

Good Friday 2020



PICTURE LEGEND

This painting by Matthias Grünewald, was painted between 1512 and 1516 for a hospital in Colmar in Alsace. The patients of the hospital had a terrible, incurable skin disease, caused by poisoned rye, and their suffering was agonising. As they looked from where they lay toward the great reredos behind the altar they saw a crucified Christ, not robed in glory, not in priestly vestments, but a scarecrow figure, hanging in appalling pain from nailed hands, his head lolling down bleeding from the crown of thorns, his whole body marked with the same scars and boils that mark the sick of the hospital. Grünewald's picture (which we know as the Isenheim altarpiece) speaks of a God who in the costliness of his love and forgiveness does indeed come down to the lowest part of our need.

Gospel

Today's Gospel is the Passion according to [St John 18.1—19.42](#)

Homily

Unsurprisingly, the moments that stand out against the inevitable background wash of 24-hr coronavirus news, are the most human. Surely there are none more so than the testimony of spouses and children that as the person they love struggled in the suffocating grip of the virus to catch their last breaths they could not be there, either to give or to receive the last promises of love, the tokens of joy, and the assurance of undying memory? Or so I thought, but last night I caught the testimony of a medic who ached inconsolably at the lonely fate of those dying in intensive care without the support of their loved ones, and that he alone could be close enough to offer his love and consolation—his humanity—in those last moments.

Such testimony would be shocking at the best of times, but our experience of isolation, and our knowledge that it is the experience for all of us, amplifies it. From prison cell to monastic cell, from small apartments in the anonymity of cities to the houses and farms of the country, from the palaces of the rich to the makeshift tents of refugees, we may not all suffer from the virus, but we are all suffering from a solitude – a lonely, anxious, fragile solitude – that does not belong to the human vocation. Our sense of anguish for those who die in such circumstances, in the midst of much business, occasionally the centre of someone's attention, but personally intensely alone, paralyzes us.

The last hours of life were such as this for Jesus. ‘Now’, say the gospels (*Matt 27.45, Mk 15.33, Lk 23.44*) ‘from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.’ The world became dark when the Son of God suffered unto death. Jesus prays Psalm 22, which begins with the words: ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ (*Ps 22: 2*). He has willingly drawn to himself the violence and sin of mankind; he has taken on himself all the sorrows and griefs of humanity; and in his last three hours he exposes himself in his silence and his lament to the utter loneliness and darkness of losing God. ‘He emptied himself’ (*Phil 2.7*), ‘loving to the very limit’ (*Jn 13.1*). He who had full equality with God freely chose, in the words of Lady Julian of Norwich (*Revelations of Divine Love ch.6*) ‘to come down to the lowest part of our need.’

2

In anguish, terrifyingly alone in a sea of activity, Jesus silently revealed and expressed in his last hours the loving presence of God precisely where God seems to be definitively defeated and absent. It confuses our hearts and minds. But the early Church understood that it was a *truth*; and they fought hard to insist that the God of Jesus Christ is *not* a God who stands aside or above his creation, but, in those wonderful words of Lady Julian, ‘comes down to the very lowest part of our need’, our lonely, anxious, fragile solitude.

What the early Christians insisted upon was that, if you cling on to a mental picture of God as a ‘Someone’ who struggles alongside all the other things in the *midst* of our lives, hungry for space and recognition; or conversely, you cling to a picture of a God who is *above* our concerns unable to know and empathize with the creation he has made, then God’s ‘availability’ to our suffering will *always confound us*. But what Jesus reveals – and reveals from the cross more clearly and profoundly than he could in a sermon, or even in his teaching at the Last Supper – is that the availability of divine love is entirely bound up with his vulnerability to human suffering.

God has nothing and no one to compete with. His unchanging power and total freedom, mean that God can humanly speaking be vulnerable to the very lowest part of human need. To say that God is immune to change and suffering is not the *opposite* of the suffering of Jesus. They are bound up together. It is *because* God needs no defence – he is God – that Jesus can be totally *defenceless*, ‘obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross’ (*Phil 2.8*).

3

When Lady Julian speaks of God in his goodness coming to down to the lowest part of our need she says this is ‘our highest prayer’. She does not mean our most exalted, joyous, or even contemplative prayer. She means our most honest, truthful, and urgent prayer: a prayer that is fully, even mystically, aware of human dependence on God’s goodness. ‘For’, she adds, ‘as the body is clad in cloth, and the flesh in its skin, and the bones in their flesh, and the heart in the ribs, so are we – soul and body – clad and enclosed in the goodness of God. Even more the soul than the body, which may decay and wear away.’

At the utter limit of Jesus’s capacity to show love – love for God and love for humanity – he experienced his most profound isolation. Some of those who are dying in these days, especially those who for fear of infection cannot die surrounded by their loved ones, share that experience with him, their lives ending in a way that no human being wants to imagine. Let us support their ‘highest prayer’ with ours, that they may know that they can never be isolated, or cut off from the goodness of the Lord, which encloses them even more in the soul than in the body.

Prayer

BY GRACIOUS POWERS so wonderfully sheltered,
And confidently waiting, come what may,
We know that God is with us night and morning
And never fails to greet us each new day.

- 2 Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented,
Still evil days bring burdens hard to bear;
O give our frightened souls the sure salvation
For which, O Lord, you taught us to prepare.

- 3 And when this cup you give is filled to brimming
With bitter suffering, hard to understand,
We take it thankfully and without trembling,
Out of so good and so beloved a hand.

- 4 Yet when again, in this same world, you give us
The joy we had, the brightness of your sun,
We shall remember all the days we lived through,
And our whole life shall then be yours alone.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906—45)

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