

The Parish Paper

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St Peter's Church, Eastern Hill, Melbourne

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The Intense Paradox of the Cross

A sermon by Mthr Dorothy Lee to open her series of addresses for Holy Week, delivered at St Peter's Eastern Hill on Passion Sunday, the 24th of March, 2024

Reading: Mark 15

Today and on Good Friday we read two different Gospel accounts of Jesus' passion and death: one this morning from the Gospel of Mark and the other from the Gospel of John. Two rather different accounts of Jesus' suffering and death: so that Holy Week is embraced by the story of Jesus' passion at either end and we can spend this week reflecting on it and preparing ourselves for the joyful story of the resurrection beyond it.

Neither Mark nor John is meant to be a journalist's account of Jesus' death: they're not bald, factual accounts of what actually happened. They're grounded in history, yes, but they're also theological and spiritual interpretations of what Jesus' death actually means for us, how it overturns our worldview, how it draws us into the resurrection and transformation of life.

Mark's is the starker account of the two, the more brutal, the more focussed on Jesus' actual suffering. Admittedly it's not too graphic but it does reveal how brutal the Romans were when they confronted what they saw as rebellion against their colonising powers, how they treated people they considered inferior as non-persons: slaves or aliens who weren't Roman citizens and who therefore didn't count.

And let's be clear about this. It wasn't the Jewish people as a whole who killed Jesus, but the Romans, with some help from a handful of aristocratic Jewish leaders. He wasn't condemned for a Jewish crime but a supposed 'crime' against the Roman empire. It didn't take much to get the Romans off-side, especially a cruel and insensitive governor like Pontius Pilate.

Mark tells the story in plain terms but redolent with the Old Testament Scriptures, like the Psalms and Isaiah. Jesus is the ultimate righteous sufferer, who suffers and dies for the sake of others, for the people of God. And what a bleak story Mark's is too! We see Jesus at his most vulnerable, most tormented, most human. And we see the apostles at their worst. Jesus himself has to struggle with his own message. He's been confidently proclaiming it all along the journey to Jerusalem — his rejection, suffering, death and resurrection. But now that he comes face-to-face with it, he seems to fall apart.

Today we heard the second part of the Passion reading, but in the first part, in Mark 14, we find Jesus at Gethsemane in terrible distress and asking the Father to come up with a different plan: 'Take this cup from me,' he begs. And yet his very openness in prayer enables him to face it: 'Not my will but thine be done', he says, and, in the power of prayer, he's able to face his enemies as they come to arrest him.

And what are the apostles doing in all this? They have been appointed to be Jesus' companions and to be sent out on mission, but now at Gethsemane they're asleep, they're not comforting him, they don't see the danger, they're sure of their own strength: 'Even if everyone else denies you, I won't,' says Peter confidently, full of illusions. The apostles abandon Jesus at the first sign of trouble.

Here they contrast with other disciples, unexpected ones. The holy women don't abandon Jesus: Mary Magdalene, the other Mary and Salome, as well as the other Galilean women. They hang in there. They stand at a distance to the cross, faithful in their following of Jesus through suffering and death. And the Roman centurion also comes to faith, the head of the Roman execution party.

Jesus himself dies with a sense of total abandonment: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' are his last words from the cross, quoted from Psalm 22. These are not words of hope and heroism, as we might expect, but words of the greatest distress, words of dereliction. How can the Son of God, the Beloved Son, die like this? How can God let it happen?

Yet strangely enough, God is present in this event: in this abandonment, this distress, suffering and death. Immediately the Roman centurion has a moment of conversion, a miracle: 'Truly', he says, 'this was God's Son!' In Jesus' dereliction and abandonment, in the absence of God, the centurion sees the face of God, the presence of God.

What is Mark trying to say in all this, in the way he tells the story, which is unlike any of the other Gospels? What's happening here is that Mark is presenting the cross as an intense paradox. On the one hand, it's about desolation and abandonment, because death itself means already the absence of God. On the other hand, and in the strangest way, it's about God's presence.

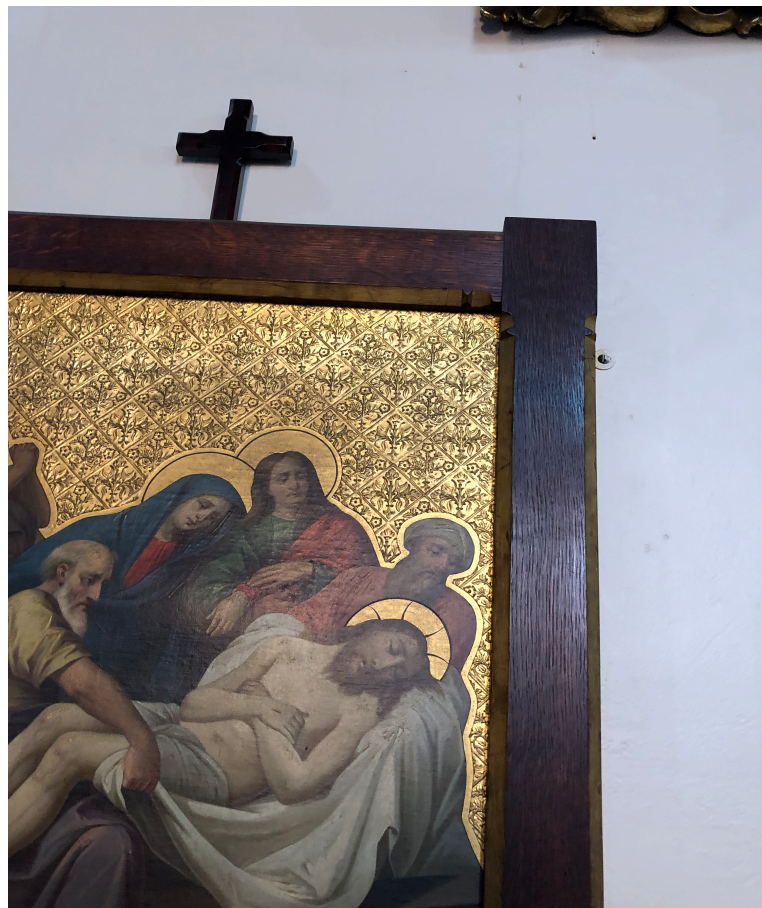
At his baptism in Mark's chapter 1, Jesus doesn't require baptism at all — it's a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, which he doesn't need. Nevertheless he still descends into the waters of the Jordan River. That's a parable, an indication of what the cross is about. Jesus, who is utterly and

entirely innocent, who is without sin and who shares the very life of God, knowingly enters into the worst of human suffering. He goes willingly to the place of divine abandonment, the place of sin and suffering and death, the place of extremity, and brings with him the presence of God — down into those frightening, watery depths. And the face of God is visible in that moment. The cross is about the absence and paradoxical presence of God.

And that's where we're to find God: in places of abandonment, in places of sin and suffering, in desolation. That's where God is to be found in our own hearts and lives when we feel most alone, most afraid, most sinful, most despairing, most abused. And that's where God is to be found in our society and our world: in the places of abandonment, pain, guilt, fear and suffering.

And into that place Jesus brings the fullness of God's gracious redeeming life: bringing forgiveness, compassion, hope, reconciliation, a new beginning.

Today we're called to stand with the holy women. We're called to recognise in this icon of suffering and abandonment the radical presence of God; we're called to see in this death the very contours and shape of our own death and, more importantly, of Christ's death which will one day wipe out all suffering, sin, abandonment and death.



Parish Prayer Link

You may remember the idea of “parish prayer chains”. Sometimes parishes had groups of parishioners and clergy who were available for others to contact, to ask for prayer support for loved ones or others (sometimes themselves), who needed prayer help. Members of the “prayer chain” were linked, as in a coordinated chain to respond to needs when contacted.

The formation of the St Peter’s parish prayer link a few years ago, grew out of this idea. These days though communication of prayer requests is done through emails, rather than earlier models of phone calls one “chain/link” member to another. This email communication between the prayer link members, a group of parishioners and parish clergy, enables quicker and more accurate communication of any requests.

Requests for prayers are strictly confidential and treated with great respect. Only as much information as the caller wishes to give, sometimes anonymously, needs to be provided. Contact details for prayer requests can be made by phone or email as shown below.

The idea of a “prayer link” comes from the understanding that prayer is often a very sensitive matter, a sense of a need for prayer often comes from woundedness and vulnerability. Sometimes we find the struggle to pray very difficult; the sense then that others are there quietly giving support in regular prayer can make a huge difference. This is because Jesus understands our need for each other. The sharing, the linking of our prayers, is not to “overwhelm God by weight of numbers” but rather to give each other support by the sharing of each other’s burdens. The weight becomes less. As we approach Easter we are given the most powerful example of this by Jesus, as he asks his disciples/friends to stay awake and pray.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or requests for prayer

Every blessing

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on behalf of the Parish Prayer Link

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The Argument from Musicality

Stephen Ames

During Evensong at Saint Paul's Cathedral on February 11th, Stephen Ames gave a sermon that preceded the launch of his new book 'A Strange Goodness? God and Natural Evil'. The following is an edited version of his sermon.

This book is an outcome of my co-designing and co-lecturing with my atheist colleagues at the University of Melbourne, a second-year subject in History and Philosophy of Science, called 'God and the Natural Sciences'. I was given this role because I was a priest, with a PhD in physics and well on the road to a PhD in philosophy of science.

In those twenty years I was occupied with probing the adequacy of a completely naturalistic view of the world. Briefly, this is the view that says nature is all there is, and nature answers to what the sciences powerfully tell us about the world and ourselves. The naturalistic worldview denies any transcendent reality. No God.

I have been interested to do this probing at three sites. The first is human inquiry, the second is human worth, and the third is human musicality. Each site has been drawn into a completely naturalistic view of the world. The probes into the first two sites show how mistaken is the naturalistic world view in denying the transcendent reality of God.

The conversation partner for the first probe is Professor Brian Cox. Cox thinks that scientific inquiry is so powerful. Here we are on this tiny speck of a planet in a vast, vast universe about which we have learned so much and with the prospect of learning so much more. Scientific inquiry is so powerful for Brian Cox that he says questions like 'why is there anything at all?' and 'why are we here?' are questions for science, not questions for philosophy or even theology.

I have stepped into Brian Cox's naturalistic worldview. I wanted to see if there is any evidence of what I call 'signals of transcendence' being overlooked amid the kind of world in which we live, which science and technology and the economy sets before us.

Some of you will be asking how so-called signals of transcendence, have been overlooked? For example, am I saying there is something wrong with the science Brian Cox is presenting? Not at all. Brian Cox is scientifically excellent. Rather, I claim, he is philosophically mistaken when he says that questions like why 'is

there anything at all?' and 'why are we here?' are scientific question not philosophical or theological questions.

My point is that a scientific explanation of why there is anything at all, would be assuming some scientific fact about the universe to do the explaining, and so logically could not explain why there was *anything* at all. The point is hidden in plain sight. Professor Cox is philosophically mistaken.

Some of you will be saying to me, 'Stephen, even if philosophical questions are back in the story, what about theology? How does God step back into the story? My response is that God never left. The question is rather 'how does the recognition of God regain a place in the story?' Again, my answer is that it is found to be hidden in plain sight, when all the materials from Brian Cox and other atheist physicists have been assembled.

The second probe concerns the worth or value of human beings. I have probed this matter in two challenging contexts. The first concerns people suffering with dementia, because the worth of human beings is widely seen and felt as being completely unravelled by dementia. The second concerns the value of people in their work, dominated by the new golden rule – those who have the gold make the rules. The first rule is, make more gold and concentrate it in the hands of fewer people.

The third probe into human musicality is sheer madness on my part because I am musically illiterate and musically incompetent. My question is whether human musicality is an evolutionary development from the remarkable sounds that birds, whales, and other animals make, and even if so, does something new nevertheless come to light in human musicality, showing us something more about human beings and about the world in which we live?

My hunch is that the answer is 'Yes'. Experientially, many people say that in listening to music they sometimes feel intimations of a transcendent reality, certainly feeling themselves as if lifted into another, greater reality. I respect that feeling and it does support my hunch, but it is not an answer to my question.

Having shown (to my satisfaction) God is present but incognito, in human inquiry and in recognising and responding to human worth,

so, I am looking to see if there is an argument *to* God being present, but hidden, incognito, in human musicality, and so be true of all music enjoyed, played, and sung, whatever the genre. I am looking for an argument that can stand up in public, anywhere.

If this proves successful, I hope the Cathedral might be a centre not only for musical excellence but also a centre for promoting this view of God, hidden, incognito, in human musicality. If this is successful, I hope this might be extended to all the Cathedrals in Australia, helping more and more people share this understanding of music.

I believe these three probes and similar ones are important because we are living a naturalistic world view, like a vast bubble, deeply taken for granted in our culture. Two of the probes show it is deeply mistaken in claiming there is no transcendent reality and urging us to live accordingly.

These probes are important for another reason. We live in a violent world, that seems very dark at times. Nevertheless, there are often found some pinpoints of light in the darkness. I believe the pinpoints of light show us what is true and what has value, not the violence or the darkness. The probes help me hold to the pinpoints of light and hold them as signs of the transcendent reality that embraces all things.

Every year students would ask me why I was a Christian. They could hear I believed in God and something of the reasons why.

But why was I a Christian? The answer was that just not any God would do. Given the vast amount of suffering and death in the world, if God could not suffer, then despite the arguments, I would not be moved by such a God. It is only the gospel of Jesus Christ that speaks of the nailed God crushed by violent death at our hands, that was raised from the dead. Only this God moves me.

Stephen Ames' extended responses to Brian Cox's worldview and on the questions of human value are found on the Cathedral website under 'Book Launch'. His book 'A Strange Goodness? God and Natural Evil' published by ATF Press is available at the St Peter's Bookroom.



Elizabeth Pemberton McPhee, 1940-2024

A Brief Life

Ian McPhee

Elizabeth gave specific instructions that she did not want any eulogies. She did, however, agree that I could give a brief account of her life, and indicated certain aspects that she wanted included.

Elizabeth (or Betsy as she was known to her relatives and her many American friends) was born and raised in Manhattan. She was a true New Yorker. She began her education at Friends Seminary in New York, and later often remarked on the quality of the Quaker education, although she wasn't Quaker herself. For her B.A. she went to Mt Holyoke College in Massachusetts, and for her PhD to Columbia University in New York. Her dissertation, in Classical Archaeology, dealt with a deposit of Classical pottery from Corinth, which she had been given during a year, 1964-1965, as a postgraduate at the American School of Classical Archaeology at Athens. In later life, after her retirement, she very much enjoyed the courses required for a Master of Divinity at the United Faculty of Theology in Melbourne.

She began to teach in 1966 at the University of Maryland at College Park. She lived at first in Baltimore and later in Washington, where she expected to spend the rest of her career. But, during the academic year 1979-1980 she was Visiting Professor at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, and, early in 1980, she met at a lecture in Athens a young Australian scholar who was also studying Corinthian pottery. After we married in 1981, we decided that it was better for her to come to Australia than for me to go to the States. This was not a decision that she ever regretted. She made a home in Melbourne and became an Australian citizen in 1985. She loved teaching, particularly the interaction with students and colleagues, and was fortunate to have a position for 19 years at the University of Melbourne, at first part-time in Fine Arts and later full-time in Classics and Archaeology, following some 15 years at the University of Maryland. With the sponsorship of Dale Trendall, she became a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and served on its Council. She had a strong sense of duty and believed in the importance of heritage, and so was involved for some years with the Heritage Council as representative for archaeology. She was also a devoted member of this church for many years, relishing the beauty of the liturgy, the extraordinary music and the excellent choir. She was a voracious reader and very knowledgeable about classical music,

especially opera. Indeed, in her Washington days, she won a weekly opera contest run by the local radio station so many times that she was banned from entering.

And yet, her home away from home, and the place where she spent so many happy days, was a small village called Ancient Corinth in Greece. Almost every year until 2022 she would return there for a month or more. She could stay in the compound of the American School of Classical Studies, spend time with her many friends, and could sort, study and publish the thousands of sherds and other material remains from one of the great cities of ancient Greece. Together with her close friends Ron Stroud and Nancy Bookidis, she helped to rescue from oblivion the extraordinary Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, and her volumes on the Greek pottery and on the offering trays from this unique site are fundamental for any interpretation of the cult and for its chronology in the Greek period.

She is no more.

Her memory will linger in the hearts and minds of those who knew and loved her. But, it will last longest in the books and articles that she wrote, her real legacy, as an inspiration and a challenge for scholars of the future, who devote themselves, as she did, to raising a memory of the ancient city of Corinth and of its people.

Under Jerusalem

Book Review by Philip Harvey

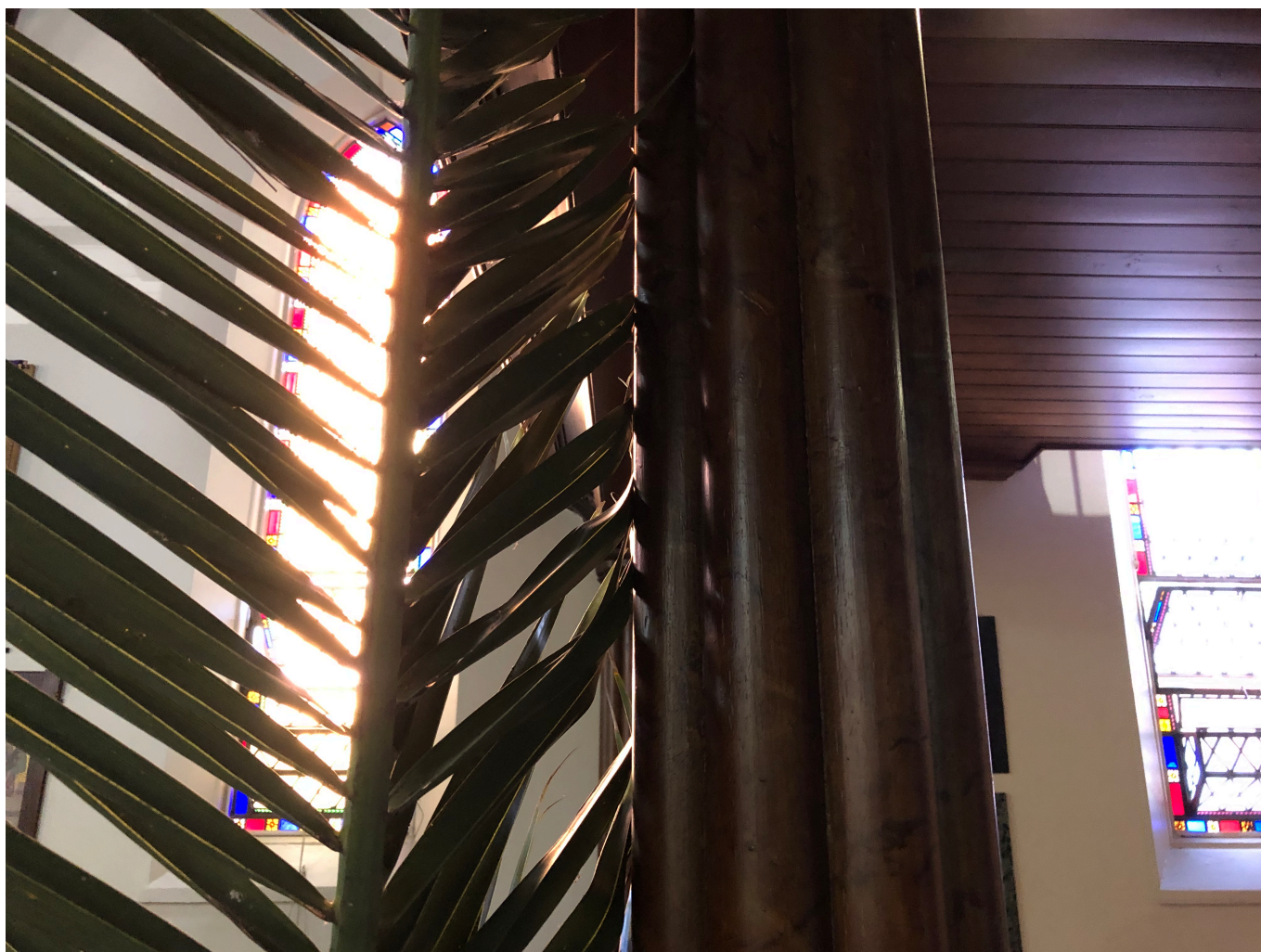
Modernised transport and increased access to Jerusalem in the mid-19th century gave rise to what this excellent history ('Under Jerusalem : the Buried History of the World's Most Contested City' by Andrew Lawler. Doubleday, 2023) depicts as an imperial 'race' for the secrets in stone and artifacts either submerged or in plain sight of the Holy City. France, then Britain, Germany and Russia are amongst the nations that expend money, material, and personnel in their different bids to lay claim to the truth about the religious past. The truth itself proves elusive over many decades, as excavators offer up contradictory theories about the exact site of the Prophet's Dream, the Passion narratives, Solomon's and then Herod's Temple, and other major facts of shared interest. Results are mixed. General Gordon, for example, he of Khartoum fame, engages in his own military-style survey, with definitively expressed ideas that a French scholar of the time described as "wonderfully weird." The cast of explorers, missionaries, Turkish overlords and other global powerbrokers right up to the present, priests,

imams, and rabbis define their vying interests, an historian's fascination but, at times, stupefyingly Dickensian.

Power politics is never far away from the emerging cultural practice of archaeology, where the excavation (legal or illegal) of a holy site can lead quickly to an international incident, or worse. (The *casus belli* of the Crimean War was over Orthodox and Catholic rights in Palestine.) 'Under Jerusalem' is rife with such stories and personalities, though along the way we meet the laudable inventors of modern archaeology, Flinders Petrie and Frederick Bliss, it being said of the latter "he did not allow preconceived religious notions to interfere with his archaeological conclusions."

This is a book about the digs since the 1860s. At that time the city was administered by the Ottomans and noticeable is the even division of the city into Jews, Christians (especially the Armenians), and Muslims. This delicate balance keeps the peace, but if representatives of any one group overstep in one way or another, all hell breaks loose. It's easy to see, even in a work about classical and biblical archaeology, how if any one group enforces predominance in the Holy Land, then there is going to be disaster.

Jerusalem as a pivotal point of imperial strategy changes when the British cede control of Palestine to the Israelis in 1948. The ascendancy of Jewish archaeology is entrenched, sometimes literally, after the Six-Day War (1967), when the mayor of the City famously, or infamously, bulldozes the Arab quarter to provide a plaza to the Western Wall. The Jewish desire to unearth its own heritage leads to rapid removal of Arab, Byzantine, and Roman layers in pursuit of any find dated, as the author puts it, between David and Jesus. Riveting are the disputes between Jewish groups, with an unsubtle divide between the secularists, whose interest is guided primarily by scientific enquiry, and the rabbinic religious whose active protection of the holy sites is governed by their own legal and traditional dictates. These differences go to the heart of Israeli politics and identity, between free enquiry and virtual theocracy, which is why we are going to hear more about archaeological right of access to holy sites in the near future, given the nature of feuds and the appalling course of events there in recent months. While the book details the physical pursuit of the ancient past, in that process Lawler expertly opens up description of the ferocious social complexity of Jerusalem, inside and out, and those very many who make a claim on its meanings.



On Sacrifice (1)

Easter Good News: God is not a psychopath.

A reflection from Fr Michael Bowie on sacrifice.

Our understanding of Eucharist and sacrifice are essentially linked to our understanding of Good Friday and Easter. I spoke last Lent about how at the heart of the Eucharist we discover a Christian understanding of sacrifice. Without a Eucharistic and Resurrection context, the cross becomes a dangerous place at which to look. And it has been warped in some unbalanced theologies in such a way that people are damaged by it.

A few years ago, Fr Jeffrey John (then Dean of St Albans in England) stirred up a small storm in Holy Week with a BBC broadcast about what happened on Good Friday and why. The key question he raised in his talk was: 'What sort of God gets so angry with the world that he needs someone to die in order to calm

himself down?' He argued that the traditional theological themes of sacrificial atonement, or substitutionary atonement, are questionable and damaging, portraying God as an abusive parent.

Brought up as a Welsh Calvinist, Fr Jeffrey had from his childhood questioned the idea that Jesus died on the cross to placate an angry God, who was also his father. As he said, *Well, you know where you are with religion like that; but belief in divine retribution isn't confined to Welsh Calvinism. ... Even on a personal level we seem to have this instinct that good fortune or bad must somehow depend on how good or bad we have been. Something awful happens and what do we do? We look up to heaven and say "What have I done to deserve this? – as though divine rewards and retributions really were immediate and automatic.*

There is evidence for that transactional view in scripture, mostly in the books of the Old Testament which date from before the Exile in Babylon. After the disaster of the Exile, in which God's chosen people discovered that their special relationship with God did not mean they escaped terrible suffering, most subsequent Old Testament writers saw that this theory didn't work. But sadly, it persisted, and has become embedded in conservative Evangelical theology which has led, at its worst, to the so-called prosperity Gospel. In less extreme forms, it supports a complacent smugness about riches and success as rewards for right believing, while looking down on those less successful or blessed.

There is a passage in Luke 13, where Jesus clearly states the opposite of this theology: *At that very time there were some present who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'*

As Fr Jeffrey argued: *The fact is that throughout the New Testament the primitive theory about the relationship between justice and suffering is turned upside-down. Jesus couldn't have been clearer. Blessed are the hungry, he said, not the well-fed. Blessed are the poor, not the rich. Blessed are the sick, the miserable, the disreputable, the outcast, the down and out. They are the ones who will get their reward. If anything, a man's suffering and failure in this life are the sign of God's special blessing and care for him, not the opposite.*

The most recent statement by the Church of England on the meaning of the Cross was the Doctrine Commission's report *The Mystery of Salvation* (Church House Publishing, 1995). It re-stated the view of the 1938 Commission that "the notion of propitiation as the placating by man of an angry God is definitely unchristian" (p. 213). Instead, the report recommended that the Cross should be presented "as revealing the heart of a fellow-suffering God" (p. 113).

Fr Jeffrey wrote later, in response to criticism from conservatives (and a large post-bag of support from a broad range of people who had actually heard the talk): *The crucifixion did not placate an angry God and change his mind. The Trinity is not divided. Of course Christ died for our sins; but the price is paid not to God, but by God. God in Christ took all the consequences of our fallenness on himself, and, in the supreme demonstration of his love for us, made the ultimate, once-for-all sacrifice of himself which unites us eternally to him. That is the doctrine the Church has urged us to preach, and we must not be intimidated from preaching it.*

A deeper understanding of sacrifice in Holy Tradition and the scripture which informs it will lead to a healthier and more authentic Christian faith.

We have come to think of sacrifice as loss, giving something up, or even death. But sacrifice is more nuanced than that: the word sacrifice means 'making holy'; it does not originally denote destruction or loss. The orthodox understanding of the Mass as a sacrifice is not *only* about uniting us to the once-for-all offering of Christ on the cross (in *solidarity with us*, as Fr Jeffrey demonstrates), though, sacramentally, it does that. But Jesus gave us the Eucharist as a sacrament of his body and blood, a 'thanksgiving sacrifice', the night before he died on the cross.

There were three types of sacrifice in Old Testament religion and only one required the death of a victim. Anglican theologians have drawn parallels with the third type, the *communion* or *thanksgiving* sacrifice, which is related to the offering of bread and wine by Melchizedek in blessing Abraham (Genesis 14.18), and the passage in Exodus where the elders went to the holy mountain with Moses 'and beheld God and ate and drank' (24.11). The communion or thanksgiving sacrifice consisted of offering the gifts (compare the Offertory of the Mass, which properly refers to the bread and wine), mediation by the priest (compare the Eucharistic Prayer) and sharing the offered gifts, or a portion of them (Communion). This 'sacrifice of thanksgiving' best illuminates the biblical lineage of the Blessed Sacrament.

The Mass is the only thing Our Lord commanded us to do in worship: he didn't tell us to read the bible, or sing hymns, or have meetings. He told us just to 'do

this'. And he gave us the Our Father as a paradigm of prayer. All the other things we do and say in Christian worship and life should surely be related to these two great gifts, both of which are grounded in relationship with a *loving* parent and a *beloved* sibling, our Lord himself.

If we come to Mass seeking communion with the God who loves us so much that he wanted to suffer *with us* (rather than seeking to avoid punishment from a vengeful and abusive parent, which we somehow believe God imposed on his son 'for us'), not only are we following our Lord's command to 'do this,' but we are also answering an invitation to fullness of life – which is the greatest gift of Easter.

On Sacrifice (2)

The True Meaning of Sacrifice

A sermon given by Mthr Kathryn Bellhouse at St Peter's Eastern Hill on the Second Sunday in Lent, 25th February 2024.

Readings: Genesis: 22.1-2, 9-13, 15-18 [The Binding of Isaac]. Psalm 97 ["The Lord is king: the most high over all the earth." Romans: 4.13-end [The example of Abraham]. Mark: 9.2-10 [The Transfiguration].

There are two perspectives on the binding of Isaac that are hard to hold together.

Many Jewish and Christian exegetes interpret the binding of Isaac as Israel's counternarrative to neighbouring nations whose gods did invite child sacrifice, and even maybe to rival cults within Israel. In the Book of Leviticus God forbids child sacrifice, and as a general rule one does not make a law prohibiting something no one has ever even contemplated – hard as it might be for the modern mind to imagine. In other Books the practice is associated, for instance, with a god named Moloch. In the binding of Isaac, we see both that Abraham was willing to go that far for El Shaddai, and also that God prevented him at the final moment. It is not a lack of devotion on Abraham's part, it is the goodness of God who desires only reasonable sacrifice.

That interpretation gives us essential historical perspective. But, at the same time, we would want to be careful not to so historicise the story as to "explain it away", a story so foundational to the Abrahamic faiths. Is the whole thing really an exercise in proving a point to "others"? Is the story not a sincere part of the spiritual fabric of the people themselves? And, therefore, of us?

When we face it in that light, our purpose is not to justify it. The story disturbs us, and it should disturb us. We might also notice two things. The terror faced by Abraham on the road to Moriah finds an echo in the unfolding of so many lives. Even to take examples from the Scriptures themselves:

In desperation Moses' mother offered him up in a basket on the currents of the Nile River, only to find herself contracted to be his wetnurse in the house of Pharaoh's daughter.

Out of gratitude and joy Hannah offered up her firstborn Samuel to the service of God at Shiloh. We know the letting go was not easy, she still made little clothes for him that she took to Shiloh each year.

Unwillingly, in despair, Hagar abandoned her son Ishmael beneath a bush, before God lead her to water to sustain them.

For most of Jacob's life he thought he had lost his son Joseph to wild beasts, only to be reunited with him in his last years.

In Solomon's court, when two women claimed the one baby, the mother offered the baby up to the other woman to save his life, before Solomon identified and restored him to her.

To take a rather different instance, Jesus speaks of the man with two sons, who had to offer one up to a life of profligacy in the hope the young man would exhaust his appetite and one day return to him.

Sacrifice is part of human religion, because it is part of human life. Can you still have faith in God when he seems to be asking of you what is most precious to you? The answer of some people is, No. The answer of others is, Oh well, God would never take what is precious. The answer of Abraham is the answer of Mary. Yes. Not because they are cold hearted. Quite the contrary. Because of a profound confidence and trust in the goodness of God, a faith that as all that we love comes from God, so it can only find fulfillment when entrusted to the Unseen Hands.

What emerges through the dialogue of experience of God in the Scriptures is that when we do offer up to God what is most precious to us, however confusing the road along which we are lead, it does not lead to destruction, he is leading us to fulfillment and to life—this is the second thing worth noticing. In no case is the loss the end of the road. The end of the road is reunion. In all we see the shadow of the Sacrifice of the Son of God, and a shadow also of the Reconciliation.

This is the true meaning of Sacrifice: we offer things up, in order for them to be taken up by God, and for us to reunited with them in his presence. This is something that manifests itself clearly in the Transfiguration.

I suspect the greatest offering Peter, James and John ever had to make in their lives, was the one made, at first, unwillingly: that of Jesus, their Christ. They invested everything in him, and then had to let go as he offered himself up at Calvary. But before Christ took them to Calvary, first he led them up another mountain, and gave them a foretaste of his risen glory. He showed them from the start that what he was offering up to the true and living God was not destined for destruction: but for life and for a living union with the Father.

If the Transfiguration can teach us anything, it is that what is offered to God willingly is not consumed or lost. It becomes part of God. Indeed, this is true of the whole of his human life. The Son of God took on a human life in order to freely offer it up and for it to be freely taken up into God, in his mysterious union with the Father. That is also why, at the end of Mass, we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice. We are not offering ourselves up to be devoured, we are offering ourselves up to be taken up, into God; led beyond ourselves into his radiant and ever-expansive light.

Sacrifice is a category largely rejected by the modern mind, but even where it is rejected intellectually, it remains part of the fabric of our being. It is evident even in something so simple as cutting flowers as they bloom, in order to offer them up in the sanctuary of a church or even a home. We take what is precious and offer it up to another, as a sign that we ourselves are devoted to them. We do this, what's more, out of the intuition that even what we offer, even the flowers, find their own fulfillment in the eyes of the One who appreciates their beauty. The more deeply we can internalise that lesson, the more freely and faithfully we can love, knowing all we love find their fulfillment beyond us, within God. We can entrust them to God in freedom and faith and hope. In him we meet and will meet with all that is precious eternally.

Editorial

Photographs in this issue taken by Susan Southall and Philip Harvey. Copies of 'Under Jerusalem : the Buried History of the World's Most Contested City' by Andrew Lawler are available in softcover and hardback from the St Peter's Bookroom. The Parish Paper is edited by Philip Harvey, arranged and produced by Warren Collins, and printed by Eugene Chin. Contributions are always welcome, both writing and original artwork.

Gethsemane

by Mary Oliver

The grass never sleeps.

Or the roses.

Nor does the lily have a secret eye that shuts until morning.

Jesus said, wait with me. But the disciples slept.

The cricket has such splendid fringe on its feet,
and it sings, have you noticed, with its whole body,
and heaven knows if it ever sleeps.

Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did, maybe
the wind wound itself into a silver tree, and didn't move,
maybe, the lake far away, where once he walked as on a
blue pavement, lay still and waited, wild awake.

Oh the dear bodies, slumped and eye-shut, that could not
keep that vigil, how they must have wept,
so utterly human, knowing this too
must be a part of the story.

