

**Reflections prepared by Adrian van Breda
for Good Friday, 21 March 2008,
on the theme of the death of Jesus**

The Gospel According to St Matthew (27:45-50, JB Phillips):

“From midday until three o’clock darkness spread over the whole countryside, and then Jesus cried with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why did you forsake me?” ... Then Jesus gave one more great cry, and died.”

Jesus died. The Son of God died. God died. Up until that moment, Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, had always existed – initially as spirit and for the previous three decades as a human being. And now he was dead. Not sleeping; but dead. Not in suspended animation; dead. Not drugged; dead. He was really dead.

No wonder the whole land was covered in darkness. No wonder the earth shook. No wonder rocks split asunder. The whole cosmos depends on Jesus for its existence. “Through Jesus, all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3). When Jesus dies, what happens to ‘all things’? “The earth shook and the rocks split” (Matthew 27:51b). Jesus was the light of the world. “In him was life, and that life was the light of humanity” (John 1:4). But now life has gone out of him. And what happens to the light of humanity? It too is extinguished. “Darkness spread over the whole countryside” (Matthew 27:45b).

Has there ever been a darker hour in human history? Could anything worse ever happen in the future? On that day, the world collapsed¹. Time stands still. The universe holds its breath. As God dies upon that cross. This is the end of the universe. This is a finality from which it seems impossible to recover.

Sometimes, we fear what might happen. We fear for our health. We fear for our family’s safety. We fear for the economy of our country. We fear for the future of our children. And any of these terrible fears may indeed come to pass. Bad things do happen to us. We may become ill with cancer or AIDS. A loved one may be killed in a hijacking. The economy of South Africa may collapse. Our children may find themselves jobless. Despite our best efforts to insure ourselves, bad things do happen.

But Jesus invites us not to be afraid. The worst that can happen – has already happened. God died on a cross. And then there was Easter Sunday.

¹ Timothy Radcliffe: Seven Last Words, p.67.

The Gospel According to St John (19:30, JB Phillips):

“There was a bowl of sour wine standing there. So they soaked a sponge in the wine, put it on a spear, and pushed it up towards his mouth. When Jesus had taken it, he cried, ‘It is finished!’ his head fell forward, and he died.”

Have you ever been with someone when they died? Or sat beside and touched the body of a dead person? Years ago, someone very important to me died. Someone who loved me fiercely, and whom I, in a childish way, loved in return. I wasn't there when she died, but I sat by her bed shortly afterwards. I remember recognising that she was gone. She was not just asleep. A sleeping person looks alive and present. But a dead person looks different – you can see that the spirit has departed.

Today we gaze on the dead face of Christ². What is that like? To look at the light of world, who is dead? To gaze on the one in whom is abundant life, but is now dead? When we gaze on the face of Christ, we expect a response – a sign of recognition, of love. But now, that face is lifeless, still, cold. He is not there anymore.

“In the Old Testament, the supreme blessing is for God's face to smile on us. ‘The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace’ (Numbers 6:24-26). Before Christ we could not see God and live. We begged that God would smile on us, but we could not look back. Now at the end of Jesus' life, we gaze on his dead face. Now it is God who cannot reciprocate the gaze.”³

Jesus is now exquisitely vulnerable. He has no capacity to protect himself. It is up to us to care for his body. To take it down from the cross, to cleanse it, to prepare it for burial. We become God's agents in the world. We become God's partners on earth. As St Theresa of Avilla has said, “Christ has no body now but yours; no hands no feet on earth but yours”. In his death, Jesus passes his responsibilities to us, to continue his work in the world.

It is the dead face of Christ that finally commissions us, calls us. Even in death, Christ continues to call and commission. He calls us to smile on the world.

² Timothy Radcliffe: Seven Last Words, p.76.

³ Timothy Radcliffe: Seven Last Words, p.78.

The Gospel According to St Luke (23:44-46, JB Phillips):

“It was now about mid-day, but darkness came over the whole countryside until three in the afternoon, for there was an eclipse of the sun. The veil in the Temple sanctuary was split in two. Then Jesus gave a great cry and said, ‘Father, I commend my spirit into your hands.’ And with these words, he died.”

When Christ dies, we also die. We share in his death. Jesus told us that he is the Way, the truth and the life. Jesus told us that we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. The way of Jesus is a way of death⁴. There is no escaping it. The cross is not just a pretty symbol of Christian faith. It is a symbol of death. And Jesus made it a symbol not just for himself, but all of us who follow him. The path of Christ is a path of death and new birth. As Jesus lies dead, today and tomorrow, we too lie die with him. In silence. Waiting.

Jesus spoke seven words upon the cross: *Forgive them, for they know not what they do. *Today you will be with me in Paradise. *Woman, behold your son ... Behold your mother. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? *I thirst. *It is finished. *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

And after these words, there is silence⁵. A silence that we must live with through today and tomorrow. It is as if we are buried with Christ, in a stone, cold tomb. In silence. And we wait. We wait for something, for anything. We wait. In despair.

Yet, we wait in hope. In hope that the Word will again speak. In hope that Life will return. In hope that Light will again come into the world. It cannot be hurried. It is like being pregnant – it takes time. And so we must wait. Through Holy Saturday. We must wait.

We wait attentively. We wait expectantly. For we know that death is not the ultimate plan of God. We know that Christ cannot remain dead forever. We know that there is new life waiting for all of us. But until Easter Sunday comes, we wait in silence.

⁴ Marcus Borg: The Heart of Christianity, p.107.

⁵ Timothy Radcliffe: Seven Last Words, p.73.