

Addresses for the Good Friday Three Hours' Devotions 2008

I – The Suffering Servant

What is the nature of historical evidence? How do we go about satisfying ourselves that something really happened? Well, if somebody told you that England would win the next Test Match and then you watched the game on TV, and England did win, you'd say: *Yes, Tommy Smith said they'd win, and they did.* Now look at the prophecy in the lesson I've just read.

This prophecy from the third author in the series of authors we know as Isaiah, comes from about 500 years before the birth of Jesus. It predicts the events of Good Friday in astonishing detail: *he is despised and rejected of men....he was wounded for our transgressions...he opened not his mouth...he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter...he made his grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death...* And this, as we read in the Gospels, is what happened to Jesus half a millennium after Isaiah made his prophecy. The wicked are the thieves on the crosses beside him. The rich man is Joseph of Arimathea who provides his tomb

This is not a vague prediction like Tommy Smith's saying that England would win the Test Match. It's much more precise. It's as if Tommy Smith had said, *England will score 490 for 7 and get the Aussies out for 163 and 227.*

There are other reasons for marvelling at Isaiah's prophecy. He is prophesying the Messiah. But the general picture of the hoped-for Messiah was of a strong, handsome prince, a soldier, the very image of a man in his prime, in all his glory. Yet what does Isaiah see? *A man despised and not esteemed, brought as a lamb to the slaughter.* Isaiah's vision of the Messiah cut right across expectations. Yet he was proved right all those centuries later.

And then Isaiah says something even more shocking. He says that *he was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities...the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.* This is awful. For above all things, the Israelites believed in God's Law and God's justice: the guilty get punished and the innocent go free. Yet here, he says, God punishes the innocent and lets the guilty go free.

But then we realise the depths of God's love for us: for he turns the injustice on himself. God turns his own law on himself. He is the innocent victim made criminal. He is punished for our sakes.

It gets even worse. The Messiah is the Blessed One of God. And anyone executed, especially anyone crucified, is regarded as cursed. So here is the Blessed, cursed. It's all upside down. Again God, the Shepherd of Israel, is in his Servant-Son the sheep who is made the sacrifice. In the death of Jesus we see one of the greatest spiritual and cultural reversals in western civilisation: before Christ, there was the temple where people made sacrifices to God; in Jesus' death God makes sacrifice for man. Christ himself referred to his own body as *this temple* – that is, this place of sacrifice.

Isaiah mixes up the theology of the Messiah with the myth of the dying and rising king which the Israelites picked up from the agricultural pagans they encountered

when they crossed into Canaan. The dying and rising king was a ritual which the Canaanite farmers performed every year for the fruitfulness of the crops. But in the case of Jesus it was no myth and no ritual. It happened to him in Palestine, under Pontius Pilate, in about AD 33.

There are hidden depths to be revealed. Because of course Christ is the *true* dying and rising King poured out for the sake of the human crops. Think of his own parable of the sower. He tells us: *The seed is the word of God*. St John tells us that Jesus is the Word of God. And the good ground is the souls that will receive him. The seed has to go into the ground before it can bear fruit. In the parable of the sower, Our Lord foretold his own death and his Resurrection in the lives of those who believe in him.

This is sensational. One wants to quote the ancient theologian Tertullian: *It is true, because it is impossible*. God's redemption of mankind is so utterly shocking in every way. Nothing is as we would naturally expect it. And it is these shocking revelations which underscore its truth. You couldn't, as they say, make it up. No wonder Isaiah begins his prophecy with the words: *Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?*

II – Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise

Here we come to Calvary, Golgotha, the place of a skull, outside the old Jerusalem city walls. A hideous hill that looks like a skull and not far from the smouldering municipal rubbish-tip. This rubbish-tip smoked and smouldered all the time and was called in Hebrew *Gehenna* which is also the name for hell, the bottomless pit. It is near here that he is crucified with a thief on either side. The thieves were very likely politicians – freedom-fighters against the Roman occupation; or terrorists, from the Roman point of view.

These two criminals represent many things. They stand for the dilemma, the contention that Jesus could never escape. He was accused of being on the side of the occupying imperial Romans – because he healed the centurion's son, because he held theological discussions with the Sadducees, the aristocratic priesthood who were hand-in-glove with the Roman authorities; and because he had a man, Matthew, among his disciples who collected taxes for the Romans.

On the other hand, Jesus was accused of being against Caesar because he also had among his disciples Simon the Zealot – that is Simon the Freedom-Fighter or Simon the Terrorist, as you like. And because Jesus claimed he was the Messiah, the one who traditionally would throw off the yoke of Israel's enemies – here the Romans. So here you have the paradoxical Jesus, whom some called a revolutionary and others an Establishment man. Actually, he was both.

These two criminals on the crosses represent *us* as well. One of them blames everybody else for his problems and asks to be saved from his just punishment. I recognise myself in him all right! Are you ever like that? I should like to be more like the penitent thief and make a heartfelt confession, own up to my own faults – instead of blaming everyone else – and ask Jesus to forgive me. The notion of confession and forgiveness is of course theologically ultimate: your eternal salvation depends on your confessing your sins. But it is psychologically necessary too for the proper

development of the personality: you can't make any moral, psychological or spiritual progress in your life at all, unless you first see what your shortcomings are and where you're going wrong. Unfortunately the whole tenor of the modern age is against penitence and confession – except apologising fatuously for what's not your fault, like the slave trade. We are encouraged instead to esteem ourselves *self-esteem*. It's fatal.

Most lovely Jesus and dearest Lord, here nailed to the Cross. And he says, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*. It is amazing that even in his agony he thought not of himself, but of his executioners. But the *know not what they do* saying goes deeper and it applies to us as well as to the executioners. What they were doing was saving mankind by killing God. You wouldn't expect them to understand that, now would you?

There are vivid images in this part of St Luke's account. *And they parted his raiment and cast lots*. The ones who were killing him got to wear Christ's clothes. That is an image for you to meditate upon between now and Easter morning. There was an old Hollywood movie called *The Robe* and I remember that robe as a beautiful, immaculate red thing, folded over the arm of the centurion played by Richard Burton. But it would not have been like that, not really. He had been scourged, remember – flogged within an inch of his life with whips with nails. The robe would have been red all right. But with his sweat and blood. Think of his Robe. And then think of what St Paul said: that we are to *put on Christ*

The vinegar they brought him was a drug to ease the torment: a small kindness even in the heart of darkness. The vinegar would also hasten the victim's death. They administered it so they could have done with the whole rotten job and get off home. It was boring standing around waiting for a man to die. Boring. The banality of evil.

And what's all this? *Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise*. *Paradise* is a Persian word – think east of Babylon, think Iran – which means *a garden*. So think of Christ's death on the Cross, this work of redemption, as the restoration of the paradise garden before Original Sin and the Fall of Man. And of God walking in the garden once again in the cool of the day, and the penitent thief – like a redeemed Adam - by his side

The first sin in the garden had brought about the death of man. The sin committed on Good Friday outside the City wall procures the death of God. And the death of God brings the life of man. No wonder some of the early Fathers of the Church spoke of sin as *O felix culpa!* - O happy fault!

And *A superscription was also written over him in letters of Greek and Latin and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS*. Why in all those languages? Because it was the Feast of the Passover and there were people in Jerusalem from all over the world. Pontius Pilate wanted to warn the whole world that *this* is what happens to those who set themselves up against Rome. More than that, St Luke wants us to understand that the salvation which Christ brings by his death is for the whole world.

Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom

III - “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabbachthani”

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabbachthani. My, God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me? The organist and theologian Albert Schweitzer meditated on this terrible saying in his book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* and came to the conclusion that Jesus died in despair. Schweitzer said that Jesus had all along thought that God would vindicate him. Instead he finds himself alone, dying on the Cross. And so Jesus despairs of God.

You might have thought that a theologian and organist of the stature of Schweitzer would have wondered where those words *Eloi, Eloi* come from. They are the opening words of Psalm 22 *My God, My God, look upon me; why hast thou forsaken me?* These words were composed round about 586 BC when Jerusalem fell and the Israelites were carried off into exile in Babylon. This Psalm was said yesterday, according to tradition, at the Stripping of the Altars after the last Mass for Maundy Thursday.

Psalm 22 deserves to be read in full, for it makes some very exact prophecies of the death of Christ. All those centuries before he was born we get these words:

They 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 stand staring and looking upon me. They part my garments among them; and cast lots upon my vesture...

I keep wondering why Schweitzer didn't notice this. Even more, why he didn't look at how Psalm 22 ends:

All the ends of the world shall remember themselves and be turned unto the Lord...They shall come and the heavens declare his righteousness: unto a people that shall be born, whom the Lord hath made.

In other words, Psalm 22 is not a cry of despair because it ends in triumph. Jesus, as a Rabbi steeped in the Psalms – which were the hymnbook of the synagogue – knew very well how the Psalm ends. You might have thought that the organist in Schweitzer – a profession acquainted with hymnbooks – if not Schweitzer the theologian – would have known the ending of Psalm 22 and amended his views accordingly. Jesus knew: and in reciting that Psalm he is prophesying his triumph.

Someone who did meditate profitably on *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabbachthani* was the theologian T.R. Glover who marvels at the forsakenness as follows:

There, on the Cross, more than in all else that Jesus did or was, there was God.

Some of them that stood by, when they heard it, said, Behold he calleth Elias.

What does this mean? It means that whoever thought Jesus was calling on Elias – that's the Latin form of Elijah – could not have been Jews. They would not get mixed up over *Eloi* and *Eli-JAH*. There must have been Gentiles at the foot of the Cross too.

So St Mark is telling us that Christ's death is for the salvation not of Jews only, but for all mankind.

This universal Gospel – this unique visionary prophecy and new and thrilling, mind-expanding insight into God and God's work – is stressed again in the words

The veil of the temple was rent in twain, from the top to the bottom.

The veil was a permanent curtain in the temple, dividing the Holy of Holies from the people. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter once a year on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Now on Calvary Christ is our High Priest and through his sacrifice of himself in the death of the Cross, atonement is made for us all. The veil is torn and holiness is Christ's gift of grace to the whole of mankind. Holiness breaks out everywhere, like a pandemic. The tearing of this Jewish veil, you might say, led to the constructing of the Christian cathedrals. And the sacrifice of the High Priest was replaced by Christ's sacrifice in the Mass.

All the ends of the world shall remember themselves and be turned unto the Lord...They shall come and the heavens declare his righteousness: unto a people that shall be born, whom the Lord hath made.

IV – “I thirst”

St John tells us that Jesus was thirsty, not out of a macabre interest in his dire physical torment, but for a very good reason. He wants to make sure we know that Jesus was a real man with real physical, human needs. Why? Because so much of the religion at the time of St John was what is called *Gnostic* – coming from the Greek word for knowledge. Gnostics were the sophisticates, those who thought themselves *in the know*

And what they thought they knew was that reality is spiritual and material things are illusory. St John rails against this view all through his Gospel: indeed, you might even say that materialism and Gnostic-bashing is the great theme of St John's Gospel. From the start: *In the beginning was the Word...all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made.*

The first miracle is water into wine. Then we have the feeding of the 5000. Healing the sick and the blind. We are told that Lazarus had been dead for four days. The disciples tell Jesus *He stinketh*. St John wants us to know that God is the Creator of the physical world and that he is committed to the material things he has made. When Jesus leaves his last gifts to his disciples, it is in the form of physical things: the bread and wine of the Last supper.

Gnosticism was not killed off long ago though. It thrives today. Our newspapers, magazines, TV programmes are full of the things the Gnostics were so fond of: New Age techniques, horoscopes, fortune-telling, lucky mascots, talismans, diets, food fads. a thousand different gurus and umpteen varieties of psychotherapy and navel-gazing. This is the pagan world, a world governed by chance and fortune, full of all kinds of beneficial and detrimental influences all to be placated or warded off. Rituals. Obsessive-compulsive habits. Touching lamp-posts. Not putting your foot on

a crack in the pavement. And above all Gnostics believe in systems, abstractions, formulas, innovations, new fads and the cult of change.

St John's Gospel says this is all wrong. It is not the things of the world that are wrong, but the misuse of them. As Chesterton said, *We thank God for the gift of wine by not drinking too much of it.* The Gnostic spirits and gods are so damned spiritual that they're no earthly use. St John puts his trust in the goodness of the Creation. Good because it was made by God. And God emphasised his commitment to the Creation by giving us grace and the eternal truth in the Sacraments – in the form of material things: water at Baptism; oil for anointing the sick; a ring at the marriage; bread and wine for his Body and Blood.

Then came the soldiers and brake the legs of the first.

This was called the *Crucifragium* and sometimes it was done instead of a crucifixion. Sometimes it was done in addition. In which case it was partly an act of mercy, to help the victim to die more quickly. Sometimes those being crucified could take days to die. The final cause of death was usually suffocation or heart failure through striving and finally failing to pull oneself up for a breath. Again the soldiers would break the legs to kill their victims in order to get off home.

But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they break not his legs.

There was no need. Again we see St John's Gospel deliberately stressing that Jesus was really and truly dead. There was a Gnostic heresy called *Docetism* which said that Christ did not actually die on the Cross – only a phantom in his place. This heresy is, as it were, the prototype of the legend that a crippled Jesus somehow managed to survive the Cross, get himself smuggled to India by his disciples and found a new religion there. I wonder at the extent of the modern prejudice against the Christian gospel when millions will set themselves to swallow the blatant incredulities of such as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code*, gross fantasies beside which the gospels are models of understatement.

But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.

Typical of St John. Real blood. Real water. We think of the Chalice which is mingled water and wine at the Mass. This led to a miraculous insight by St Thomas Aquinas. St Thomas meditated on the parable of the Prodigal Son. And he said something very shocking about it – and very wonderful. He said that God is the prodigal in the sense that what he does continually is to pour out his being into his creatures so that they have being, so that they live. Like the prodigal in the parable, God pours his being into wastrels like us. This is what God does: he just gives us his being all the time. God *is* being as ever-flowing gift. It is God's nature to give himself away.

And in Christ he pours himself out for us on the Cross. And here we must surely be reminded of Our Lord's saying that he who loses his life saves it. We become truly ourselves only when we surrender our lives to God and give ourselves away to others in love.

St John is the eye-witness of all these things:

And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.

It is the early spring now of thy healing
And the nervous flowers come with music:
I hear, *O Sacred Head*, and that
The duteous day now closeth.
I lie here in fear and ecstasy.
Remove, O Lord, the types and shadows,
The accursed figures of speech,
The lying similes.
Bring on the harpsichord boats and
The water pots of wine;
The golden light of the first gifts,
The sun, early, east of Jordan:
Frankincense –
And myrrh.

V – Christ died for the ungodly

St Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* was written at least fifteen years before the first Gospel and here he sets out his famous doctrine of justification by faith – a doctrine with a turbulent history and which in the hands of Martin Luther helped to split the Church in the 16th century. Luther was dismissed as *that drunken German* by the Pope of the day. Now I see there is greater affection for him from the present Pope; and who knows whether the Roman Church might not erect a statue to Luther as it is doing for Galileo?

Luther was not the most extreme of the Reformers. He believed in the real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and he was a man of great learning and passionate devotion to Our Lord. But he did make this stark contrast between faith and works and he quoted St Paul to support his arguments: *Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through Our Lord Jesus Christ.*

What do we make of the divide between faith and works? When we were little children we were taught of course that we would go to heaven only if we were good: the suggestion was that we get there by our own efforts. St Paul and Martin Luther deny this. If we are saved by how good we are, then why do we need the Saviour Jesus Christ? As usual William Blake puts it dramatically:

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

Blake was right. There is no doubt about the teaching of the Gospels on this. We are *miserable offenders*. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Jesus Christ is the Saviour. We said as much very recently, in the Collect for the Second Sunday in Lent:

Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves....and again in the Collect for Sexagesima: O Lord God, who seest that we put not our trust in anything that we do...

But we don't really believe that, do we? Not emotionally. Not deep down. We think it's all up to us. We think *we're* in charge of our destiny. We think that Collects such as the ones I've just quoted are a bit exaggerated – like putting the clock on a quarter of an hour fast, so we don't get up late. We suffer from what was in the old days called *the English heresy* – Pelagianism – the idea that we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. It's very Puritanical. It's very English. Most respectable. This is where the understanding of self-examination, confession and forgiveness come in again: a moment's self-examination, a moment's true reflection and we *know* we cannot justify ourselves. *None is righteous, no not one.*

So the Gospel is plain. We can't save ourselves. We are justified by faith. However, this whole business of faith and works is a minefield. Because faith is not just saying *I believe in Jesus Christ as my personal Saviour*. Why does that saying always make me think of insurance salesmen? Evangelicals tell me: *You can do nothing for your own salvation, so get down on your knees and say this*. As if saying were not a form of doing.

Having faith – the faith that saves us – is not just a form of words. It is what's called a *performative*. Here are some examples of performatives. I say *I love you*. The saying of these words is part of the loving act. You say to me, *I promise*. And in saying *I promise*, you are actually making the promise. Because we are uniquely creatures with language, it follows that some of the most important things we **do** are the things we **say**. And saying that we have faith means actually putting our whole trust in Christ – it's like a physical act of labour. In other words, faith is a work.

Well then, if we are not saved by doing good, why bother to do good? Because, as Our Lord said, *By their fruits ye shall know them*. In the life of faith, following Christ, we are enabled by his grace to do some good, which is to try to love God and our neighbour. It is useful now and again to look at the back of the Prayer Book at the *Thirty-nine Articles*. At *Article XII* for example, which says, *Good works are the fruit of faith; they are pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ and do spring necessarily of a true and lively faith*.

So – you are saved by Christ alone who then – if your faith is true and alive - both commands you to do good works and gives you grace and power to do them.

VI – And the graves were opened

Christians believe that God reveals himself supremely in Christ. This is why any sort of watered-down, lowest-common-denominator accommodation with other faiths is out of the question. Sometimes interfaith relations – so called – seem to be operated by academics from all parties trying to agree on what each believes the least. But there are ways in which God reveals himself to all men of whatever religion or none. And the chief of these ways is by natural law.

It is wrong to kill without just-cause. It is wrong to sleep with your neighbour's wife. It is wrong to tell lies. It is wrong to take what doesn't belong to you. It is wrong for you to give respect to that which does not deserve respect. All these things are binding whatever name you choose to describe your religion. You know all these things are true, because they are part of the necessary data for the successful conduct of life – like the law of gravity. Try going against the law of gravity and see what happens. Break the Divine commandments and just as surely you are heading for a fall. These things derive not from any particular creed, but from God's act of creation. This is why we speak of *natural law*. When God made the world, he saw that it was good. This means that the moral law, good and evil, are embedded in physical reality. This makes theology, poetry and music meaningful.

When I say these things are embedded in physical reality, I mean we don't just speak of misery, we speak of darkness; not abstractly of joy, but of light. Our life is difficult, so we say the path is stony or the way is steep. When we are aware of judgement, we speak of fire; and when we're ashamed our hearts and our cheeks burn. So the events of Good Friday – the death of God – are earth-shaking literally:

The earth did quake and the rocks rent... and the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose.

In other words, spiritual events such as the redemption of the world through Christ's death on the Cross will have their physical counterparts in the world – because the creation, spiritual and material – is one. And great art is able to represent these spiritual events exactly: when you hear *The St Matthew Passion* you are witnessing the death of Christ.

This scene of earthly chaos, culminating in our redemption, which we have just heard in St Matthew's Gospel is well-depicted in Mahler's *Second Symphony – The Resurrection*. The first movement is a funeral march in which we are asked to imagine standing beside the coffin of the hero. The second movement recalls wistfully an event in his life. The third is a scherzo portraying the irony that runs all through our lives. The fourth is a little contralto song *O Rotchen Rot – O Little Red Rose* – is about the first awareness of love. The fifth and last movement is massive: it portrays the end of the world and the resurrection of the dead. Whenever I listen to it, I think of these chaotic verses from St Matthew's Gospel, the whole universe being clattered about in the throes of death and resurrection..

Perhaps strangely – and perhaps not altogether strangely – the same Christian psychological sequence we find in Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony* is replicated in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* – the Buddhist manual. This should not come as a shock. God made the whole world and we cannot limit his revelation of himself in it to one particular part.

When the great Christian Apostle St Paul writes about our longing for salvation and fulfilment, he doesn't say that our Christian souls were yearning, he gets much bigger than that. He says: *For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.*

This prophetic vision erupts again and again in the Bible. Isaiah says:

The earth is utterly broken down. The earth is clean dissolved. The earth is moved exceedingly. The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard...

The prophet Joel says: *The sun shall be darkened and the moon turned to blood.*

These are the physical manifestations and counterparts of the ultimate struggle between good and evil. Again St Paul says:

For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

Until now. Now it is over and done. This moment when Our Lord in dying speaks above the rending veil of the temple, above the earthquake, above the chaos of sin and evil. He speaks the word of victory

It is accomplished. It is finished.

And now there is the deep silence of Holy Saturday.