

## MATERIAL FOR HOLY WEEK 2020

### Maundy Thursday – Luke 22.39-71

In our reading it Maundy Thursday night and the Last Supper is over. I'll post a reflection on the Last Supper and Communion on <https://www.stedsandstmatts.co.uk/worship-while-our-buildings-are-clo>

Here are a few thoughts on George Herbert's poem "The Agony". It is a forceful poem, demanding that we look on Christ's agony.

Philosophers have measur'd mountains,  
Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings,  
Walk'd with a staff to heav'n, and traced fountains:

    But there are two vast, spacious things,  
The which to measure it doth more behove:  
Yet few there are that sound them, Sin and Love.

    Who would know Sin, let him repair  
Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see  
A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,  
    His skin, his garments bloody be.  
Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain  
To hunt his cruel food through ev'ry vein.

    Who knows not Love, let him assay  
And taste that juice, which on the crosse a pike  
Did set again abroach; then let him say  
    If ever he did taste the like.  
Love in that liquour sweet and most divine,  
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine.

*The Agony, page 5*

From the very beginning philosophers, which has a wider definition than we're used to - intellectuals, thinking people - people question. They will measure mountains, search the depths of the oceans, examine politics, deal with people, "Walked with a staff to heaven", measuring the distance with a surveyor's measure - George Herbert 1593 to 1633 lived during the lifetime of Galileo Galilei 1564-1642. Yet, says Herbert, they should be looking at the biggest questions of all, Sin and Love.

To see the reality of Sin, sin affecting God, go to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. You will see a man whose prayers were so anguished, whose agony was so painful, that his sweat ran like drops of blood. Most of us have seen physical pain causing such agony. Humans can inflict these levels of pain on others - "Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain". Three years ago, I had a wander round beautiful Hever Castle in Kent. Lovely gardens, a beautiful interior, Anne Boleyn and plenty of history. Then the last room, the room in the gatehouse, had a display of torture instruments - real, genuine presses and vices, designed to inflict pain, used to inflict pain on real human beings. Christ's pain is deeper than we can begin to imagine.

To see the reality of Love, God is Love, go to the foot of the cross. We must watch as a Roman soldier plunges his spear, his pike, into Christ's side and the blood and water run out. We use the word 'piercing', as if we're piercing an olive with a toothpick. No, Roman soldiers may have pierced olives, but they were also capable of piercing the bodies of their victims - perfectly capable of hardening themselves against the pain and suffering they were inflicting. I wondered why blood and water came out, did some research, and it is suggested that the pain of the flogging that Jesus received would have caused his body to go into shock, his heart to beat faster, and fluid to collect in the pericardial sac around his heart. A spear thrust in would release blood and water. That explanation is a bit too close to home, my son Gareth needed his pericardial sac drained on several occasions after he'd had his heart transplant (though it happened for him, carefully, in an operating theatre, not with a spear thrust).

Herbert takes that flow, that blood and water, the wine and water I mix together every time I prepare the table for communion, and presents it to us almost as a wine tasting. The sensual pleasure of liquor sweet - OK, we don't drink communion wine for pleasure - but through the Eucharistic sacrament we are enveloped in the Love of God.

This poem hasn't been set to music, so I've found a C14 Latin poem, set to music by the C20 composer Stanley Vann – born in Leicester, director of music at Chelmsford, then Peterborough. Sung by my favourite Cathedral choir – St Edmundsbury – including our Harry and Gareth.

Hail true Body, born of Mary spotless Virgin's virgin birth;  
Thou who truly hangedst weary on the cross for sons of earth;  
Thou whose sacred side was riven,  
Whence the Water flow'd and Blood,  
O may'st thou, dear Lord, be given  
At death's hour to be our food.

O most kind! O gracious One!  
O sweetest Jesu, Holy Mary's Son! Amen.

*Words: Latin, 14th century, translated H.N. Oxenham, 1829-88*

*Music: Stanley Vann, 1910-2010*

The Choir of St Edmundsbury Cathedral, directed by James Thomas

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGp\\_-hGRo7g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGp_-hGRo7g)