

## MATERIAL FOR HOLY WEEK 2020

### Good Friday – Luke 23.1-47

The day of death, always a bit too close to home. For many of the people witnessing Jesus' crucifixion, by now the images would have passed. We forget the normality of crucifixion. In a troublesome province like Judea, a place that the Romans ruled by force, the sight of criminals, troublemakers, undesirables, being dragged through the streets, covered in blood after a vicious whipping, the sound of the nails, the screams, the pain, the violence of death - and most bodies were not carefully removed and buried. Leave them there as a warning to others - few would grieve.

Soldiers are perfectly capable of nailing fellow humans, of thrusting spears into the sides of dying men, of breaking legs so bodies can collapse. The first few times it may have been difficult, but more experienced men will show you what to do, will goad you to lose your fear and inhibitions - and alcohol will help. This was a job - three to do today, and more next week. The bible tells us that the Centurion praised God, one likes to assume that he went home to think, that his life was changed. You'll remember the 1953 film "The Robe" with Richard Burton as Marcellus - but the chances are that next week the centurion and his troops nailed more men up.

The bible tells us that the crowd returned home "beating their breasts". Really? His followers may have done, those of them who were there (the disciples seem to have gone into hiding), people whose lives had been touched by Jesus - indeed, many people's lives had been touched and they would have mourned, if they didn't feel angry that God had not intervened and saved his Messiah. Some grief, plenty of anger, and that emptiness that touches all who grieve.

Joseph of Arimathea, a man of importance, authority, bravery - able and willing to go to Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus. I expect that the soldiers treated him with respect and, because he had authority to remove Jesus' body, the body was removed - soldiers obeyed orders. The women - probably including his mum - were there, watching and preparing.

"On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment". Dr Luke does not try and describe their grief, their anger, their emptiness. They were not sitting there saying, "it's OK, he's back tomorrow" - this was the end. Perhaps Mary and Martha remembered the raising of their brother Lazarus, but this was Jesus who was dead - who was here to raise him? This is the end.

But all of us who have suffered grief, know that thinking straight is the last

thing you do. The day of a death, the days after a death, so often the grief and the tears hit you straight between the eyes.

This is Herbert's poem "Grief"

O who will give me tears? Come all ye springs,  
Dwell in my head and eyes: come clouds, and rain:  
My grief hath need of all the wat'ry things,  
That nature hath produc'd. Let ev'ry vein  
Suck up a river to supply mine eyes,  
My weary weeping eyes, too dry for me,  
Unless they get new conduits, new supplies  
To bear them out, and with my state agree.  
What are two shallow fords, two little spouts  
Of a less world? the greater is but small,  
A narrow cupboard for my griefs and doubts,  
Which want provision in the midst of all.  
Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise  
For my rough sorrows: cease, be dumb and mute,  
Give up your feet and running to mine eyes,  
And keep your measures for some lover's lute,  
Whose grief allows him music and a rhyme:  
For mine excludes both measure, tune, and time.  
Alas, my God!

Grief, page 69

The people who write about Herbert's poetry do not think "Grief" is one of his best. John Drury in his book *Music at Midnight, the life and poetry of George Herbert* writes "The first twelve lines are wearisomely rhetorical, calling on clouds, rains and rivers to give him tears adequately to his sorrow in monotonous iambic pentameters. He is on unusually poor form" (page 333). Perhaps he is - but actually, he has summed up very well that state you can be in when the tears don't come. When you feel you ought to be grief-stricken. After our Gareth died, I remember feeling guilty that I was strong enough to get on the phone and tell people he'd died, I was apologising to the girl at Student Finance who was upset when she took my phone call - I felt guilty that I had spoilt her morning. "My grief hath need of all the wat'ry things" - I wanted to cry, but tears would not come.

I am not alone, I have sat in hospital chapels with parents who, an hour earlier, opened the door to two police officers who have uttered those words "Can we come in?" I have seen people in floods of tears, using up the Chaplaincy department's supply of tissues - but I have seen others who sit there, numb. An early memory is listening to the Archers - "have a good cry, let it all out, you'll feel better". The Archers, the best pastoral counselling training available.

Going back to George Herbert - for John Drury the poem comes alive in the last few lines. "Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise for my rough sorrows". For the poet, his poems should be an answer. For a painter, the painting should lead to an understanding. For a musician, music should sooth the soul and help make sense of pain and grief. For any artist, in any medium, their art should be able to cope with death, with grief, it should be able to help us fathom it.

No, not at the moment, says Herbert. My poems are "measures for some lover's lute", words that touch the fancy, that celebrate all that is good, that seduce a beautiful woman - and even if love is painful, music and a rhyme will make it better.

This grief transcends, excludes "both measure, tune, and time". In the darkest of despair, there is nothing. Usually we meet to pray in a church that is empty, stripped of everything that brings beauty - this year we can't even do that.

Here is a setting of "Were you there when they crucified my Lord" sung by the choir of King's College, Cambridge.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5qUnKC9rPU>

There is something ironic that crucifixion - something so horrendous, bloody, evil - is sung about with something so beautiful.