

## At the Foot of the Cross

Golgotha is not only a place and an occasion in history, but it is a Spiritual reality in all times and all places. The cross is not only an instrument of death, but also the key to the mystery of life.

Here, at the foot of the cross, we come face to face with love, and each of us can learn how to answer to that love.

It is a meeting place; an event that calls for response.

Bible Reading

Matthew 27: 27-56

### **The Soldiers Mock Jesus**

<sup>27</sup> Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. <sup>28</sup> They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, <sup>29</sup> and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" <sup>30</sup> They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. <sup>31</sup> After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

### **The Crucifixion of Jesus**

<sup>32</sup> As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. <sup>33</sup> And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), <sup>34</sup> they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. <sup>35</sup> And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; <sup>36</sup> then they sat down there and kept watch over him. <sup>37</sup> Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

<sup>38</sup> Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>39</sup> Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads <sup>40</sup> and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." <sup>41</sup> In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, <sup>42</sup> "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. <sup>43</sup> He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" <sup>44</sup> The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

### **The Death of Jesus**

<sup>45</sup> From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

<sup>46</sup> And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabac thani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" <sup>47</sup> When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." <sup>48</sup> At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. <sup>49</sup> But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." <sup>50</sup> Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. <sup>51</sup> At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. <sup>52</sup> The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. <sup>53</sup> After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared

to many. <sup>54</sup> Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

<sup>55</sup> Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. <sup>56</sup> Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

## **Meditation**

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

Meditating on the crucifixion is a hard task.

And among all Jesus’ words from the cross, this one is the most painful.

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

Is there a greater pain than to see someone we love put to death?

From somewhere long ago, I can hear another voice. The voice of an old man holding a child in his arms. He gives thanks to God for the salvation he sees in this child... But then comes Simeon’s dark warning to Mary: “A sword shall pierce your heart also...” (Luke 2:29-30)

Perhaps it is as Jesus utters that terrible cry of abandonment that Mary’s heart is truly pierced by the sword. The moment not only when her beloved child is dying but when he seems to be catastrophically abandoned by God.

To feel abandoned by God is a terrible experience. Many of us may have had it at some point... The empty darkness is overwhelming. But for Jesus, who knew himself so close to God, it must have been immeasurably worse.

And yet. That is not the worst. Worse by far is that small word “why”.

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

When we feel abandoned by God we know, or we may suspect, that it is in fact we who have closed our hearts and minds to his love. We are sinful, often stupid; we make mistakes and get things wrong. Very wrong. Wrong with our neighbour.

Wrong with God.

We know deep in our hearts that God never abandons us, it’s just that often we cannot see or feel the presence of God.

Is that how it was with Jesus? He always seems to have had a clear vision of God. Such a close and intimate love of father and son that they almost seemed one. So how can Jesus be abandoned by God? How can he ask the question: ...why have you forsaken me?

Unless at the end, he suddenly loses his faith...

It may be there is no answer to that.

But there is this officer at the foot of the cross recognising Jesus as the son of God. What drew such respect from him? It is unlikely that the Roman officer was familiar with Psalm 22. Probably he did not even speak the language of Jesus.

But Jesus must have been familiar with the psalm – all of it.

He did not say “Help me”, or “Father come back”, or “God, where are you”... he spoke the opening words of Psalm 22.

Wondering at these words is important. And the wondering leads to another painful question. A question that involves us today.

The question is simply: where were Jesus’ friends? Where were the men? There is a lot in the gospels about the Twelve and about Peter. Sometimes it is as there

were no women disciples: no courageous, faithful, loving women around... It is as they had been photo shopped out of the picture...

But when it came to the crunch where were these male leaders? Were they standing there exposed to danger with the small group of women, and possibly the beloved disciple? No. Jesus could have cried: Why have they abandoned me? And how often in our lives do we abandon Jesus?

Why, in the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, do we so often fail Jesus? Why, despite his infinite and unconditional love, do we deny him? Why when we see the suffering of our neighbours across the globe, and of this beautiful planet do we walk past on the other side?

Every day of our lives we turn away, run away. We busy ourselves with lesser things. Often churchy things. Every day we abandon God in our neighbour. How can we sleep in our beds while 25.000 of God's children starve to death every day? While people in our own cities die silently of poverty, cold and neglect?

I believe Jesus is still crucified today in situations of our own making. "My God, my God, why do these people who are my disciples abandon me?"

What if? What if when old Simeon took the Christ child in his arms and spoke that terrible warning to Mary... what if he wasn't just speaking to her? What if he was looking past her, looking over her shoulder, into the future? What if he was also speaking to us?

Telling us that if we love this Christ child and follow this Christ person, the sword will enter our hearts too... At the sight of one we love put to death by the fear and the greed of the world... But also at the realisation that it is not God but we ourselves who abandon him...

It breaks our hearts to see someone we love in pain. But what hurts even more is the knowledge that it is not God but us who have forsaken him. When we see him in our neighbour, hungry and naked, and we walk past on the other side.

The realisation of our failure feels like the end of everything. And there is silence. But it's not the end.

Because in the silence we hear the sound of someone running. Running towards us. A father running to embrace a beloved child... Amen.

## **Prayers**

Let us join in a litany at the foot of the cross.

Merciful God,

We meet each other today, at the foot of the cross,  
as inhabitants of one world.

We wait with each other as those  
who inflict wounds on one another:

**(all) be merciful to us.**

As those who deny justice to others:

**be merciful to us.**

As those who put our trust in power:

**be merciful to us.**

L: As those who are greedy:

**be merciful to us.**

As those who put others on trial:

**be merciful to us.**

As those who refuse to receive:

**be merciful to us.**

As those who are afraid of the world's torment:

**be merciful to us.**

Silence

Bearer of all pain, we come to share with you the burden of all this world's suffering. We stand by you.

In the refugee camp:

**we wait and we weep.**

At the door of the torture chamber:

**we wait and we weep.**

In the townships:

**we wait and we weep.**

Among the broken street-children:

**we wait and we weep.**

In the oppressor's court:

**we wait and we weep.**

In the devastated city:

**we wait and we weep.**

On earth soaked with blood:

**we wait and we weep.**

Silence

Giver of life, we wait with you to offer the hope that comes from the cross to earth's darkest places. Where pain is deep and affection is denied:

**let love break through.**

Where justice is destroyed,

**let sensitivity to right spring up.**

Where hope is crucified,

**let faith persist.**

Where peace has no chance,

**let passion live on.**

Where truth is trampled underfoot,

**let the struggle continue.**

Where fear paralyzes,

**let forgiveness break through.**

Eternal God, reach into the silent darkness of our souls with the radiance of the cross.

O you who are the bearer of all pain,

**have mercy on us.**

Giver of life,

**have mercy on us.**

Merciful God,

**have mercy on us.**