

Holy Week Compline Address 27.03.2018**John 19.25-27**

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.

I apologise if this address is deeply personal, but the death of Jesus was a deeply personal event for all involved, even for the Word made flesh.

As I preach, my mother, her name is Heather, is in a hospice in Poole, and these are her last days. I was with her on Sunday, and will be again tomorrow, ready of course to drop every duty in between if required. We as a family take it in turns to be with her, and with my father. Many of you will know such times as you watch and wait for the inevitable death of a loved one.

Mum took her turn for the worse around Mothering Sunday, when the Gospel reading was the one we have heard this evening. People often find it a challenging Gospel, as Jesus hangs upon the cross and his mother looks on. Why choose that for Mothering Sunday? Mothering Sunday is a day full of folk tradition, a day for children, for cards and spring flowers? And those short 68 words have stayed with me since mid-Lent.

But in these last days, the tables have been turned. Instead of a mother watching her son die slowly, it is a son watching his mother die slowly. Heather is being well looked after, and she is ready to go now, but there is something helpless about not being able to do anything for her other than to stand there, not at the foot of a cross, but at the foot of her bed.

I am no stranger to death, but it is always different when it is your own, and it is different for me I find from any other bedside, of which there have been many hundreds as a priest, different because this is my Mum and the tools of my trade are less objective than for the parishioner, less powerful in the hands of Steve. I say Steve because that's what Mum calls me. You may have noticed, no-one calls me Steve, I am very much Stephen, and only my wife and my mother are allowed to shorten my name. Don't even try calling me Steve!

This Gospel is Jesus at his most human. True God and true human, the physical Jesus is still hanging on a cross, nailed there after public flogging and ridicule. His suffering is real, as real as anyone who dies a painful death. This though is also the suffering of God. God is nailed to the cross. At times of bereavement, we all ask ourselves the searching questions of faith, magnified for me certainly in this Holy

Week. Why does God allow suffering? Why is there evil in the world? Why did my Mum get cancer? Why?

If we had a God who did not know suffering, I would not be able to believe. I don't mean for God to know about suffering, without really experiencing it for himself, but to know about it first hand, a nailed hand. For me, this is why I believe, and continue to believe stood at the foot of the bed. All this tells us that life is real, that suffering exists because otherwise life would not be real, and that we have a real God who has really experienced suffering himself.

And in that pain and suffering, Jesus still finds in his humanity, the strength to hand his mother over into the care of another, someone whom he trusts. I am handing Heather over to someone whom I trust, Jesus Christ our Lord. When she dies, as the Gospel says, 'from that hour, he will take her to his own home.' And I'm OK with that, because our God knows my name and he knows Heather's name, and he knows your name. Trust in him.

Father, I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me,
and in all Your creatures -
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence.

Charles de Foucauld

Stephen Lake, Dean of Gloucester