

# Good Friday Addresses for the Three Hours' Devotion 2007

## I: The Landscape

Our Lord's life and death were set in a particular landscape, and this is not merely incidental: landscape never is. There is no merely literal history. Events are always physically and emotionally tied up with where they happened. The Black Hole of Calcutta would not have quite the same ring to it if it were the Black Hole of Neasden. My Aunt Doris left me her Bible when she went to New Zealand after the war to marry her soldier boy, and when I started to read it in bed I soon discovered the often terrifying power of the biblical landscape.

Right at the beginning in the Garden of Eden there was *The Voice of God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening*. And a little later, Jacob in the wilderness wrestling with God calls out *How awful is this place*. No escaping atmosphere and presences: *Behold a valley of dry bones*.

The life of Christ was lived out in a small country, at the time an insignificant, though irritatingly troublesome, outpost of the Roman Empire. The Holy Land is at the northern end of the Great Rift Valley which runs all the way down into Africa. The coast at Caesarea and Joppa, at Tyre and Sidon is Mediterranean. You might be in southern Portugal or the Greek islands. The same clear light. Goethe said he had never seen light until he visited Italy. The flat sea reflecting the clear sky.

And if you look inland from the coast, you will see the distant brooding Mount Hermon, rising 9000 feet at the north end of the Sea of Galilee. Without Mount Hermon and the moisture it creates, all the Holy Land would be a desert. To the north west of the lake are the Golan Heights. On its eastern side are the biblical villages – amazing as you drive the lake road and pass through such as Magdala and Capernaum. All these little towns and the lake itself are 600 feet below sea level – one of the lowest places in the world. Until you follow the Jordan river as it flows sluggishly south into the Dead Sea. This is 1200 feet below sea level, the lowest place on earth.

The Bible calls Jerusalem *Mount Sion* and it is a city on a hill: 2400 feet above the plain. From the northern end of the city you can look towards the sea and below you is the ruined fortification Megiddo – one of the most fought-over towns in history. Now a pile of stones. Thirty-nine times it has exchanged hands in battles. Just what you would expect of a place that was strategically set on the high road between Egypt and Assyria and the route to Babylon. Megiddo – in prophecy giving its name to Armageddon, the Last Battle.

From Jerusalem to Jericho is about eighteen miles. But in that eighteen miles you drop 3600 feet from the cool of the urban hilltop to the dense heat of the world's floor. So when St Luke begins the parable of the Good Samaritan and says, *A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho* – he definitely means the *down* bit. That road wriggles through the Judean wilderness, a hard place of white rocks which always reminds me of a painting by Cezanne. This is the wilderness where Our Lord was tempted forty days and forty nights.

Blinding sun by day and a velvet darkness at night. Just these extremes. You can see why it was the headquarters of the Gnostic philosophers by the caves at Qumran. Extreme climate. Extreme philosophy. All light and dark. No shades of grey. Amazingly, you can sunbathe safely here in the blinding sun and the temperature up around 120 degrees. The fact that the land is so low-lying means there is an extra layer of atmosphere which filters out the ultra violet rays. Now it is a health spa for those suffering from psoriasis. God is good and not trying to murder them with a malignant melanoma. Here too is the Dead Sea so thick with salt that you can't sink in it. And above the sea Masada rises 1000 feet. You can go up on foot or by cable car and even at the summit you're still 200 feet below sea level.

The last few weeks of Christ's life on earth were spent in Jerusalem, the City of David, the ancient Jebusite capital from 1000 years before Our Lord's birth. The Jerusalem of the prophets, the citadel which had fallen to the Babylonians, which had rebelled at the time of the infamous Antiochus Epiphanes and which was now a Roman garrison.

There is the Mount of Olives, and halfway down this little hill is the garden of Gethsemane where you can still see the ancient olive trees from Our Lord's time. Behind the hill is Bethany, the home of Martha and Mary - and Lazarus who lived there and died and lived again. Jerusalem is truly golden with the sandstone of the buildings glowing in the sunlight. Come down from the Mount of Olives and you cross the Brook Kidron and start to ascend into the old city.

Here are still the crooked steps which lead up to the house of the High Priest. And a quarter of a mile from there is Pilate's palace. This was the route taken by Jesus during his trial. *The Via Dolorosa* and *The Way of the Cross*. Nowadays there is an unintentionally ironic signpost telling you that the way of the cross is a one-way street. You can see marks in the road, carved there by the Roman soldiers as part of the gambling games they played. *And they cast lots for his vesture*. And by the Jerusalem bus station is an ugly hill, its shape macabre. You can still see it. *And behold, they came unto Golgotha – the place of a skull*.

## **II: St Luke 23: 33-43**

Because the scientific culture dominates our way of thinking, we tend to think that the best explanation for anything is the most literal. Typically we are interested in quantities, weights, measures, how much? how fast? and how far? But the quantitative perspective is one-track, limiting, accurate in a narrow sort of way but stultifying to the imagination. Other ages were more poetic. They rejoiced in allegory: Christ as the Bride of the Church; God himself as a mother hen. And the Cross of Christ as the Tree of Life.

And so it is. Symbolically our Fall came through our eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And there in Eden was that other Tree. Not mentioned again until Christian poets recognised it for what it is: The Cross of Christ. As the Tree of Knowledge brought death. So the Tree of Life, the Cross, brings life.

Scientific truth is not the same thing as religious truth. Scientific truth is exact, but provisional, always susceptible to amendment. As it was once put vividly: *Even the most beautiful hypothesis is one day slain by one brute fact.*

Religious truth is not provisional. It is eternal because it concerns the relationship between God and human nature. And God and human nature do not change. But religious truth is not literal either. It is not one-track. For instance, *You must be born again* is not meant to be understood as a once-off, as some revivalists vainly believe. It means you have to be born again and again and again. As St Paul puts it, *Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.* Daily.

Religious truth is paradoxical. An interesting word *paradox*. It comes from two Greek words *παρα* and *δοξα*: *para* meaning *by the side of* as in parallel lines and *doxa* meaning opinion. So a paradox is two opinions side by side. But *doxa* also means *glory* – so a paradox is something that is *by the side of glory*.

And religious truth has to be paradoxical because what it deals with is way beyond our ordinary understanding. Religious truth is hammered out of apparent contradiction. So Christ is both Good Shepherd and Lamb of God. He is both God and Man. Mary is Virgin and Mother. In the midst of life we are in death. And now today at the foot of the Cross we see that the Blessed One is cursed. For the Bible says *Cursed be everyone that hangeth upon a tree.*

This is the horror of the Crucifixion. Not that Jesus endured a few hours of terrible pain – agonising though it was. But that He who was without sin was punished as a criminal. That God who is the origin of all goodness was treated as evil. Remember that Jesus, God with us, was accused of blasphemy. There is no religious truth without paradox. It is paradox that unites the opposites and shows us the workings of the Divine economy. When God wants to bring about supreme good, he does not start where we might start – given such an awesome task – with something that's pretty good already. He starts with the worst. When he wants to give life to men, he starts with the death of God.

And so we see in this the Passion according to St Luke, a dramatic paradox which would be laughable if the situation were not so dire. Here is a man dying on a Cross promising eternal life to the man next to him who is dying also. *This day shalt thou be with me in Paradise.* Is this a sick joke, or what?

Actually, Our Lord's words to the penitent thief teach us the truth about Christ. First let me tell you lies about Christ. Millions of decent people of good will, thousands of them here in the City, do not believe that Christ is the Son of God. They give him the credit for being a very good sort, a sound teacher, the Founder of a system of morality. But this is not the Christ of the Gospels. Here is the Christ of the Gospels, the real Christ, today promising eternal life even as he is dying.

This is not someone who is a moral philosopher, or even a jolly good fellow. This is the one who casts out devils, raises the dead and says *Before Abraham was, I AM.* You may not believe a word of this. Then you have the right not to be a Christian. But if you do think Christ was a mere teacher of morals – like Socrates or John Stuart Mill – you are not a Christian as the faith has always been proclaimed and understood. To

be a Christian is to recognise Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Eternal Word *by whom all things were made*.

Jesus was no mere teacher of righteousness. He *is* our righteousness. The alternatives have been nicely set out for us: You can't have Jesus of Nazareth as just a good guy. He was mad. He was bad. Or he is God.

### III: St Mark 15: 29-41

*Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabbachthani. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*  
Another pair of opposites: the cry from the depths to the heights. And the paradox that it is God himself who cries out that God has forsaken him. Can God forsake God then? No. But God-made-Man can feel what men feel when we feel forsaken and lost. The Hebrew word *Eloi* is from the old word *El* or in the plural *Elohim* – the High God or gods. The word appears in the first verse of *Genesis*. It is God as *Eloi* who drives back the Red Sea *by a strong east wind* to allow the Israelites to pass over on dry land. Where is God now at this Passover? He is on the Cross as the Passover sacrifice for men.

Of course you can, if you wish, look at all this from the forensic point of view, as if conducting a post-mortem. That's what Albert Schweitzer did in his book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer concluded that Christ's life had ended in failure and disappointment. He had trusted in God that he would deliver him. But he had been wrong. So Schweitzer concluded that we should forget about Christianity and adopt the philosophy of *reverence for life*.

But there is much more to Our Lord's cry from the cross than that. *My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me* is the first verse of *Psalms 22* - the psalm of lament sung in the symbolic ritual of the dying and rising king in ancient Israel. That psalm is also an unnerving prophecy of the death of Christ, who was the real dying and rising King. The words of this prophecy are terrifyingly exact:

*All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out their lips and shake their heads saying, he trusted in God that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, if he will have him. They pierced my hands and my feet...They part my garments among them and cast lots for my vesture....*

Those words were written hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. Here they are, coming true at the first Good Friday.

But Our Lord knew when he uttered those terrible words that the psalm ends with a hymn of praise and thanksgiving for deliverance:

*They shall come and the heavens shall declare his righteousness: unto a people that shall be born, whom the Lord hath made.*

That *people* is the church, the people of God, those who are saved by his sacrifice.

Sacrifice was made in Israel in the time of Christ. The High Priest went into the holy of holies once every year on *Yom Kippur* – the Day of Atonement. And what did he

do there? He made intercession for the people and addressed God by his name *YHVH* – a word so sacred that it was only ever uttered once a year by the High Priest in solitary prayer. And when the word was written down, it was without the vowels – so that no one would be able to pronounce it. This is the word translated into English as *I AM* – the word by which Jesus named himself before the Pharisees. That is why he was accused of blasphemy.

That temple where the High Priest interceded on *Yom Kippur* had its veil. And this veil was what screened off the holy of holies. When Jesus dies on the Cross he enters the holy of holies and *veil of the temple is rent in twain, from the top to the bottom* – that is from heaven to earth. And the holiness which before was hidden is now out in the open. Christ's death creates the Church, a holy people. The barrier between sacred and secular is broken down. You might put it in modern terms and say that Christ democratised holiness. He made holiness a gift available to us all. What was once hidden and particular is now open and universal. That is why the centurion, a Roman, a gentile, a pagan is the first beneficiary of this new grace – the first to see and say that *Truly this was the Son of God*.

And not just men but women who until that time had not played a prominent part in religious observances. St Mark's Gospel leaves us with this haunting verse about the women at the Cross. Ah yes, the weaker sex! The men had all run away.

*There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James the less and Joses; and Salome...and many other women which came up with him unto Jerusalem.*

#### **IV: St John 19:28-37**

St John, the most theological of the four Gospel-writers, is adept at glimpses of Jesus that are full of feeling and intensity. So it is St John who records that *Jesus wept* when he heard of the death of his friend Lazarus. It is John who tells us of Jesus writing with his finger in the sand because he is embarrassed when he comes across the woman caught in adultery. Now today in this most solemn hour he tells us how Jesus said, *I thirst*.

There is no doubt that a man being crucified would thirst, being hanged for hours in the middle of the day. So why does St John make this apparently redundant remark? He has a deep theological motive. He is fighting a war against those influential intellectuals of his time – the Docetist heretics – who said that Jesus was not truly a man, not really flesh and blood, but a sort of spiritual manifestation. And of course spiritual manifestations, ghosts and the like, do not thirst.

These Docetic enemies of the Gospel were numerous and powerful. They were what is loosely described as Gnostics – from the Greek word for *knowledge*. The Gnostics thought of themselves as being *in the know*. The Gnostics believed that only spiritual things were real. They thought that the world was not made by God but by an inferior deity or demon and that salvation came through escaping from material things and from the body.

These Gnostics are the heretics whom St John attacks in the very first chapter of his Gospel – the one we read at Christmas. He tells us that the material world was made by God. And he knocks this into us in words of one syllable: *All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made.* You feel like adding *Geddit!*

The truth of Christianity and its very centre is material and physical: Incarnation: the *Word became flesh.* The Incarnation was hideously repulsive to the Gnostics who were so refined and intellectually pure that they hated anything to do with the body. They always remind me somehow of that saying of Lady Ottoline Morrell about Bertrand Russell: *You should see him in his dressing gown. He's all disembodied mind!*

There are plenty of Gnostics around today. Hampstead Buddhists and New Age freaks among them. People who believe in ideas and systems, in methods and techniques. They are snobs who try to impress us with their *secret knowledge* – *their Γνωσις.* But there is no secret knowledge. The Christian faith is universal and wide open to all nations and all cultures.

The Gnostics distrust practicality and getting your sleeves rolled up. Whereas the religion of both the Old Testament and the New is all about God getting his sleeves rolled up: first to create the material world and then to enter it as a baby and die for it in the flesh. The creation and the Incarnation are the ways in which God expresses his solidarity with us...

... that is with *us men and for our salvation* and not for disembodied minds, spiritual snobs, people too spiritually refined to be any earthly use. The whole Gospel – especially St John's Gospel – stresses the centrality of material things: the water into wine; the loaves and fishes; the bread and wine at the Last Supper; the physical suffering of Jesus on the Cross; and the Resurrection of the Body. I fear St John would never have made a modern liberal bishop.

Then after telling us that Jesus was a real man who suffered on the Cross, he confirms for us, out of the mouths of the Roman soldiers, that Jesus really died on the Cross. Jesus was no phantom spirited away at the moment of a pretend death that was only for appearances sake. St John, that most gentle and sensitive writer, steels himself to give us the very gruesome facts: the water and the blood which came from Jesus's side. He was a real man and this was a real death.

St John, with all his stress on the materialism of the Incarnation, does not lack anything when it comes to being spiritual. It is St John who writes all those words about Christ as the Vine and how, if we want to live, we must drink his blood. And here in this event on Calvary we witness the Water and the Blood, the Water and the Wine that, mixed in the Chalice, become the Sacrament of Christ's death and of our salvation.

### **V: Romans 5: 1-8**

The magnificent *Epistle to the Romans* has, with justification, been called *St Paul's Gospel.* St Paul in his early life was a tortured religious genius, an orthodox Jew,

devoted to the Law of God. But he had a problem which he couldn't escape: *if salvation is through keeping the Law and avoiding sin, how can I be saved – when I know that I am a sinner?*

With typical Pauline – and he's like Beethoven – grandiosity – St Paul even refers to himself as *the chiefest of sinners*. This problem he had – how it pricked him. Then he met Christ on the Damascus Road, and Christ asked him, *Is it hard to kick against the pricks?*

St Paul understood, better than anyone else, what human nature is like. He saw that we are all steeped in Original Sin. There's nothing macabre or complicated about Original Sin. St Paul defines it for us in words of one syllable:

*The thing I would not, that I do; and what I would, I do not*

That is the human condition. It is the conclusion that any one of us comes to after a moment's reflection. St Paul says, *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*. It's a pun, a joke. For the word for sin *αμαρτια* is one borrowed from the archery contests in the Greek games: the arrows that fell short were of the *hamartia* sort.

So we have the splendour of God's Law in all its perfection alongside the squalor of our very human imperfection. Paul realised in the blinding light on the Damascus Road that for us to be saved there must be something to match the splendour of the Law which we fail to keep. And it was revealed to him that this something was the Grace of God. God trumps our sin by his mercy.

Back in 1984 a friend of mine, a teacher and a first-rate actor came to my village church to rehearse the Good Friday Passion Play. Afterwards we went to the pub as usual and we all said Goodnight at chucking out time. I got a call next morning from my friend's wife to say he had died in the night. He was thirty-two, previously in good health. I was in the Vicarage alone for the next few nights and I began rather to dwell on the death of my friend. I couldn't sleep.

On the bookshelf in the bedroom was a copy of Karl Barth's great commentary on St Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*. I picked it up and started to read. I stumbled upon a marvellous word of comfort. Barth says: *God sees that we are sinners and he comes to us in judgement. He does not stay his judgement or temper his wrath. He exercises upon us the full weight of his judgement. Only through Christ we experience God's judgement not as condemnation, but forgiveness.*

That is a pretty good summary of the Gospel according to St Paul. We are not good men. God doesn't wait for us to become good. He has given up looking for moral improvement from us. Instead God moves in and touches us just where we are:

*God commendeth his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

This is the shocking truth of the Gospel. Puritans and those people who think well of themselves don't like it at all. It's a scandal. The undeserving are given the reward. A

lady actually said to me recently at a Livery Dinner, *I don't regret anything I've done. But I do resent some of the things done to me by others.*

*But* it's no use trusting in our own righteousness, as Cranmer's great *Prayer of Humble Access* says: *We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs...* It is no use trusting in our own righteousness. We ain't got no righteousness. As William Blake put it:

*If moral virtue was Christianity, Christ's pretensions were all vanity.*

That is the Gospel of St Paul. This self-sacrifice by God in Christ today on Calvary is the means – the only means – of our salvation.

## **VI: St Matthew 27: 50-end**

That last lesson describes an astonishing scene. It's macabre like Walpurgis Night or like some wild scene from a post-apocalyptic film. After the death of Christ the graves open. Ghosts. Earthquakes. Darkness. And what a phrase that is: *after the death of Christ*. Of course it had to be like that. Christ is the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, by whom all things were made; the rational, organising principle behind and within creation. His death is therefore shocking, not just personally and emotionally for those who loved him. His death is shocking cosmically. And the world of nature, made by him, responds – unnaturally.

The time between now and Easter morning is the strangest time of the year. Liturgically – but not of course actually – Jesus Christ is dead. The church goes undecorated. Priests and people are commanded by our rules of ritual not to acknowledge the altar. It is a mark of grief and a mark of absence. I can remember the first time this sensation of absence took hold of me. It was a sense of loss and a sense of fear.

I told you about my Auntie Doris going off to New Zealand and leaving me her Bible. I used to read it in my bedroom over my granddad's newsagent's shop. The window looked out over Oak Road and the jail field. And beyond the field Armley jail itself – a magnificent Victorian folly, like a castle, black with turrets and battlements. At night it was full of lights. Rows of lights from the cells and this made it look like one of the great *Cunard* liners. About nine o'clock the prisoners had to put their lights out and I used to watch as one after another they went out leaving only the big light at the entrance – what my granddad called *the porter's lodge*.

Oak Road was usually busy with workmen to and from the factories in Armley Road: the place by the bridge where they made wallpaper and *Greenwood's and Batley's* the engineering shop where my other granddad worked. Men in overalls answering the hooters and buzzers calling them in and setting them free. But on Good Friday afternoon Oak Road was silent, empty. It was an age when there were still the vestiges of the Christian faith in public life. No one worked. It was a strange and mysterious atmosphere, like a haunting.

I was only a lad. I recall reading this chapter from St Matthew's Gospel in the silence. No one playing on the jail field either. And the dusty afternoon sunshine falling on the

corner of grandma's dressing table. There was a peculiar intensity about it. You felt the force of that phrase, *after the death of Christ*.

I know the first importance of the Gospels is not as works of literature, but as instruction for the people of God. But this last chapter of St Matthew's is a literary masterpiece. In Sophocles and in Shakespeare there is often the convention of the fifth act. This was a sorting-out, meant to restore a sense of calm in the theatregoers before they set off home.

And here in St Matthew we have a sorting-out and a clearing up. Necessary things are done decently and in order. There are the women. Women are always the most useful people at a birth or a death. And then here comes Joseph of Arimathea to make the arrangements. He goes to Pilate as if going to the Registrar of Deaths. The tomb is sealed.

If it were a symphony, this would be where the music stops. Now we are left with thirty-six hours in which to use our imagination. What happened next? A powerful tradition in the early church speaks of the *harrowing of hell*. Like the Palm Sunday procession, Christ marches into hell – and plants his Cross there. The Tree of Life in the midst of death. Of course the devil and his demons are terrified. This is a most comforting tradition and I wish I'd known it when I was a little boy in my bedroom opposite the prison. I would have known – what we know today – that there is no place in heaven or earth, or even in hell, that is not touched and healed by the redeeming work of Christ.

*So they went and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone and setting a watch...*