

Six meditations from the Passion story in John's Gospel chapters 18 - 19.

David Atkinson

1. Gethsemane: Jesus is 'crushed for our iniquities'.

John 18. 1 – 12.

1 After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.

2 Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples.

3 So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.



4 Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?"

5 They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.

6 When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground.

7 Again he asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth."

8 Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go."

9 This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me."

10 Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus.

11 Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

12 So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him.

You will know the famous photograph of Jerusalem, with the city wall, and the Temple Mount, and the gleaming golden dome of the mosque. It is taken from the top of the Mount of Olives.



At the bottom of the Mount of Olives is the garden called in Greek Gethsemane, and in Hebrew Gat Shemen. Our narrative of the passion and death of Jesus, John chapters 18 and 19, begins in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is a place of betrayal: 'Judas, who betrayed him knew the place'. For John's readers I think reference to a garden would bring back memories of another Garden, and another story. At the beginning of our Bibles, there is the Garden of Eden, and Adam is the man: there it is a story of betrayal: Adam's disobedience and his betrayal of trust in God, and the loss of fellowship with God. The Garden of Eden becomes a story ultimately of the power of death. But in the Garden of Gethsemane, we are thinking about another Man, Jesus, a second Adam, and the story of his obedience, in fellowship with God the Father, bringing reconciliation and justice, and healing. The story of Jesus leads ultimately to the defeat of the power of death.

It was in this garden, Gethsemane, 'Gat Shemen', on Thursday evening of Passover week that Jesus prayed, and cried and sweated blood. It was here that in fear and yet in acceptance he anticipated Friday, and the Cross.

The Hebrew 'Gat Shemen' means 'oil press' for it was in this oil field that the olives were crushed in stone presses, trodden out as in a wine press in order to provide oil. Gethsemane is a place of bruising and crushing, and from this bruising and crushing, the release of the oil of new life.

People are being bruised and crushed near Gethsemane today: Some Israelis and some Palestinians: crushed by the stone presses of mutual recrimination. We pray for the blessing of God's sustaining oil of justice and healing on all people in the Land of the Holy One.

For oil in the Hebrew Bible is first about blessing, a blessing for life. Oil is also about food, about sustenance, and therefore about trade and justice. And oil is used for anointing, which often means healing. Sustenance, justice, healing.

So let us understand the olives in the olive presses as releasing an oil of life: an oil which is a blessing from God who gives sustenance, justice and health. The olives are bruised and crushed, but from them flow some of the means of life for the world - a world which still needs feeding, still needs justice, still needs healing.

So come back now to Gat Shemen, the oil press of the Garden of Gethsemane, come back to Thursday of Passover week. Here at the place where the olives are crushed, and the oil of life is released, we are invited to keep company again with God's anointed Messiah. He is a king

who is crushed and humiliated - and in his brokenness he stands with and for a broken world. Here we see God entering into a world of hunger, both spiritual and material, a world of injustice and broken relationships, a world which is sick and wounded. And here in that world – this world – is the Son of God praying, and crying and sweating blood. Christ, God's anointed, is on his journey to the Cross, 'wounded for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities' (Isa. 53.5).

We sometimes feel bruised by the demands of others, we sometimes feel crushed by the pressures of living. Jesus Christ has been there too, and has been there first. He invites us to be united with him, to pray with him in Gethsemane. He invites us to stay with him and follow him. So come back in heart and mind to Gethsemane, and find there again for yourself God's nourishment, God's justice, God's health-giving oil of life flowing from the bruised healer, the royal Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

But note now one more thing: in Gethsemane something very strange happens. The soldiers and the police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, arrive with lanterns and torches and weapons. So Jesus steps forward and asks them: 'Whom are you looking for?' They answer, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replies, "I am he." And then astonishingly, when Jesus says to them, "I am he," they step back and fall to the ground.

I think the first readers of John's Gospel would have understood why they stepped back and fell to the ground. Jesus had said 'I AM'. It comes many times in John's Gospel: I AM the bread, the light, the gate, the way, the good shepherd, the vine. I AM is God's own name. When Moses asked God 'what shall I call you?', God said: I AM that I AM. Unmistakably here, Jesus is saying what he said elsewhere: 'I and the Father are one'. Jesus says 'Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?' Here in Gethsemane, and later on the Cross, Father and Son are together. The Cross is not – as some Christians have said – something to do with and God the Father being angry with Jesus the Son, and that the Cross is Jesus appeasing an angry Father. Here, as everywhere, Father and Son are together. As in the work of the world's creation in the beginning - so here also in the new creation at redemption of the world - Father and Son in the power of the Spirit are united in love to bring sustenance and justice and healing.

It is a thing most wonderful,
almost too wonderful to be,
that God's own Son should come from heav'n,
and die to save a child like me.

And yet I know that it is true:
he chose a poor and humble lot,
and wept and toiled and mourned and died,
for love of those who loved him not

I cannot tell how he could love
a child so weak and full of sin;
his love must be most wonderful

if he could die my love to win.

I sometimes think about the cross,
and shut my eyes, and try to see
the cruel nails and crown of thorns,
and Jesus crucified for me.

But even could I see him die,
I could but see a little part
of that great love which, like a fire,
is always burning in his heart.

It is most wonderful to know
his love for me so free and sure;
but 'tis more wonderful to see
my love for him so faint and poor.

And yet I want to love thee, Lord;
O light the flame within my heart,
and I will love thee more and more,
until I see thee as thou art.

(William Walsham How 1823-1897)

Let us pray:

Pray for all who feel betrayed.

Pray for all who need healing, sustenance and justice.

Pray for blessing of God's oil of life.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

Let us pray for God's ancient people, the Jews,
the first to hear his Word:
for greater understanding between Christian and Jew, Jew and Palestinian;
and for the removal of our blindness and bitterness of heart,
that God will grant us grace to be faithful to his covenant,
and to grow in the love of his name.

2. Jesus before Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate.

John 18: 13- 14; 19 – 32:

13 First they took [Jesus] to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year.

14 Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

19 Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching.

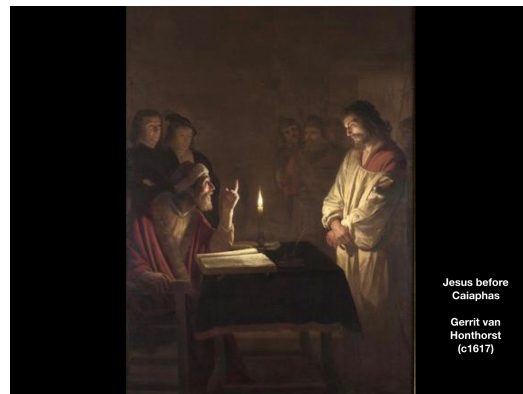
20 Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret.

21 Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said."

22 When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?"

23 Jesus answered, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"

24 Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.



28 Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover.

29 So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?"

30 They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you."

31 Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death."

32 (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

On the day that Jesus was crucified, there were many questions being asked. In this passage there are two questions from Jesus himself: In response to Caiaphas, the high priest, Jesus answers: 'why do you ask me?'. When the police officer in court slaps Jesus in the face. Jesus responds: 'Why did you strike me?' Why? Why? - and the other Gospels record the same terrible later question from the Cross: 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' My

God, why? That is surely a question we have asked when things are hard: where is God in all this? Why doesn't God do something? My God, why? And probably the most common question which people ask, when confronted with this narrative of the passion and death of Jesus is 'Why?' Why did Jesus die? Part of our answer is earthly and political, though as we shall see that is only a part. The earthly and political answer comes into focus in our passage where Jesus is questioned by the old former high-priest Annas, and then by his son-in-law Caiaphas who was now High Priest. In other words Jesus is up against the political and religious Jewish leaders of that time, Annas and Caiaphas. Then Jesus is sent to Pilate, the Roman Governor representing Emperor Tiberius.

Let us pause with Caiaphas: We read: 'Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.' This refers back to a little episode that is recorded a bit earlier in John's Gospel, in 11. Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead.

'Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on, they planned to put him to death. (John 11.45-53).

So here are three reasons why the Jewish leaders want Jesus to die.: First: treason. Jesus has been performing signs, and people are believing in him. He is leading them away from their faith in the God of Israel. We have a law, they say, quoting Deuteronomy (Deut.13.1f.), that anyone who does signs in the name of some new God and leads the people astray is guilty of treason, and must be put to death. Second: Jesus is a threat to the Jewish leadership: if we do nothing, everyone will believe in him, and that will undermine our authority. Third: fear of what the Romans will think: what do you think the Romans will make of an uprising here? They will come and destroy our Temple and destroy our nation.

There were huge political currents swirling round Palestine at that time. But there is more to it than that. There is a fourth and crucial reason which, all unknowing, Caiaphas says, and John the Gospel writer records it as a prophecy about Jesus: 'he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation.... to gather into one all the dispersed children of God.' The most important reason why Jesus died is that God is working his purposes out through the turmoils of political upheaval - and his purpose includes gathering together a new community of God's people. In some unexpected way, John tells us that one is to die on behalf of others. One hymn puts it this way: 'Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood.' Condemned by Caiaphas and Jewish law; condemned eventually by Pilate with the power of the Roman Empire. He bore this shame and scoffing - he bore the suffering and the crucifixion, on behalf of others. On behalf of me. What can that mean? It is not that God

is condemning Jesus: St Paul is very precise: It is sin that God condemned: 'God condemned sin in the flesh'. (Rom 8.3). God himself, made flesh in Jesus takes on himself the punishment caused by sin, whose wages is death, so that we are 'set free from the law of sin and death' (Rom.8.1-4).

We need to go back to the Garden of Eden and the story of Adam's disobedience, Adam's pride, Adam's desire to be like god. The result is broken relationships, shame, guilt, hiding from God, banishment under the power of death. The Adam story is the story of all humanity. Through the infectious spread of selfishness, pride, ungodliness, all of us in our different ways share in the story of Adam. He becomes the Representative human in God's creation, under 'the power of death'. By contrast, Jesus is the Representative human in God's new creation, he is born and dies in the likeness of sinful flesh. God condemned sin in his flesh, breaking the power of death.

The New Testament thinks of Adam and of Jesus in both individual terms and also as representative human beings. All of us, all human beings 'in Adam', are trapped in the personal and social and structural consequences of sin. All who are 'in Christ' will share with him his power over death, and also in the gift of his new resurrection life.

How is this possible? Throughout his life, Jesus was obedient to the will of his Father; throughout his life, Jesus was faced with choices and temptations do other than God's will; He battled through. When he was confronted with injustice, he confronted it; when he was confronted with sickness, he healed it. His was a life of suffering. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: 'he learned obedience through what he suffered'. (Heb.5.8). He was constantly seeking to break through the powers of evil and ungodliness. And now, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and before Caiaphas and Pilate, all those forces combine together against him. And Jesus does for us what we cannot ourselves to: he is the obedient human being faithfully fulfilling all God's law. He is finally confronted with all the powers of evil, and he bears the weight of that for us, as a Representative human being. We could not do that. But as God's Holy Spirit unites us with Christ in his death and resurrection, we can share in his victory.

Man of sorrows! What a name
for the Son of God who came
ruined sinners to reclaim!
Alleluia! What a Saviour!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
in my place condemned he stood;
sealed my pardon with his blood;
Alleluia! What a Saviour!

Guilty, vile and helpless we;
spotless Lamb of God was he;
full atonement - can it be?
Alleluia! What a Saviour!

Lifted up was he to die;
 'It is finished!' was his cry;
 now in heav'n exalted high;
 Alleluia! What a Saviour!

(Philip Bliss, 1838 - 1876)

Let us pray:

Pray for all who ask 'why?'
 We acknowledge our sinfulness as part of a fallen world:
 -broken relationships; shame, guilt, hiding from God.
 We pray for the gift of the life of God's new creation.

For all who are carrying the burden of the own sins and their guilt, that they may hear God's word of grace and reconciliation.

Pray for all who are wrongly convicted that they may find justice.

3. Gabbatha. Jesus before Pilate's seat of power; the power of self-giving love.

John 18. 33 – 19.13.

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

34 Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

35 Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

37 Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

38 Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him."

39 But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?"

40 They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

1 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

2 And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe.

3 They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face.

4 Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him."

5 So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!"

6 When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him."

7 The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

8 Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever.

9 He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.

10 Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?"

11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

12 From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

13 When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha.

This reading begins in Pilate's Headquarters, and ends on a Stone Pavement where Pilate had his judgement bench - called in Hebrew Gabbatha.

One of the frequent words in this passage in front of us is 'king'. 'Are you the king of the Jews?'
 'My kingdom is not from this world'. 'So you are a king?'
 'Hail, King of the Jews!'. Do you want me to release for you 'The King of the Jews?'



Gabbatha

And, as we shall read in our next meditation, when Jesus dies on the cross, the sign over him reads. "The King of the Jews".

So Jesus is God's King, God's Messiah, God's Royal Priest. In much of his teaching – especially as recorded by in the other Gospels, Jesus is calling his followers to understand that Jesus himself is God's appointed King, inaugurating what he often calls The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven.

And in front of Jesus now stands imperial power, in the form of the rather weak and otherwise insignificant Roman Governor. Pilate says to Jesus: 'Do you not know that I have the power to release you and the power to crucify you?' Jesus replied: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above. In other words: all worldly power - even of the Emperor Tiberius; all worldly power – even of President Trump and Boris Johnson; all worldly power derives from God's gift, and is accountable to God, and should be used to promote the good of God's world and God's people not – as the Roman Emperor does – in a totalitarian and coercive way.

When Pilate asked Jesus whether he was a king, Jesus replied: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

The power of the Kingdom of God is not like Roman power: violent, coercive, intimidating, divisive, unjust. My Kingdom, says Jesus, is not like this worldly power - if it were like your Roman power, my followers would be fighting like yours do. But my kingdom is different, and my power is different. Jesus' power - the power which will ultimately defeat the power of evil and death, is a different sort of power. It is, John's Gospel tells us, the power of self-giving love.

Earlier in John's Gospel we read of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. He is the Teacher: he is the Lord, and he takes a towel and basin and does the work of a servant, washing the dusty feet of his disciples before they sit down for their last supper. Jesus explains: 'If I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.' That chapter begins with the Gospel writer saying 'Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.' And a bit later on Jesus says 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' Jesus is the supreme example of humble sacrificial service; the supreme example of self-giving love. His power is not that of coercion, of violence, of fighting. His power which now confronts Pontius Pilate is the power which conquers death; the power which redeems the world; the power of self-giving love. As the Gospel earlier put it: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that everyone who believes in him should not perish but may have eternal life. (Jn 3. 16).

The First Letter of John underlines this clearly: God is love (4.16); In this is love: that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (4.10). I remember being at a meeting where someone accused Christians of glorying in suffering - what a weak and feeble religion. Look at that stained window, he said: the centrepiece of this church is a picture of Roman torture. What sort of God is that? So why does every church have a

cross? Why are many shaped like a cross? Why do people have a cross on a neck-chain? Or carry a little wooden cross in their pocket? Not to celebrate Roman torture such as Pilate often meted out at Gabbatha! But because we believe the gospel story: that in this death God in love is giving himself to share with us in the depths of human experience; God in love is going to the limits of human suffering; God in love is himself being crucified as the God-Man Jesus, in order to go through death in order to break its power - and to break through the power of death is resurrection and new life. We do not glory in suffering: we see in the suffering God the power of self-giving love.

My song is love unknown,
 my Saviour's love to me,
 love to the loveless shown,
 that they might lovely be.
 O who am I, that for my sake,
 my Lord should take frail flesh and die?

He came from his blest throne,
 salvation to bestow;
 but sin made blind, and none
 the longed for Christ would know.
 But, O my friend, my friend indeed,
 who at my need his life did spend!

Sometimes they strew his way,
 and his sweet praises sing;
 resounding all the day
 hosannas to their King;
 then 'Crucify!' is all their breath,
 and for his death they thirst and cry.

Why, what hath my Lord done?
 What makes this rage and spite?
 He makes the lame to run,
 he gave the blind their sight.
 Sweet injuries? Yet they at these
 themselves displease, and 'gainst him rise.

They rise, and needs will have
 my dear Lord made away;
 a murderer they save,
 the Prince of Life they slay.
 Yet cheerful he to suff'ring goes,
 that he his foes from thence might free.

Here might I stay and sing,
 no story so divine;
 never was love, dear King,
 never was grief like thine.
 This is my friend in whose sweet praise
 I all my days could gladly spend.

(Samuel Crossman (c.1624-1684))

Let us pray:

Pray for all in positions of authority: the need for wisdom, justice and peace.

That the peoples of the world may be led away from greed, coercive power and violence, to learn instead to power of self-giving love and generous service.

For all who seek to confront violence and oppression with sacrificial love and self-giving service.

For a rethink of our values.

4. Golgotha. Jesus 'the Man': mocked, scourged, crucified

John 19. 14 - 30.

14 Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. [Pilate] said to the Jews, "Here is your King!"

15 They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor."

16 Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus;

17 and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.

18 There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.

19 Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

20 Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.

21 Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, " 'The King of the Jews,' but, "This man said, 'I am King of the Jews.' " "

22 Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

23 When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top.

24 So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says, "They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots."

25 And that is what the soldiers did.

28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty."

29 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.

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



In each of three of the corners of Trafalgar Square in the centre of London there is a huge, impressive statue. One is of a King of England, two are of army Generals. They all look imperial and important. They speak of power. But the fourth plinth has no permanent statue. In recent years, different sculptors have been asked to provide a short-term statue to go on the empty fourth plinth. In 1999 Mark Wallinger made a sculpture of a small, life-sized, unimpressive, ordinary human being, cut out of plain marble, wearing only a loincloth, and a crown of thorns. The contrast with the imperial symbols on other plinths was remarkable. Mark Wallinger called it 'Ecce Homo', which is Latin for 'Look: the Man'. 'Here is the Man'.

This was the description which Pontius Pilate gave to Jesus in John's Gospel, referring then to Jesus' humiliation, dressed up by mocking soldiers in crown of thorns and purple robe: 'Here is the Man!' (19:5).

John's Gospel begins with a remarkable Prologue in which the writer says: 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'. (Jn.1.14). The Word, God's Wisdom embodied in Jesus, became flesh. Jesus, the Son of God, shared our humanity. The First Letter of John spells this out: 'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life' (1 John 1:1).

John's Gospel shows us a Jesus who got tired on his journey through Samaria and asked for a drink of water (John 4:6-7), and was greatly disturbed and moved to tears at the grave of Lazarus (11:33-35). His soul was troubled at the festival in Jerusalem (12:27); he takes a servant's towel and bowl of water to wash his disciples' feet in the Upper Room (13:4-5). And nowhere more painfully clearly than in the section of the Passion from John chapter 19, where Jesus dying on the Cross says 'I am thirsty'. Jesus is a real human being in every way, sharing our human feelings and pains and needs and agonies. Jesus was thirsty, he really died, his side was pierced with a spear, blood and water flowed, his body was laid in a tomb.

After the resurrection, it was a physical Jesus who invited Thomas to test out the wounds in his hand and side, and who later prepared breakfast on the beach for his disciples (20:27; 21:9). He is a man. Jesus has known what it is to be thirsty. He has known what it is to be betrayed. To be humiliated. To feel shame. To be tortured. To feel pain. To face the most agonising death. To everyone who has felt betrayed or humiliated or shamed; To everyone who feels pain: Jesus has been there too; and when we come to face death: he has been there before us. The Cross is not about a God who is distant from us, doing some miraculous distant thing to redeem and remake the world. The Cross is God's own self entering into the very depths of human suffering even to the point of death. This is the awful climax of Jesus' life of obedience to the Father's will. At every point, like the pioneer hacking a way through the jungle, Jesus beats his way forward in obedience to the Father's will, confronting evil and disease and the power of death until at the end he breaks even death's stranglehold in order ultimately to destroy all power of evil. And as his life ends, John our author points to Psalm 69.22: 'for my thirst, they gave me vinegar to drink'. It is a psalm Jesus must have known well; it is frequently quoted in the New Testament. It is a deeply moving testimony to human suffering:

I am weary with crying, my throat is parched;
 thou knowest my reproach, and my shame and my dishonour;
 my oppressors are all known to thee.
 Insults have broken my heart so that I trembled.
 I looked for pity but there was none; and for comforters but I found none.
 They gave me poison for my food and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

It is not that Jesus is asking for a drink in order to fulfil what the psalmist is saying: rather this scripture is so much part of his own spiritual life, that Jesus identifies with the testimony to human suffering that the psalm expresses.

The other psalm quoted more in the other gospels is Psalm 22. Jesus quotes the first verse: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Both psalms enter so deeply into the dereliction of human pain and suffering that they are often quoted as pointing to the experience of The divine Man who carries the anguish of the whole world. They illustrate the depths of human suffering which even experiences the awful dereliction of feeling that God's own loving presence is hidden, covered in the cloud of darkness which surrounds him. Here are some words from Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day but you do not answer; and by night, but I find no rest. All who see me mock at me. They make mouths at me and shake their heads. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws. They divide my clothes among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. But you, O Lord, do not be far away. O my help, come quickly to my aid.

At the Cross, there is a fork in the road of human history. God in Jesus the Man is at the mercy of broken humanity, offering himself in anguish and grace. Broken humanity pushed God in Jesus to death, who accepted this rejection in order to remain present to the world of broken humanity. In raising Jesus from the dead, God shows that there is another road: a way of building the pieces back together instead of remaining broken. At the Cross, the story of humanity begins again.

There is a green hill far away,
without a city wall,
where the dear Lord was crucified
who died to save us all.

We may not know, we cannot tell,
what pains he had to bear,
but we believe it was for us
he hung and suffered there.

He died that we might be forgiv'n,
he died to make us good;
that we might go at last to heav'n,
saved by his precious blood.

There was no other good enough
to pay the price of sin;
he only could unlock the gate
of heav'n and let us in.

O dearly, dearly has he loved,
and we must love him too,
and trust in his redeeming blood,
and try his works to do.

(Cecil Frances Alexander 1818 - 1895)

Let us pray:

Let us pray for all who suffer:
for those who are deprived and oppressed

for all who are sick and handicapped
for those in darkness, doubt and in despair,
in loneliness and in fear;
all who thirst, and are hungry; the despised, the outcast, the refugees;
for prisoners, for the victims of false accusations and violence,
for all at the point of death, and those who watch beside them.
that God in his mercy will sustain them with the knowledge
of his love.

5. The victory of the crucified Lamb.

John 19. 28 - 37.



28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty."

29 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.

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

31 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.

32 Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him.

33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.

35 (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.)

36 These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken."

37 And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."

'When Jesus knew that all was now finished. ... He said, "It is finished." ' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

What was finished? It was not that Jesus was finished - those watching did not know, but we now know that Easter morning is on the horizon. It was not even that Jesus' earthly life was finished. What was finished, that is 'completed', was this task within God's purpose for God's people and God's purpose for the whole world to break the power of death and to make all things new.

In the story of the Garden of Eden, God's man (Adam and Eve) had sought to live in God's world on the basis of their own proud self-assertion, and not on the basis of loving obedience to God's word and God's will. So they were banished from the Garden, and all their relationships became disordered: with one another, with their later family, with their environment, with God.

But it is not only God's people who are redeemed. In the symbolic imagery of the Garden of Eden, part of the curse of sin was that God's garden would be overrun with thorns and thistles. Yet, when Messiah comes to redeem, the prophet Isaiah writes:

The trees of the field shall clap their hands;
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
Instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle;
It shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

This all fits with St Paul's wonderful reflection. Col. 1. 19 -20:

In Christ all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

It is a cosmic redemption of all things in heaven and earth through the blood of the cross. We are redeemed; the sun and moon and stars are redeemed; the giraffes and the cockroaches are redeemed. All things are made new. Through the death of Messiah, new life goes on.

The old is finished; the new has come. The death and resurrection of Jesus inaugurates a whole new phase of life in this world. No longer held in bondage by the power of death, but liberated into a new life.

One vivid piece of symbolism in John's account of the death of Jesus, is that he takes us back to Passover night in Egypt. God's people are in bondage to Pharaoh. But on Passover night, the people are told to sacrifice a lamb, and spread some of the blood on the doorpost of the house, so that when God's angel comes in judgement, the people who are sheltering in the place marked by the blood of the lamb are safe and are liberated. The life of the lamb is laid down so that other life can continue. And this deliverance was remembered year on year by the people of Israel. The Passover Lamb was to be chosen exactly to match the needs of the people; it was to be eaten in the house; 'you shall not break any of its bones.' (Exod 12.46).

This is vividly in mind in the Gospel account. 'It was the day of Preparation for the Passover'. The lambs were being prepared in the Temple as Jesus is on the Cross. When the soldiers came to Jesus, they did not break his bones. Jesus is the Passover Lamb. His disciples - like the Israelites under Pharaoh - discover that in the death of Jesus the Lamb of God, their bondage to the rule of death is over. Life is laid down so that new life can begin. The death of Jesus means a new Exodus; a new liberation; the start of all things new.

The Lamb of God means many things in the Hebrew Bible. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, the lamb is God's surprising gracious provision; in the Exodus story, the Lamb is the means of liberation; in Leviticus: the sacrificial lamb keeps alive in the consciousness of the people God's promise of forgiveness. In Isaiah 53: the suffering servant is described as a lamb.

And elsewhere, the lamb becomes the victorious Ram leading the flock in the war against evil. This is the picture developed in the Book of Revelation, where Jesus is the Lamb on God's throne, who -in a different image - is then described as a conqueror on a white horse confronting all the powers of evil. And the Conqueror's robe, we read, was dipped in blood. He is the Lamb who was slain. Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

Jesus! the name high over all,
in hell or earth or sky;
Angels and men before it fall,
And devils fear and fly.

Jesus! the name to sinners dear,
the name to sinners given;
It scatters all their guilty fear,
It turns their hell to heaven.

Jesus the prisoners fetters breaks,
 And bruises Satan's head;
 Power into strengthless souls He speaks,
 and life into the dead.

O that the world might taste and see
 The riches of his grace;
 the arms of love that compass me
 Would all mankind embrace.

His only righteousness I show,
 his saving race proclaim;
 'Tis all my business here below
 to cry: 'Behold the Lamb!'

Happy, if with my latest breath
 I may but gasp his name;
 Preach him to all, and cry in death;
 'Behold, behold the Lamb!'

(Charles Wesley 1707 - 88)

Let us pray:

Veneration of the Cross

Most merciful God,
 who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ,
 delivered and saved humankind; and redeemed your creation;
 grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross,
 we may triumph in the power of his victory;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

6. A Garden Tomb. A new family waiting.

John 19: 25 - 27; 38 - 42.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son."

27 Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

38 After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body.

39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.

40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.



We recall the words of Caiaphas which we quoted earlier:

"You know nothing at all. You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. (Jn.11.46f).

The Gospel writer is reflecting here that Jesus was understood by Caiaphas to die on behalf of all the people, and part of God's purpose was 'the gather into one the dispersed children of God'. The First Letter of John says something rather surprising: we declare to you the Word of life so that you may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 Jn 1. 1-3). John Stott comments on this: 'the proclamation of the Gospel is not salvation', but 'fellowship'. The Gospel of the Word of Life, rooted in the cross of Christ, is primarily about fellowship with God, and ultimately about sharing his joy.

Around the Cross, as Jesus dies, we see the beginnings of what that means: '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.

It is a scene of sadness and not yet joy, but it is a scene of fellowship - even the beginnings of the church. The death of Jesus and the new life that will flow from his resurrection is about building a people to share fellowship with God.

The fourth century church leader St Augustine in his reflections on one of the psalms, commented on 'Adam' because of the eruption of sin into the world, 'has been broken up', and all his relationships broken up. Sin is about things falling apart:

Adam therefore hath been scattered over the world. He was in one place, and fell, and as in a manner broken small, he filled the whole world: but the mercy of God gathered together the fragments from every side, and forged them by the fire of love, and made one what was broken. That Artist knew how to do this; let no one despair: it is indeed a great thing, but reflect who that Artist was. He who made, restored: He who formed, reformed.

This chimes in with Caiaphas' word: 'to gather into one the dispersed people of God.' And as the Gospel writer says earlier:

Jesus said: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... The wolf snatches them and scatters them'. But the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep: 'they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock and one shepherd'. (Jn .10. 11-18).

Woman behold your son; Behold your mother. The scene at the Cross is of family restored; the scattered sheep brought together into one. The fragments forged together again. And it ends - as we began - with a garden. In this garden there is a new tomb where Jesus body is laid. And then there is a time of waiting. On the third day, Mary Magdalene will discover the tomb empty, and encounters someone she mistakes for the Gardener. And of course in one sense the Risen Jesus is the Gardener - a new Adam in a different Garden, now making all things new. Easter morning will not only point to new life, but to a family, a new community in fellowship with God, in fact a whole new creation. But now there is the waiting.

That is where our text will lead us if we read on. This is where our narrative takes us: from the bruising of Gethsemane to the trial before Caiaphas and Pilate; to the recognition of a new power at work - the power of sacrificial love; through the obedience of Jesus to the Father's will despite all the deeply human suffering and thirst - and the recognition nonetheless that God's purposes for the world are being worked out in the death of the Lamb and his victory over all that is evil. But it ends today on Good Friday with a new tomb in a different Garden; with an embryonic new fellowship being called together; but still with the sadness and the questions; and the waiting; but also the hope.

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ my God:
all the vain things that charm me most,

I sacrifice them to his blood.

See from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingling down;
did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an off'ring far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

(Isaac Watts 1674 - 1748)

Let us pray:

Almighty Father,
look with mercy on this your family
for which our Lord Jesus Christ
was content to be betrayed
and given up into the hands of wicked men
and to suffer death upon the cross;
who is alive and glorified with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.