

# **AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS**

## **An allegory and readings for Good Friday**

In this most unusual Holy Week, most of us are wholly or mainly at home. Some are going through this strange time alone, physically, at any rate.

Our commemoration of the final hours of Jesus's crucifixion ordeal has never been conventional 'collective' worship, for all that it might have taken place in church. It is perhaps as private as anything we do in the church's year.

The readings offered here provide familiar words for the last hours if traditional words are what you find helpful. They include psalms, a reading from Isaiah and the Passion readings from John's Gospel.

Also included is a story, an allegory of being alone and mourning a friend. Its intention is to allow you to travel, in your mind, away from the four walls in which you perhaps find yourself.

## **Alone. An allegory for Good Friday**

*Imagine. Sit quietly and imagine ...*

Dwarfed by surrounding hills, a rucksack on her back, a woman walks alone. No-one else today is on the track to the high pass in the uncertain weather, with the chance of late snow. No phone signal here, no house for miles and not so much as a shepherd's refuge in sight. Solitude was not what she had sought, not as such. The place, the wild roughness, the heather, grass and mosses and the granite boulders that the green cannot subdue; it is these she has come for. The aloneness comes gratis.

Three and a half days' walk it has taken Mary to get here from the train, from a station in the middle of nowhere. No other passengers got off. The train guard, if that's what she is still called, gave her a cheery send off, but she has neither met nor spoken to anyone since.

Her new tent has proved good enough, effective against a biting wind on her first two nights. She trusts it now, and is looking forward to a few days in one spot. Can a place be raw, but not a wilderness? Natural beauty, people say of these hills, but natural is a qualified term for what once was forest, before felling and sheep refined the landscape. Not wilderness then, but as unlike urban life as you can find in our islands, purged of a city worker's day-to-day distractions.

Tuesday she had set off, after a day's gathering of food and kit.

'What are you doing on the weekend?' Not a question she is missing this Friday. But, of course, today it would be, 'What are you doing over the holiday?' Easter: eggs and chocolate bunnies, early barbecues and the smell of lighting fuel if the weather relents, roast lamb, hot cross buns in their proper season for once, and spring, the new life of flowers and nesting birds.

It is noon by the time she finds a spot in the shelter of a large rock outcrop, a couple of dozen steps from a stream that trickles down to the watershed and elects to head south. Mary has come from that direction, but had not seen the clear water

until now. Its gurgling will be her music. The sun peeps through clouds as she drops her pack. She sits, knowing she will pitch camp and stay here or hereabouts for three days.

Good Friday. But nothing good for Mary; certainly nothing good for Jess.

Mary had known her friend only a few years, no time at all. They did not go back to childhood or college, but their friendship felt as old as these hills. Mary had come to assume it would always be there, the understanding they had, their shared, sharp way of looking at the world and its foibles. They would tease and encourage each other through marriages and children into maturity and old age, where, as grumpy old women in purple, they would put the world to rights. So Mary thought.

But Jess had died.

Most months they had walked, in places like this, though not these hills. As they walked, time and again, they had talked and listened to each other.

She had been a story-teller, Jess, from a town in the north east of England that Mary's other friends had sneered at, to begin with, though none had been within 50 miles of it. Poetic, in a way, Jess's stories, capturing life in a few words, through enigmas and jokes and riddles.

Then Jess had left her. One year ago, not this date, but on last year's Good Friday.

Mary was left bereft, unable to imagine what tomorrow or next year might bring.

And so she has come here to be alone.

The hours pass, the sky darkens, lightens, darkens. For Mary the quiet grows more intense. She feels her distance from other people increase. Bit by bit she clears her mind of the busy world.

And as she does, she feels her friend at her shoulder, teasing in the old way, breaking through the bleakness. As Jess's voice and her familiar words and gestures come to her, Mary feels the warmth and closeness that time and death have not destroyed.

## Reading: Isaiah 53

Who has believed our message  
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.  
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by mankind,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.  
Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.  
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
Yet who of his generation protested?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was punished.  
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,  
and with the rich in his death,  
though he had done no violence,  
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,  
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,  
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,  
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

After he has suffered,  
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,  
and he will bear their iniquities.  
Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,  
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,  
because he poured out his life unto death,  
and was numbered with the transgressors.

## **Psalm 116**

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;  
he heard my cry for mercy.  
Because he turned his ear to me,  
I will call on him as long as I live.

The cords of death entangled me,  
the anguish of the grave came over me;  
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.  
Then I called on the name of the LORD:  
“LORD, save me!”

The LORD is gracious and righteous;  
our God is full of compassion.  
The LORD protects the unwary;  
when I was brought low, he saved me.

Return to your rest, my soul,  
for the LORD has been good to you.

For you, LORD, have delivered me from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling,  
that I may walk before the LORD  
in the land of the living.

I trusted in the LORD when I said,  
“I am greatly afflicted”;  
in my alarm I said,  
“Everyone is a liar.”

What shall I return to the LORD  
for all his goodness to me?

I will lift up the cup of salvation  
and call on the name of the LORD.  
I will fulfill my vows to the LORD  
in the presence of all his people.

Precious in the sight of the LORD  
is the death of his faithful servants.  
Truly I am your servant, LORD;  
I serve you just as my mother did;  
you have freed me from my chains.

I will sacrifice a thank offering to you  
and call on the name of the LORD.  
I will fulfill my vows to the LORD  
in the presence of all his people,  
in the courts of the house of the LORD—  
in your midst, Jerusalem.

**Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.**

### **Reading: John 18-19:42**

When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it.

<sup>2</sup> Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples.

<sup>3</sup> So Judas came to the garden, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?”

<sup>5</sup> “Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.)

<sup>6</sup> When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground.

<sup>7</sup> Again he asked them, “Who is it you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they said.

<sup>8</sup> Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go.”

<sup>9</sup> This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: “I have not lost one of those you gave me.”

<sup>10</sup> Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.)

<sup>11</sup> Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?”

<sup>12</sup> Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus.

They bound him <sup>13</sup> and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year.

<sup>14</sup> Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard,

<sup>16</sup> but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in.

<sup>17</sup> “You aren’t one of this man’s disciples too, are you?” she asked Peter. He replied, “I am not.”

<sup>18</sup> It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.

<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.

<sup>20</sup> “I have spoken openly to the world,” Jesus replied. “I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret.

<sup>21</sup> Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.”

<sup>22</sup> When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. “Is this the way you answer the high priest?” he demanded.

<sup>23</sup> “If I said something wrong,” Jesus replied, “testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?”

<sup>24</sup> Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So they asked him, “You aren’t one of his disciples too, are you?” He denied it, saying, “I am not.”

<sup>26</sup> One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the garden?"

<sup>27</sup> Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.

<sup>28</sup> Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.

<sup>29</sup> So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?"

<sup>30</sup> "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."

<sup>31</sup> Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected.

<sup>32</sup> This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

<sup>33</sup> Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

<sup>34</sup> "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

<sup>35</sup> "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

<sup>36</sup> Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

<sup>37</sup> "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

<sup>38</sup> "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him.

<sup>39</sup> But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?"

<sup>40</sup> They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

19 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

## **Collect for Good Friday**

Almighty God, we beseech thee graciously to behold this thy family, for which our Lord Jesus Christ was contented to be betrayed, and given up into the hands of wicked men, and to suffer death upon the cross, who now liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

**Amen.**

Trusting in the compassion of God,  
as our Saviour taught us, so we pray

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.**

## **Psalm 22**

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from my cries of anguish?  
My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, but I find no rest.

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;  
you are the one Israel praises.  
In you our ancestors put their trust;  
they trusted and you delivered them.  
To you they cried out and were saved;  
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm and not a man,  
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.  
All who see me mock me;

they hurl insults, shaking their heads.  
“He trusts in the LORD,” they say,  
“let the LORD rescue him.  
Let him deliver him,  
since he delights in him.”

Yet you brought me out of the womb;  
you made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast.  
From birth I was cast on you;  
from my mother’s womb you have been my God.

Do not be far from me,  
for trouble is near  
and there is no one to help.

Many bulls surround me;  
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.  
Roaring lions that tear their prey  
open their mouths wide against me.  
I am poured out like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint.  
My heart has turned to wax;  
it has melted within me.  
My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,  
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;  
you lay me in the dust of death.

Dogs surround me,  
a pack of villains encircles me;  
they pierce my hands and my feet.  
All my bones are on display;  
people stare and gloat over me.  
They divide my clothes among them  
and cast lots for my garment.

But you, LORD, do not be far from me.  
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.  
Deliver me from the sword,  
my precious life from the power of the dogs.  
Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;  
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

I will declare your name to my people;  
in the assembly I will praise you.  
You who fear the LORD, praise him!  
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!  
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

For he has not despised or scorned  
the suffering of the afflicted one;  
he has not hidden his face from him  
but has listened to his cry for help.

From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;  
before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.  
The poor will eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek the LORD will praise him—  
may your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth  
will remember and turn to the LORD,  
and all the families of the nations  
will bow down before him,  
for dominion belongs to the LORD  
and he rules over the nations.

All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;  
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—  
those who cannot keep themselves alive.  
Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord.  
They will proclaim his righteousness,  
declaring to a people yet unborn:  
He has done it!

**Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.**

## **Reading: John 19**

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

<sup>2</sup> The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe <sup>3</sup> and went up to him again and again, saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And they slapped him in the face.

<sup>4</sup> Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.”

<sup>5</sup> When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!”

<sup>6</sup> As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!”

But Pilate answered, “You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.”

<sup>7</sup> The Jewish leaders insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

<sup>8</sup> When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, <sup>9</sup> and he went back inside the palace. “Where do you come from?” he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer.

<sup>10</sup> “Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”

<sup>11</sup> Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

<sup>12</sup> From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”

<sup>13</sup> When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha).

<sup>14</sup> It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon.

“Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews.

<sup>15</sup> But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” “Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked. “We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered.

<sup>16</sup> Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus.

<sup>17</sup> Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha).

<sup>18</sup> There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

<sup>19</sup> Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

<sup>20</sup> Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek.

<sup>21</sup> The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.”

<sup>22</sup> Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”

<sup>23</sup> When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.

<sup>24</sup> “Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.”

This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said,

“They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” So this is what the soldiers did.

<sup>25</sup> Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

<sup>26</sup> When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman, here is your son,” <sup>27</sup> and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

<sup>28</sup> Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.”

<sup>29</sup> A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips.

<sup>30</sup> When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

<sup>31</sup> Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down.

<sup>32</sup> The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other.

<sup>33</sup> But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

<sup>34</sup> Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

<sup>35</sup> The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.

<sup>36</sup> These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken,”

<sup>37</sup> and, as another scripture says, “They will look on the one they have pierced.”<sup>[e]</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away.

<sup>39</sup> He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.

<sup>40</sup> Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

<sup>41</sup> At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid.

<sup>42</sup> Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.