

REFLECTIONS FOR HOLY WEEK AND EASTER

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Cimabue, Crucifix (1270; detail), San Domenico, Arezzo

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Preface

After training for ministry in Durham, I was ordained Deaconess in Carlisle Diocese in 1983, then Deacon in 1987 (the year this was first permitted), and finally Priest seven years later. In England, we all had to wait until 1994 to be priested, and a cluster of the reflections in this booklet date from around the time of the debates about women priests. Subsequently I retired (early) in 2007, and moved to north Wales. (Here the dates for women's ordination differed, since although women first became deacons in 1984, only in 1997 was ordination to the priesthood approved.)

This group of meditations was written at different times, for various reasons. Dates are shown where I remember them. They are put together for you in this booklet to use as you find helpful, whether individually, with a group, or as part of a service. The relevant Bible references are given after the title of each one.

The order in the booklet reflects the move from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday.

The inspiration for the first meditation was taking a service on Maundy Thursday in Barrow-in-Furness.

The main group of reflections for Good Friday entitled 'Were you there?' (used with the first verse of the hymn 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?') was originally intended for a Three-Hour service with readings, prayers and hymns, at St Andrew's Church, Penrith, during the 1990s. These items were used again for a similar service in St Luke's Church, Barrow-in-Furness, about ten years later.

An extra Good Friday meditation entitled 'At what cost?', intended for the evening, follows. It reflects on what these events mean for us today. The Emmaus item that concludes the whole sequence may work best for individual use.

Carol Farrer, February 2024

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Taking the Maundy Thursday Service

Prepare the altar, decide that when the time comes,
we will gather round, and stand in a circle,
some close enough to chairs to rest against them,
as John rested against Him.

No collection this evening, no money changing hands.
No pieces of silver given and received.

Giving out the wafers, touching hands.
Hands twisted by the years, bone through flesh.
Feeling hands twisted by nails.

Pouring water on the patten and the cup,
washing away the crumbs and the wine.
So Pilate washed his hands of guilt.
So He had washed His disciples' feet.

Folding up the altar cloth, sides to middle,
sides to middle. Folding up the graveclothes.

We go out, our minds wander, our thoughts run from Him
whom our lips have touched. 'Is it I Lord?'

He goes out, and is taken, He who gave us this meal
in remembrance of Him, and despite all our betrayals
He still gives, and in bread and wine, we take Him again.

written on Good Friday, 18 April 2003

Meditations for Good Friday on the theme of 'Were You There?'

Good Friday © www.art4prayer.co.uk



Pilate

Luke 23.13–25. Isaiah 50.4–9a

I told them. Three times I told them
there was no basis for any of their charges.
They come along here, at the crack of dawn,
and expect me to come out to them, in case
they pollute themselves by entering my palace
on the eve of their Passover, their great feast,
and bring me a man they accuse of being a king!
The nearest thing there is to a Jewish king
these days is Herod, and they can't stand him.
There's not much Jewish blood in him. At least
this man they brought today was a Jew. Was a Jew.

A strange people they are. Not civilised.
We Romans have conquered the world, and the
Greeks have given it education.
All the Jews do is argue amongst themselves about their God.
Do you know, they actually said that this man, this Jesus,
claimed to be the ... Son of God.
Now that made even me stop and think.

When they said that, I went back inside –
I seemed to be going in and out all morning.
And I asked him where he came from and
if he realised, I had the power to let him go
or to crucify him. I still don't know
if he was soft in the head, or ... or ...
He said my power came from above – I suppose
from the gods – but he would mean their Jewish God.

And what was my wife on about?
Sending me messages while I was at work?
She knows I don't like it. And what a message.
'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man.'
Well, I could see he was innocent of course.
At least, I could see these religious leaders
were just green with envy because this Jesus,
from that back of beyond town called Nazareth,
had beaten them at their own game.

They say he only had to turn up anywhere
and the crowds came out. They wanted their sick healed,
their children blessed, and to hear him preach! I ask you!
A country preacher reaching a mass market!
No wonder their own authorities were worried.
No one can remember when they last had a good prophet.
Unless you count that fellow John, that Herod got rid of
a year or two back. The people liked him too.

No, that can't be right. The people don't like,
didn't like, this Jesus. They shouted for his blood.
Time and again I offered the crowd his life this morning.
And they shouted me down. I wonder if it was the same crowd
they say welcomed him last week. A fickle lot, these people
I have to govern.
To educate into being part of the Roman empire.
To teach them something about Roman justice.

If I had really handed out Roman justice
today, I'd have had a riot on my hands.
There wasn't really any reason to execute him
but if he had lived, others would have died.
A good old-fashioned riot here is no joke.
And it would have been no joke for me either.
They would have complained to Caesar about me. Again.

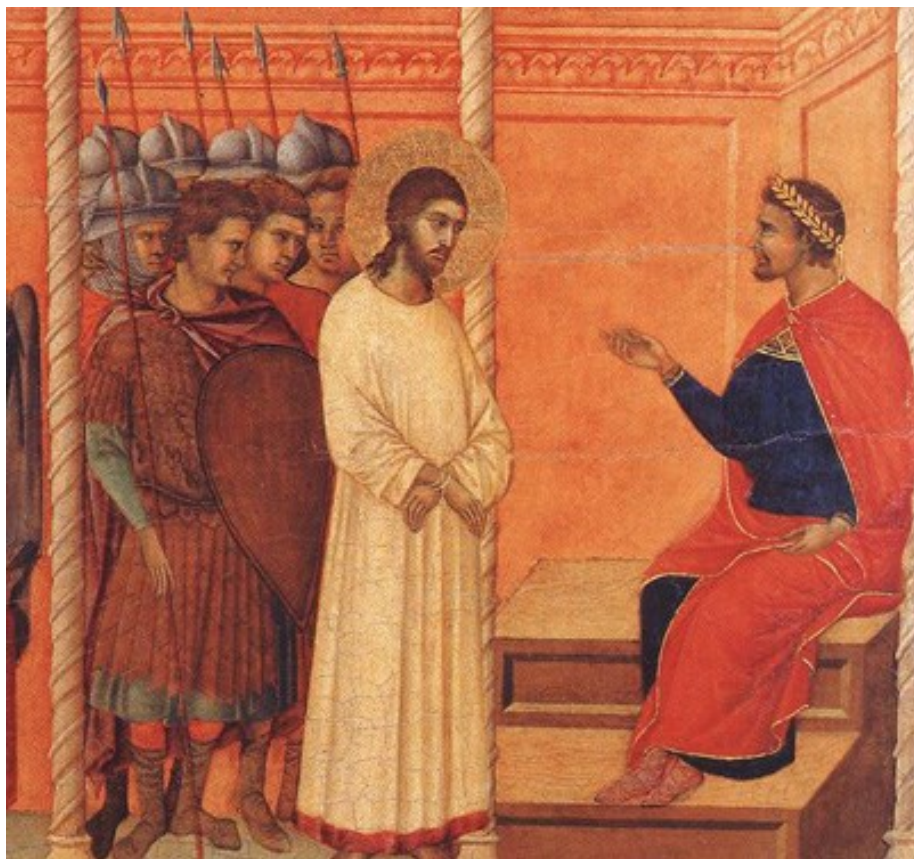
I had been going backwards and forwards
since first thing, apart from sending him to Herod.
And by midday I had had enough.
So, I washed my hands of him. Let them see
it was their decision, not mine, their fault if
it was all a mistake, a miscarriage of justice.

But I had the last word. The notice of his crime
set above the cross. Jesus of Nazareth it reads.
King of the Jews – they didn't like that. Not one little bit.
But I put it there. That's the kind of king for them.
A dead one.

One of them came back this evening. For the body.
Probably wanted to get it buried, out of sight, out of mind,
before their precious Passover began. Well, it's begun now.
Their day begins as the sun goes down.
Their 'Son of God' has gone down all right.
The centurion told me he was well and truly dead.
So, I let this Joseph of Arimathea take the body and get rid of it.
And I've just given orders for a guard to be set over the tomb.
In case his friends try and steal the body.

Apart from saying my power – my power mind you –
came from above – he hardly said anything.
Wouldn't answer any of their accusations.
But when I asked if he was a king he said yes, he was.
And that he came into this world to testify to the truth.
Everyone on the side of truth, he said,
listens to me. So, I just asked him
'What is truth?'

written 22 February 1995



Duccio, Christ before Pilate (1308–17; detail)

Image in the public domain

Simon of Cyrene

Luke 23, 26. Mark 15. 21

I was minding my own business
going into Jerusalem to buy what we needed
to celebrate the Passover, the great festival.
The memorial of our redemption, our escape
from captivity in Egypt. I know about Egypt.
It lies between my birthplace in Cyrene and this city.
This city, the home of my people, Israel's children.
This city, where our God has made his home,
the Temple, the Holy place, the Holy of Holies.

I was minding my own business,
thinking of the celebrations, of telling the Passover story
in answer to the questions of my children
Alexander and Rufus. They never stop
asking questions, and they wanted to know
what I would do in Jerusalem today,
who I would meet, what I would buy.
So, I told them of the lamb to be purchased.
Of the bitter herbs, the unleavened bread, the wine.

I was minding my own business.
As I approached the city gates after
the early morning walk from our village
I realised that once again the city was
in turmoil. People were shouting and
crowding around a group of soldiers
with spears showing above the heads of the mob.
Another execution. I wouldn't tell the children
about this, but I thought I would just take a look.

I wasn't minding my own business then,
rather minding the business of the Romans,
and of their victims. There were three of them.
More Jews of course, but at least Roman justice
is fairly even-handed, as justice goes these days.
I supposed they deserved what they were to get,
thieves and murderers – what's the world coming to?
But one of the three had been cruelly scourged,
his back laid open, and his head deeply cut.

I was beginning to mind his business now.
What had he done that was different, to deserve
the extra weight of the lash? My curiosity got
the better of me and I pushed to the front of the crowd.
My interest in him proved to be my downfall
for the moment I reached the front he fell
under the weight of the cross that he carried,
and the centurion, knowing his authority only
too well, looked round for another victim.

I was made to mind his business.
The cross was thrust at me to bear
and you don't argue with a centurion.
He must have thought me strong enough to carry
the burden, or perhaps he just wanted to get
his part in the business over and done with.
He would be busy enough over the festival
keeping the peace in a volatile city.
And the sabbath begins when the sun falls tonight.



Way of the Cross, Fifth Station: Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross
Franciscan Monastery, Washington DC
© Lawrence Lew OP creativecommons.org

I was now minding his business.
Bearing the weight of the wood of the cross,
following him along the road to Golgotha,
The Place of the Skull. Yet it seemed
the weight was not lifted from his shoulders.
As I staggered behind him, he bore his grief,
He carried his sorrows. For all Jews know
by such an execution is a man smitten by God
cut off, out of the land of the living.

The soldiers minded their own business.
Pushing through the crowds to the place
of execution. They did not waste time
as with hammers and nails, ropes and pulleys.
They soon had the three men nailed down, strung up.
And over his head, This is Jesus, King of the Jews,
for all who see to mock at him. If you are
the Son of God, come down from the cross.
Come down from the cross.

What business has he minded
to bring him to this? Has he claimed a kingship
of the Jews? Surely not that he be Son of God?
For that blasphemy they would have stoned him,
not got the Romans to hang him on a cross.
What did he do? But I remember now
I have heard of this Jesus, he is the preacher,
the teacher from Nazareth, a rabble-rouser.

The centurion saw me standing there, and called
‘Be about your business now,
You’ve done your job. Enough sightseers here.’
I still had to get the lamb, the bitter herbs,
the bread, the wine, for the festival, but
I could not go, I could not leave him yet,
I had carried his cross, helped bring him here.
And others stood watching, in groups of three and four,
his friends, his followers, his mother – his mother!
How could anyone watch their Son die like this?

Why didn’t he mind his own business?
What was he about to make such a fuss?
Why come to Jerusalem at all? The city
that kills the prophets and – what was I saying?
Why had everything become a question?
‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’
Surely all questions were being answered for him
now, for he was dying, and soon it would be finished.
He is cut off from the land of the living.

I set off to mind my own business
this morning, to prepare to celebrate the feast.
The lamb, the bitter herbs, the unleavened bread,
the wine. I had to go home without them –
I had left it so late – and explain myself
to my wife, my sons, Alexander and Rufus.
No lamb to be slaughtered, but I had seen
him die. No bitter herbs, just bitter questions.
How can we celebrate our redemption
without bread and wine?

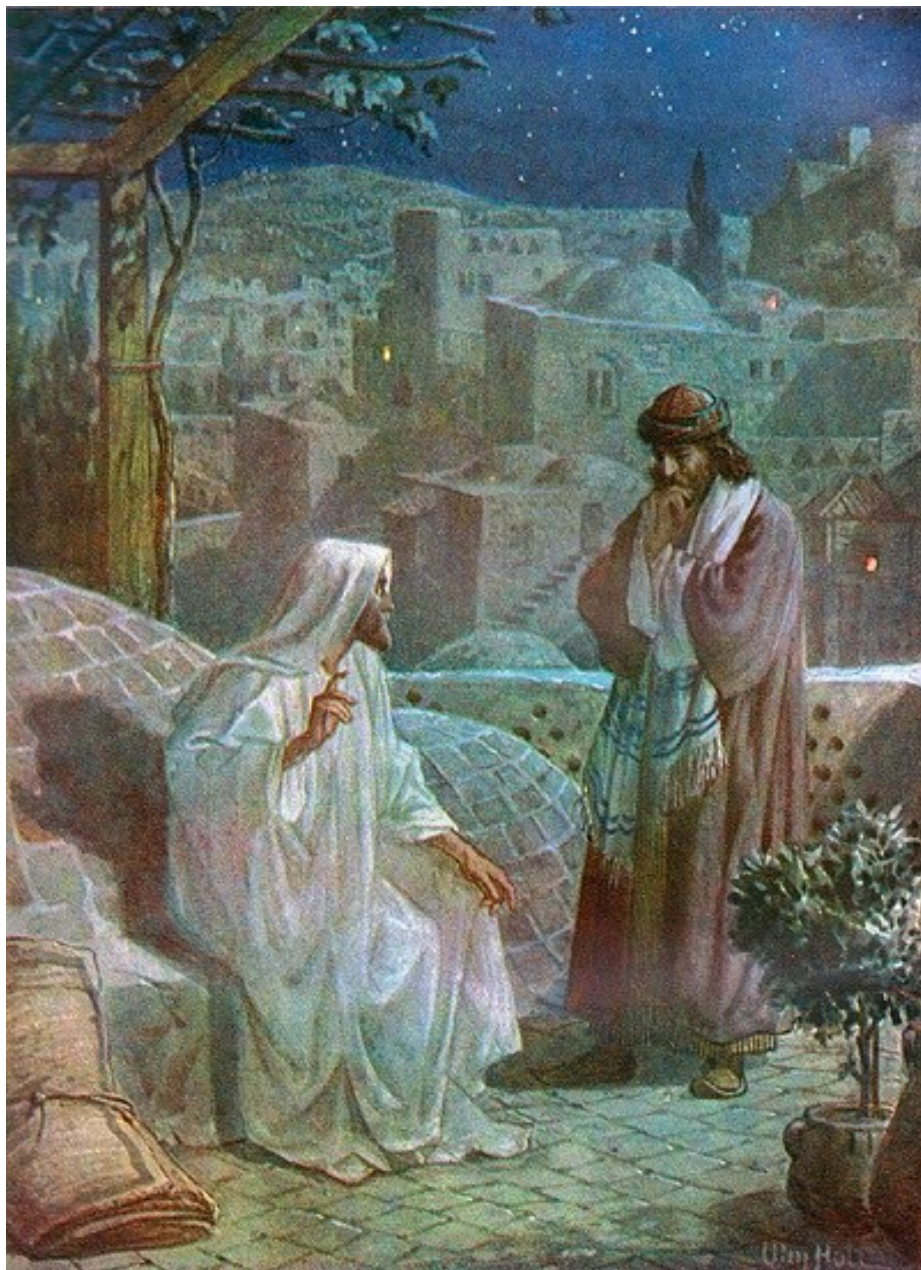
Nicodemus

John 7.25–32, 45–52. John 19.38–42

In the Council meeting I had said:
‘Does our law condemn a man without first
hearing him to find out what he is doing?’
We Pharisees had sent the Temple guards
to arrest him, for some of our number
had complained that he broke the Sabbath by
healing people, and his replies to our questions
had been abrupt to say the least.

None of my colleagues knew then, nor now
that when he first came to Jerusalem and
caused an uproar in the Temple, throwing out
the money changers and the sheep and cattle sellers,
I had gone to him by night, and met with him.
I had heard of the miracles, the power with which
he spoke to the crowds, the authority of his voice,
and I wanted to find out for myself just
what I should make of him, and of his words.

As a member of the ruling council I had gone
in secret, afraid of being seen by anyone,
but needing to see him, to talk, to listen.
He came from Nazareth, and didn’t seem
to have had any of the formal training I had had,
no years of studying, learning and discussing
with others, yet he could hold his own, more than
hold his own. It was not like the debates we have
in the Temple Courts, arguing points of law.



William Brassey Hole (1846–1917), Jesus and Nicodemus
Image in the public domain

It was as if he didn't just know the law,
it was part of his life and breath, and very being.
He spoke with a freedom, a depth of understanding,
beyond all others. And of birth, truth, the kingdom
of God, the Spirit, faith, love, and of being
lifted up.

Lifted up. Today we have lifted him up
that all who pass by can see, and mock.
There was no mocking in him when we spoke.
I dared to say, 'We know you have come
from God', and he did not ask if my colleagues
agreed with me or if that was my own idea.
He spoke of new birth, and we in the Council
have brought about his death. We could not
accept what he said. We did not like it
when the guard we had sent to arrest him
came back empty handed and said,
'No one ever spoke the way this man does'.

When I tried to speak up for him in the Council
they rounded on me, and called me a Galilean.
We don't have much time for Galileans in Jerusalem.
From then on, I knew they were still after him.
There would be a sudden silence when I came
into a room, and the turning of cold shoulders.

I didn't think they would act so swiftly, so near
the feast, because of the crowds. But Joseph
came to me this morning and told me the
Council had arrested Jesus, and tried him
in the early hours, at night ... at night ...
and had persuaded Pilate to order his death.

There was nothing either of us could do.
It was out of our hands now. It was only then
that I realised Joseph of Arimathea shared
my inmost feelings, my following of Jesus.
Before, he had not dared tell me.

Why is it that now it was too late to save him,
we found courage. Courage to speak together,
to share dashed hopes, to wonder aloud
if we could have done things differently. If
we could have stopped the horror of
what we have seen today. Our friends,
leaders of our people, having conspired
to bring about the death of an innocent man,
a good man, best of men, standing at the foot
of his cross, and mocking him.

His light came into the world, and we
have put it out. As I first went to him
by night, so now, as night approaches,
Joseph and I have taken down his body from the cross,
and buried him in the darkness of death.
We have soiled our hands by handling him,
we are unclean for the Passover feast.
There will be no rejoicing for us tomorrow.
We will look for him, and we will not find him.
Where he is we cannot come.

No one ever spoke the way this man did.

written 11 April 1995

Mary Magdalene

Matt 26.6–13, Luke 8.1–3, Luke 23. 48–49, 55–56, Ps 51.1–9 (12)

Nearly three years of my life – three years of
His life too.

Yet what was my life before I met Him?
Did I truly live or just eat, sleep, breathe?
Life weighed heavily upon me, wore me down,
my wealth did not lift the burden I carried
nor colour the greyness of my world,
the confusion of my mind found no rest.

Others did not see, for I hid it well,
I seemed to float through life and toss
off the clinging weight of hurts and sorrow.
But He saw. I felt His eyes seek me out,
and see into my very soul.
See the depths of despair, the loneliness,
meaningless, empty nothingness.

I might have thought He would see through me,
for there was nothing of me to see.
Yet He saw the darkness, and the shadow,
and He reached out to me, and held me.
Before even His hand touched me and healed me
I knew that He had taken hold of my life.

And now His life is draining away.
The eyes that found me dull in pain.
The hands that healed me twist in agony.
Have three years of new life come to this?
Three years of following Him around Galilee,
meeting His needs from the wealth that
never met mine, sharing His friendships,
learning for the first time to be alive.

He should never have come to Jerusalem
He knew, we knew, the risks, yet He set
His face to this city, the centre of our world
the city that kills the prophets and stones
those sent to her, that is killing Him.

Nothing could turn Him from His path
not all our pleading, nor shouting.
So we followed Him as we have done for
the last three years, wherever He goes, we go too.
Now His body is broken on the cross
as the jar of perfume was broken in the
house of Simon the leper, His blood is
poured out, as the perfume was poured out
on his head, poured out and wasted.

They said it was wasted, thrown away,
when it could have been sold, and the poor helped.
Now He has been sold and thrown away
and the poor who flocked to hear Him
have no shepherd now, to rescue them
as he rescued me. Yet for all the darkness of this day,
the darkness of the past, the grey despair, has not returned.
The devils He cast out of my life are gone.

There is the agony, the grief, the loss of one we all loved
more than life itself, as we see life draining out of Him.
Something of His life still lives in us, still breathes, refuses to die.
Though we will not always have Him with us
the fragrance of His presence among us
fills every fibre of our being, as the perfume filled that house.

That day he spoke of His burial, that His body was being prepared.
And now His body is indeed prepared,
at the point of death and we can do nothing for Him,
but stand, stand near, and watch, feel, pray, wait.

Will they let us take his body, now it is all over?
We women stand and wait.
It is all we have to hope for now.
That we can give Him that last service
of a decent burial, instead of a criminal's grave.

Two men come, discretely, but with authority,
and take down the body.
A moment's panic, confusion, terror,
lest we lose Him again, what is left of Him.
Then we follow, at a distance,
and see as these two carry Him away
to a tomb in a garden nearby.
By what authority do they take the One
who means so much to us?
But we do nothing tonight.
We will return, after the Sabbath is over.
And do what we can, for the One who
did all, gave all for us.

The Centurion

Gen. 22.9–14, Ps. 22.14–21, Ps. 31.1–5 Luke 23.32–34, 44–49

I always did say that in this job,
I provided you stay alive for long enough,
you get to see everywhere, and everything.
We can be sent anywhere in the Empire,
whether we are breaking new ground beyond Gaul,
watching the power struggles in Rome itself
wondering who will be the next Emperor
to rule this unwieldy, turbulent world,
or keeping the peace in a relative backwater
like Palestine. Our armies have been
here near enough a hundred years, so
they are used to us, and us to them.

Not that life is ever easy for a centurion.
There are the lads to keep under control,
and however long we have been here
there is always the chance of an outbreak,
an uprising, and here in Jerusalem
there will be a religious angle to everything.

They take faith a bit too seriously
if you ask me, but it's in their blood.
These Jews have had one god for
something like two thousand years,
since a man called Abraham got
some kind of a call to move house
and set up home here. A Jew told me

that their Temple – and you have to admit
it is quite a building – is on the site that
this Abraham was supposed to sacrifice
his son to his god to prove his faith.

He got let off at the last minute,
and Abraham found a sheep instead.
They go in for sacrificing sheep still.
This weekend it is their Passover, and
everyone is at it, lambs for the slaughter.
We were just hoping they would keep
their minds on their festival and we
might have a quieter time for a change.

But there was the usual routine work.
Three executions due, before the feast,
a couple of run-of-the-mill criminals
and one of those murderers that think they
will try a bit of resistance work on the side.

They ought to know they won't get away
with it, and some of our lads soon caught
Barabbas. An open and shut case against him.
At least that's how it was until this morning.
There had been a bit of action in the night,
and the High Priests had some fellow they
had arrested, but wanted the Governor
to deal with for them. Didn't want to
dirty their hands, so they handed him over.

I know our job is to follow orders, and mine
is to see the lads do their job reasonably well,
without going over the top, or slacking off.
But it seems the Governor wasn't too keen
on condemning this Jesus, and tried to
palm him off on Herod – Jesus was a Galilean.
Herod's men had a bit of fun with him,
dressed him up in a fancy purple robe –
the royal colour, then Herod sent him back.

Pilate wondered if a flogging would do the trick,
so, I fixed that up, the usual sort of thing.
The lads weren't too heavy-handed then.
And back he went to Pilate, but these priests,
they really had it in for Jesus, like dogs
with a bone, they wouldn't let him go.

They got their mates in the crowd to ask for
Barabbas, to let him go, because of the feast.
Pilate wanted to let Jesus go, but he lost
that round, the heat was on, and the priests won.

The Governor sent him down, and my lads
did go a bit far then. They had heard
the charges, that Jesus claimed to be a king –
one of them had to paint the charge sheet,
the notice to go over the cross –
The King of the Jews.

So, they gave him a crown of thorns, and
got on their knees in front of him
while others spat at him, and hit him.
After a bit I stopped their fun
or we would never have got him to
the Place of the Skull, Golgotha, for execution

We made it through the crowded streets
with a bit of help from a passer-by
when Jesus couldn't manage to carry his
own cross any further, and we did our job.
No, it isn't a pleasant part of the work,
to nail men down to a wooden cross,
then to mount a guard and watch them die.
But it comes with the territory. We do it.

The lads divided up the men's clothes,
and threw lots for one of Jesus's garments,
no need to tear it in pieces and share it out.

Perks of the job – it helps encourage the lads.
They offered the three drugged wine, but
Jesus wouldn't take any. And along with
the Chief Priests, there to see it finished,
I realised a lot of his friends were there too.

We often get a few friends and family around.
We're there to see they don't cause trouble
and this lot didn't. Not even when the
priests and scribes did a bit of shouting at him.
He didn't shout back, but he said a bit.
asked his friend to look after his mum,

and – this was a turn up for the books –
he said ‘Father, forgive them – they don’t know
what they are doing’. Well, I’m a professional
soldier, and I *do* know my job. We all know
we’re earning our daily bread here.
Whose father he was speaking to I don’t know...
well. ... but it’s not many a man facing death talks
about forgiving them that are, well, killing him.

He didn’t last long really. It got very dark.
A bit eerie, even for an old soldier like me.
He cried out when he died. ‘It is finished’.
The Governor sent to check if it was finished
and we broke the legs of the other two
to hurry them on their way, but he had gone.
So, we pierced his side, just to be sure.

We *do* know what we are doing.

Those women were watching still, and
two men came with permission to take him down.
He had said something more about his father
when he died. ‘Father into your hands
I commit my spirit.’ Like I said,
sooner or later, you get to see everything
in this job. That ... man ... Jesus.
Perhaps now I have seen everything.

At What Cost?

Good Friday evening. Think back.
Think back almost two thousand years,
to the first Good Friday evening.
Then another 24 hours to sunset on Thursday evening.
Five people.

Three face the last 24 hours of their lives.
They are in prison, awaiting execution for their crimes.
They are murderers, thieves, bandits.
Some villains catch the popular imagination, like the Kray brothers.
One of these bandits has. Everyone knows his name.
We know his name. Barabbas.
And he and two others will die tomorrow.

...

Two other men are gathering with eleven friends in an upper room
They will share the Passover meal.
The meal of liberation.
We know all their names.
But these two particularly have their minds on what lies ahead.
And it will cost.

...

Move ahead a few hours, and the night is over, day has come.
Of the three men who had been in prison,
two are being taken from their cells.
They will be marched to the place of execution.
Death lies ahead.
Their crimes will cost them their lives.
The third man is not with them.
Each year at Passover, one prisoner is released
the mob has fairly easily been persuaded to call for him.
They know his name, Barabbas.
The door opens and the world lies ahead of him.

The last two men had shared the Passover with their eleven friends.
One has been betrayed by the other, and deserted by the eleven.
During the night He has been tried by the religious courts.
He has been taken to the Governor and condemned.
Now He too is to be marched out to the place of execution.
As day dawned, the extent of what he has done
also dawned on the fifth man.
He tries to undo his treachery, but it is too late.
No one can undo history.
As he realises this, he throws down the thirty pieces of silver,
and leaves.
He will kill himself.
It is now Friday evening.
Of those five men, unexpectedly one is alive.
He is free.
Free enough perhaps to have watched three people die.
Free to join his friends, or free to leave the city.
What will he do with his freedom?
What has it cost?
Now four are dead.
One has killed himself. In despair? In remorse?
He will be buried in the field of blood.
The two thieves are dead. They had expected death.
One died with mockery on his lips.
One died in hope of eternity.
And the other man is dead too.
He is the one who has brought us here tonight.
He is the one who has given us hope of eternity.
He is the one our words and actions sometimes mock.
He is the one whose blood washes away our despair and remorse.
He is the one who has set us free.
At what cost?

Emmaus

Luke 24.13–35



© Janet Brooks Gerloff, *The Road to Emmaus* (1992)

They had not realised it was Him.
They had talked and listened, all the way
since He had joined them and asked
what was getting them down.

It wasn't until they sat down,
having persuaded Him to stay and share
a meal, that they saw the familiar
gestures, heard words of blessing.

The bread broken and handed to them.
Was it His voice, His head uncovered
or His favourite grace, or the bread
held in broken hands?

Hands which on Thursday had taken bread
and on Friday were nailed down.
Voice stifled as the lungs struggled in
blessing for mother and friend.

At the moment of recognition
the wild birth of joy and hope
the confirmation of impossible rumour
He vanished from their sight.

But not from their hearts. Seven
miles back to Jerusalem fled by
and as they got back their breath
the others shared their joy too.

No longer nailed down, no more entombed
the hands that took bread on Thursday
and blessed, broke and shared it out
are free to do so again

When He hung on the cross, His
hands could not hold bread and break it.

They could not lift a cup of wine
and bless it.

He could not share bread and wine
with his friends.

When He hung on the cross, He nonetheless
gave us bread and wine, His body and blood.



Rembrandt van Rijn, Supper at Emmaus (1648)
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