

HOLY WEEK 2024



**AT THE FOOT
OF THE CROSS**

“Through Christ, be reconciled to God.”

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

Across the four gospels, there are seven sayings of Jesus that are recorded as him saying them as he died on the cross. We began Lent—Ash Wednesday—with Jesus saying, “Father forgive them, they know not what they do.” (Luke 23.24) Now, during Holy Week, as we prepare to witness again to Jesus’s death and wait in anticipation for his resurrection, we will reflect on five more of those sayings.

Our reflections each day are written from the perspective of one who may have stood at the foot of the cross and heard Jesus saying these things. On occasions that person is just someone in the crowd. On others, it is a character who is referenced in the scripture reading.

This booklet accompanies video presentations of these reflections and prayers. Links to the videos can be found at:

<http://www.bromleyurc.org.uk/example-page/holy-week/holy-week.php>

On the final page of this booklet is a hymn by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty that summaries all that Jesus says and what he does for humanity on the cross. If you are reading these reflections, rather than listening, then please keep referring to this hymn as the week progresses.

And finally, if not otherwise stated, all the reflections and prayers are written by Stephen Fellingham (Bromley URC Local Church Leader) and Elaine Colechin (minister of St Mark’s United Church, Greenwich and Bromley URC).

Bible translation: New Revised Standard Version.

These Holy Week reflections are being shared across churches in the South London Synod Area (East) including:

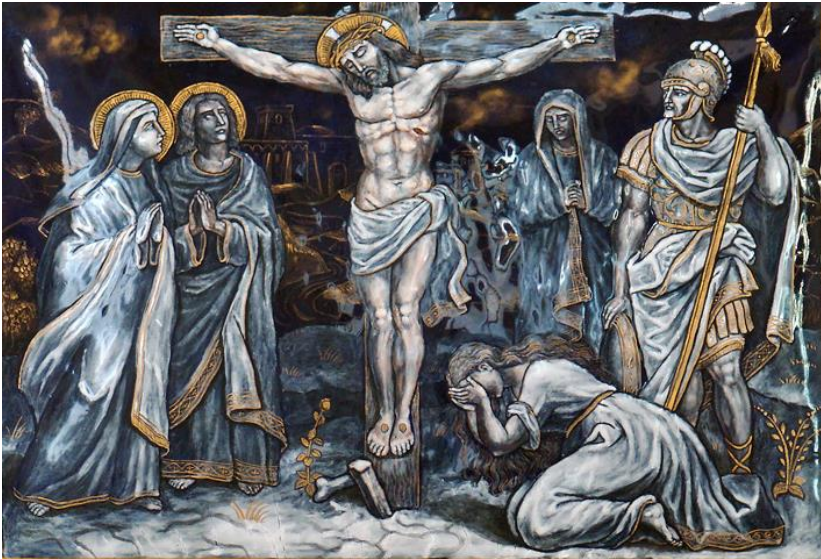
Bromley United Reformed Church; Dulwich Grove United Reformed Church; Elmers End United Reformed Church; Emmanuel United Reformed Church, West Wickham; Hayes Free Church; and St Mark’s United Church, Greenwich.

HOLY MONDAY

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

Mark 15:33-39

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'



REFLECTION

It was a cry of complete desolation. Maybe not surprising from a man who had been executed for no other reason than giving others hope. But it is a cry that still haunts me to this day. How could a man who had been so full of hope become one who was so completely without hope?

As I stood at the foot of the cross, and those words of anguish hit the crowd, it was odd to watch their reaction. It was the normal crowd of locals who turned out for the executions plus a smattering of those who looked to be from among their religious leaders. To begin with there was a questioning whisper among them, “Is he quoting from the psalms?” and then louder voices calling out, jeeringly, “He is calling for Elijah!” I guess through the pain he would have been experiencing, his words were not exactly clearly pronounced. It could have been Elijah he called to rather than God!

The next thing, one of the local fools had taken a sponge on a stick and stolen some of the cheap, vinegary wine we had around the execution site to steady our nerves, more than quench our thirst. One of us should have intervened and probably stopped them, but the crowd was so caught up with the fool’s actions, we could have ended up with more trouble than leaving them to taunt the man further. “See not even Elijah comes,” the fool shouted, as they waved the sponge in front of the man’s mouth.

When he cried out again, words incomprehensible or maybe so full of pain I just did not want to hear their content, the crowd took no notice. Too caught up in the antics of the fool and the mockery heaped upon all those whom we crucified. Yet, I knew then, with certainty, it had not been Elijah he had called to. It was God—the God who he had woken the world up to in his teachings and actions.

To this day, I still do not completely understand why I said what I said in response to his cry. I knew something of the man, but I did not know him like one of his invisible, vanishing followers or friends. He was one I knew more by rumour than truth. Yet, even in that desolation and utter hopelessness, there was something about him that opened my eyes to God and God's mercy and love.

Later there were more rumours, this time about the temple. At the same time as the man had died, apparently the temple curtain separating off the Holy of Holies had spontaneously torn in two. Was that a sign of God's desolation at the death of the man? Or was it a sign that something new was about to start? No more barriers between us and God because one man cried, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

I will let you decide. I know what I think!

PRAYER

As the hopeless hour approaches,
when all seems to be lost God,
and complete desolation hits us
at the foot of the cross,
we pray that we do not get caught up with the mockery,
with the disbelief that you would sacrifice yourself for us.
Let us sense the disquiet in you
and open ourselves to your grace
so that we may proclaim,
you are our God, ever-present,
ever-loving, now and always. Amen

HOLY TUESDAY

Today you will be with me in paradise.

Luke 23:32, 39-43

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'



REFLECTION

Only three crucified today. I watched as Jesus was nailed to the wooden beams, flanked by two criminals. The soldiers were rough and callous, showing no mercy as they drove the nails into his hands and feet. The crowd around us jeered and mocked, shouting insults at Jesus as he hung there, bloodied and broken. But at least he and the others crucified today are luckier than most. At least their suffering will be over by sunset when the Sabbath begins - the Roman authorities showing they understand Jewish sensitivities that nothing unavoidable should happen on the Sabbath - even dying - so they break the legs of those who were not yet dead before sunset.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of despair as I watched Jesus, the man who had performed miracles and preached about love and forgiveness, being nailed to the cross. How could this be happening? Why was this happening to Him? As the soldiers hoisted the cross upright, Jesus cried out in agony, and my heart broke at the sound of His suffering.

One of the criminals joined in with the mockery, hurling insults at Jesus and challenging him to save himself if he truly was the Son of God. But the other criminal stopped him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserved by our actions; but this man has done nothing wrong."

Turning to Jesus, he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And in that moment, I saw something miraculous happen. Jesus turned to the repentant criminal and said, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Today - right then – in the moment of struggle and death, he was and we are transformed fully into God's realm of Shalom. This surely was a moment of grace and mercy that left me speechless, as I realised that even in His own

suffering, Jesus was still reaching out to the lost and the broken, offering them salvation and forgiveness.

Tears filled my eyes as I witnessed the power of forgiveness and redemption right before me. Despite his pain and suffering, Jesus showed love and mercy to even the most broken and sinful of men. And in that moment, I knew that I was in the presence of a truly special person. Could he really be who he said he was? This man saw God's presence as palpable and powerful within everyday life. If that is so then the realm of God is not only near, but it is right here in healings, hospitality and welcome of outcasts and sinners, and spiritual and ethical transformation. I am left asking: Can we experience the hope of everlasting life in the shadows of Calvary? And the answer surely must be yes. As I looked up at the man hanging on the cross, I knew that His sacrifice would change the course of history forever.

PRAYER

Dear Jesus! Your kindness to the penitent thief recalls the prophetic words of the Old Testament, "If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow: and if they be as red as crimson, they shall be white as wool." In your words of forgiveness to the penitent thief, I understand now the meaning of your words, "I am not come to call the just, but sinners. . . They that are in health need not a physician, but they that are ill." "There shall be joy in Heaven upon one sinner that does penance, more than upon ninety-nine just who need not penance." I see now why Peter was not made your first vicar on earth until after he had fallen three times, in order that the Church of which he was the head might forever understand forgiveness and pardon. Jesus, I begin to see that if I had never sinned, I never could call You "Saviour." The thief is not the only sinner. Here am I! But You are the only Saviour. Amen

By Ven. Fulton Sheen

HOLY WEDNESDAY

Woman, her is your son.

John 19.16b-18, 25b-27

They took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.



REFLECTION

“Woman, here is your son.”

Helpless, I felt so helpless. My son was in front of me; I could see the pain spreading across his body, his face, and there was nothing I could do. When he was a child, I could comfort him; I could hold him in my arms. But not then; then I dare not even reach my hand out to him. He is no longer the child I once held so tight; he was now a man I sometimes felt I barely knew. He hung there in agony and there was nothing I could do but stand at a distance and watch.

A long time ago, an old man told me that one day sorrow would pierce my heart like a sword. Although I hoped, even prayed, that the day would never come, it did that. My precious child, my first born, my gift from the Almighty, left me. He was pulled out of my grasp and sorrow engulfed me. My heart was pierced, broken, beyond repair.

“Woman, here is your son.”

I knew from the start that he would not be like any ‘normal’ son, if you can say there is a norm for any child. I knew from the moment that I first felt him move within me that every hour I had with him I would treasure. Not to say that Joseph and I loved him more than any of our other children, or that we treated him any differently; he caused us the same anxiety as they all did. But we always knew that he was different; that he was never just our child. We knew that one day he would leave us and not look back, for he had a purpose in the world far greater than we could conceive, let alone understand. And that God-given task led us to that day, that cross and all that pain.

“Woman, here is your son.”

Even with his last breaths he was concerned not for himself, but for others. John, Jesus’s closest friend had been standing next to me and Jesus spoke to us both saying, “here is your son” and “here is your mother”. Strange words—I have other sons, why should I take John as another? And John has a mother, why would he want another? But then where were my other sons? Where was John’s mother?

The pain I felt cut so deep and the hole that Jesus has left in my life, could not, would not ever be replaced by anything or anyone. But now that I think about Jesus’s words away from that place and that moment, he wasn’t asking me to replace him with John, but to find comfort in John and for him to find comfort in me. John understood better than my other sons what had happened. He felt some of the pain I feel. Not that Jesus’s brothers would not mourn him, they would, but somehow what I and John knew was different. If we were to bear what we have known and seen, John and I were better bearing that together than apart. For what we had witnessed on the cross the end of something, but also the beginning of something. Something I could not quite grasp in the moment.

“Woman, here is your son.”

On the cross, I saw the end of my wonderings and a place in a new home—a home in which Jesus’s memory, words and actions would live on for generations to come. Looking up at that cross I experienced death, and new life together. For from within my overwhelming grief came overwhelming joy. Today things had changed; we had begun again with a new hope, a refreshed vision. Although at the foot of the cross, it felt like a hopeless home, unthinkable, impossible, but there was my son and with him all things are possible!

PRAYER

A new home, a new life,
this is what you offer us at the foot of the cross, Merciful One.
In the hour of our despair,
in the time when we feel the least worthy,
how might we see this possibility?
Maybe not in what we see
but what we hear spoken of to others.
Even with your dying breath,
you show your love for one who loved
and comfort them with the arms of another.
Help us to know that love and show that love
for your eternal glory, Amen.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

I thirst.

John 19.28-29

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.



REFLECTION

As I stood by the cross, the midday sun beat down mercilessly on the hill of Golgotha. The scene before me was one of agony and despair, as Jesus hung between two thieves, his body wracked with pain. The soldiers had nailed him to the wooden stake, and he struggled to breathe, his chest heaving with each laboured gasp. Hung from his arms, each time he wants to breathe, he has to push himself up with his feet against the piece of wood put there deliberately to enable victims to prolong their lives - prolong their suffering. His shoulders ache, his mouth is parched. He is exhausted. It is clearly near the end of His human life. He senses it. He has hung on the cross for six hours now. It is painful just to watch him get a breath. He clearly is feeling the pain of dying in its fullness.

This death is horrific, but no more horrific than many other deaths in the past nor many still to come. He is dying, as many of us do, vulnerable, powerless, and tortured. How much longer will it continue? Where are his so-called disciples, his friends? As painful as this death must be to this man, to be abandoned by those who pledged their loyalty and their lives to him must be even more devastating.

As the hours passed, the sun began to set, casting a deep orange glow over Golgotha. I could see the exhaustion on Jesus's face, the weight of the world's sins bearing down on him. And yet he does not want to die without a final word. Even amidst his appalling suffering he remembers scripture, he remembers God. He cries out, "I thirst." He is asking for something to drink for this final effort.

My heart clenches at the vulnerability in his voice, the stark reminder of his humanity amidst the divine presence that seemed to radiate from him. And the only people to come to his aid are those who nailed him to this cross earlier today. Grabbing a nearby

sponge, they soak it in the sour wine that was being passed around by the other soldiers. They lift it to Jesus's cracked lips, offering him a meagre sip of relief. The bitterness of the wine mingled with the salty taste of his blood. As Jesus drinks from the sponge, I can see a flicker of gratitude in his eyes, a silent acknowledgment of the small act of kindness that had been offered to him by people who only hours earlier had been so brutal. I can see the relief wash over his face as he drinks, his thirst momentarily quenched. Despite his suffering, Jesus shows no anger or bitterness, only a quiet acceptance of his fate.

As I watch this simple act of kindness amidst the brutality of the crucifixion, I am filled with a deep sense of awe and reverence for Jesus. In this moment, I see not just a man dying on a cross, but a Saviour who bears the weight of the world's sin with grace and humility. And I know that his sacrifice will not be in vain, but a testament to the power of love and forgiveness in the face of unimaginable suffering.

PRAYER

This day seems to be all about death, Jesus;
what else is it when you are arrested,
accused, beaten,
betrayed, crucified?

But, when we look a little closer,
we discover it's really all about life;
integrity unbowed by expediency,
love unchanged by hatred,
humility undeterred by power,
truth untainted by lies;
and real, vibrant, fearless life breaking through it all.

You died, Jesus, because you refused to settle for anything less,
than genuine, eternal life,
for you, and for us all.

Teach us to live by the same creed,
to refuse to cling to a life that is less than real,
less than honest, humble and loving;
and to be so resolute in our quest for life,
that we will always be ready to die
in order to find it and share it.

Amen.

By Jan van de Laar

GOOD FRIDAY

It is finished.

John 19.30-34

When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.



REFLECTION

As he died, what else could be said. It was over, there was nothing more as life finally left his body. What remained was just a shell hung on two bits of wood bound together.

It was a kind of a relief that it was over. No more squabbles or doubt as to whether he was who he said he was. Life could go back to being what it had been before. We knew our place. The Romans knew their place. It was not quite the existence any of us wanted, but it would do for now. At least we controlled the narrative of God again!

But did we? Did we have control again?

Why say “it is finished?” Sure, death is final, but in how he uttered those words with so much conviction, certainty, and a sense of achievement, he was not just referring to the knowledge that his life was just about to end. In that hour he was able to say he had completed his life’s work; he had brought to completion his mission.

Was it truly over, though? Just as we had not really regained control, had this strange mission of Emmanuel—God with us—really reached its conclusion?

I remember talking with Nicodemus and his recollection of Jesus’s words to him about spirit and water, birth and rebirth. We tie the Spirit of God to our breath, and so as Jesus breathed his last, God’s Spirit, in our understanding, left him. But from what Jesus told Nicodemus, in that moment as he died, God’s Spirit did not just evaporate or disappear with the wind, as we would naturally assume. In breathing out his Spirit, Jesus poured it out on those who were there at the foot of the cross and beyond. What Jesus completed was just the beginning of something completely uncontrollable!

We talk about repentance and purification; we have rites and practices to make ourselves holy before God. Yet, we always control this despite the calendar we follow. We choose when we make our offering—when we wash the dirt from hands. Yet, as Jesus gave up his spirit and breathed his last, he blew away what we thought we controlled and ruled over. This new life he spoke of with Nicodemus was more than ritual. It was a complete change in our way of life with God. No more rules, only the utterly free movement of the Spirit within the people of God.

You cannot control that. We cannot control that. Take a breath and the Spirit is within—inspiring, leading, guiding, reviving—being God in us!

As he breathed his last, we did not reclaim God; God reclaimed us!

PRAYER

With those words from the cross,
Jesus, you proclaimed our salvation:
your work was done, humanity was reconciled again with God.
Yet, you did more than this, for salvation is about change,
about a new life with God and in God.
You poured out the Holy Spirit
on all who saw and on all who did not see.
You let the Holy Spirit roam free among the people
to mould hearts and minds in God's ways again.

As we stand at the foot of the cross
may the breath of the Holy Spirit pass through and into us,
instilling in us that it is finished—we are forgiven—
and inspiring us to be your people,
God's people, following your ways always. Amen.

HOLY SATURDAY

Silence

Mark 15.42-47

When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid.



REFLECTION

No words now came from the cross, just silence. The sound that was around us was that of the soldiers dealing with the dead and the not yet dead. We waited, in silence, until they came to take the body down for us.

Silence

The body, limp and motionless, was a dead weight; hard to manoeuvre. On the rough ground, we did our best to wrap him in the linen cloth that would be his burial shroud, as quickly as we could. Time was short, the Sabbath had begun, this work needed to be done without delay.

Shouldering his body as best we could, we silently hurried to a nearby tomb.

Silence

The tomb in its chiselled nature from solid rock had the rough feel of this rushed burial. We had no time to linger. No time to ensure all was right—that his body was properly prepared and respected. I suppose it was how others had wanted it to be: a disgraceful death followed by a dishonourable burial. Yet as we hurried to roll that stone to seal his grave, at least we managed to lay him to rest in peace, in silence.

Silence

Now as I sit silently at table, observing the start of the Sabbath, all I can think of is at least he is not still there, hung on that tree as a spectacle. At least the Law has been fulfilled. He is buried among the dead and all is silent.

Silence

PRAYER

In the darkness of this hour,
in its silence,
we are silent.

There are no words to express what we feel,
there is no more action that can be taken;
we can only be in the shock,
in the reality of death
and its silence.

God, as you are silent,
so are we.

We wait for you;
please wait for us. Amen

Oh, to see the dawn
Of the darkest day:
Christ on the road to Calvary.
Tried by sinful men,
Torn and beaten, then
Nailed to a cross of wood.

*This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us,
Took the blame, bore the wrath:
We stand forgiven at the cross.*

Oh, to see the pain
Written on Your face
Bearing the awesome
weight of sin;
Every bitter thought,
Every evil deed
Crowning Your bloodstained
brow.

*This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us,
Took the blame, bore the wrath:
We stand forgiven at the cross.*

Now the daylight flees,
Now the ground beneath
Quakes as its Maker
bows His head.
Curtain torn in two,
Dead are raised to life;
'Finished!' the victory cry.

*This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us,*

*Took the blame, bore the wrath:
We stand forgiven at the cross.*

Oh, to see my name
Written in the wounds,
For through Your suffering
I am free.

Death is crushed to death,
Life is mine to live,
Won through Your selfless love.

*This, the power of the cross:
Son of God, slain for us.
What a love! What a cost!
We stand forgiven at the cross.*

Stuart Townend & Keith Getty

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