all depart and ask ourselves what it is that is finished.

The dying and agony during which we have kept watch is nearly finished. It comes to an end and we will depart. But what will we have witnessed. What is over? What is done? What has been accomplished?

There are those for whom this event is best described as a divine deal – a price paid. The theory is, that we all deserved to die and that Jesus in some way takes the penalty for our sin in our place, redeeming us by his blood. The offer, so they say is that if we accept Jesus as Saviour, his blood will count instead of ours when God is doling out ultimate punishments and rewards.

Well, if that comforts you, then God bless you. That way of thinking is what I used to think Christianity is all about. I've not entirely let it go. It still can creep up on me and move me whilst reading from Isaiah, “For by his stripes we are

healed", it can still cause a tingle to go down my spine when singing with the crowd,

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain—
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

It moves me, but it does not ultimately satisfy me when I've got my head in gear. Its a part of the story and a part of my story, but is it enough. Does that finish the story. Does it square the circle of my salvation. Is that sacrifice enough?

Well, that sacrifice might be enough if I thought that God was in the business of doling out eternal damnation.

However, I preach and teach that God already loves us every time I get into that pulpit.

Can that faith, that hope in that love defeat me today?

If God already loves us, there is no price to be paid. If God already loves us to distraction, hell is not an option.

Before we depart we must ask ourselves, how big is that love, how wide are its borders, how great is its compass?

The cross tells us that God loves us this much – enough to stretch his arms out, not only to embrace us, but loves us even when we would cause him all the pain that can be imagined.

His love is the only retribution he can offer.

The punishment for our sins is not death. It is to know we are loved.

The penalty for being who we are is not hell. It is to know we are loved.

The only discipline on offer from the God I know, is to know that I am already loved to distraction.

It is finished he said on the cross.

But what is finished?

Nothing less, I think, than the complete identification with us.

The Son of God looked on at the world far off and said, "Let me go there."

He became incarnate. The festival of the incarnation is supposed to be Christmas Day, but Good Friday is a part of the same idea.

God took something on. He took on being a body. Being like us.

Being like us, he shared in this world for a while. He walked through galilee. He made friends and talked with them and taught them.

He made found opponents and disputed with them in public.

He did odd things that have significance thousands of years later. Taking the ordinary things in life and giving them cosmic meaning. Bread, stones, oil, water, wine. He told stories about people like us: prodigal children, searching people, sometimes rather half-hearted disciples.

He shared with us by walking and talking. He shared with us by eating and drinking. He shared with us by listening and teaching. He shared with us by suffering and dying.

And now it is done.

It is finished he says. The journey is over. It is done.

His identity with us is complete. His identity is so mingled with ours that I have faith that what happens to him will happen to me.

He will be buried now. He will lie at peace now.

Let us go from this place thankful for his mission to earth, remembering his life amongst us and grateful for all he came to bring us.

He identified with me. I identify with him. Wholly human. He has come. He has been. He has accomplished something.

Whatever he has accomplished it is over.

It is finished, he says.

What was it he said about building up the temple after three days?

What was it he said about how the Son of Humanity must die?

What was it he said about even a grain of wheat needing to die before new life could begin?

Well, whatever he said, he can say no more.

All is done. All this is over, It is finished. Completely finished indeed.

Amen