

**Friday 15 April 2022**

*A sermon preached by the Acting Precentor of St Paul's, the Revd Kirsty Brown, at a performance of John Stainer's oratorio The Crucifixion on Good Friday 2022*

This afternoon is a gift. Yes, it is a gift to hear the beautiful music sung by our soloists and choir. But it is mainly a gift of time: time to reflect, to contemplate, to consider the events of that first Good Friday over 2000 years ago. In our bustling world, particularly as we come out of our lockdown cocoons, there is not much opportunity to stop, to listen and to hear that still, small voice of calm.

As the hymn writer John Greenleaf Whittier encouraged us:

Drop thy still dews of quietness  
Till all our striving cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess  
The beauty of thy peace.

This is a time to put aside our to-do lists, to shut out the distractions of our lives, and to listen, maybe for the first time, maybe for the 80th time, to what happened on the day the Son of God was sentenced to death on a cross. You see, what happened that first Good Friday speaks into our lives today. We might have come here full of anxiety: worried about our health, our job, the state of our nation, the war in Ukraine, the burden of climate change, the pressure of trying to balance work and family responsibilities, the grief of being separated from family. We might be suffering intense physical or emotional pain from illness or trauma. We might feel very far from God.

But in this recalling of this moment in history, we are reminded that Jesus speaks into that pain, that anxiety, that suffering. He suffered the humiliation of a rigged trial, the agony of a death on a cross, the trauma of separation from his own Father. He understands where we are coming from. But Jesus doesn't just offer us empathy in our current circumstances. You see, Christians believe that the things that are wrong in our world, and the impact they have on us, are due to trying to do things our own way instead of God's way. We call this sin. And this sin puts a barrier up between us and God. How can a pure and just God look on us who have messed things up so spectacularly? Throughout history, as recorded in the Old Testament in the Bible, God in his mercy provided ways for humankind to restore the relationship with him. But each time we stuffed it up yet again. And so God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world for our failings, but to save the world and restore our relationship with God.

What we recall today in Jesus' death on the cross, is more than just temporary compassion from Jesus for our situation, it is the long-term solution for our world and for ourselves as individuals. Because it restores our broken relationship with God and enables God to see us through Jesus' sacrifice for our sakes. Instead of seeing our sin, God now sees the righteousness of Christ.

So as we listen to the words and music this afternoon, we consider how we might respond to this telling of history. What impact will it have on our lives? Will we accept the sacrifice of God's son on our behalf or will we leave it as a story that is told without impact on our lives? Will we allow Jesus' sacrifice to speak into our anxiety, pain and suffering?

As we prepare to spend this time in reflection, responding to what we are hearing by standing and joining in with the hymns, let me finish with a poem by Melbourne poet Matthew Pullar called Via Dolorosa.

I  
In the garden you  
Sweat in drops of blood, you who  
Made the earth blossom

II

And then a kiss  
Betrays you with the violence  
Of a close friend's sword

III

By dark, the council  
Meets and seals your fate. You let  
Your own reject you

IV

While, by firelight,  
Your close friend lies, denies you  
To keep himself warm

V

In the morning sun,  
Amid the screams, the prefect  
Washes his hands clean

VI

Scourges eat your flesh  
The soldiers taunt you, laugh and  
Crown you now with thorns

VII

On our back you bear  
The curse of all the world. You  
Fall; it crushes you

VIII

A stranger by the way

Shares the weight of the cross, but  
Cannot drink the cup

IX

Women weep, lament  
But do they cry for your or  
For the brown, dead tree?

X

The nails are hammered  
You fill your lungs with anguish  
While night takes the crowd

XI

But one sees through it:  
A thief who sees your kingship  
And dwells with you now

XII

Then, last words to she  
Who gave you life; the Life, you  
Now prepare to leave

XIII

With a cry, you give  
Up your spirit; It's finished,  
You proclaim, and die

XIV

Down we take your body,  
In the thrall of darkness, to

Its tomb in the garden.