

Good Friday 2006

Introduction

Welcome to this service at the heart of the Christian year. The accounts of the Passion of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke) place the crucifixion at between 12 and 3 in the afternoon and there was darkness over the whole land.

Thank you to Douglas Board for preaching. Douglas has been a member of SMITF for over 25 years and is the author of 'The Naked Year – Prayers from the heart of London'.

Doors, and having the courage to go through doors, are a major image for the Christian journey. "Behold I stand at the door and knock" is one of the great images of Christ from the Book of Revelation. The events of these three days have their startling culmination on Easter evening when the fearful disciples were gathered on the first day of the week behind locked doors. 'And Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you".'

In this church, known as 'the church of the ever open door', Douglas Board is going to invite us to enter through a series of doors to help us find for ourselves the significance of Jesus Christ on this Good Friday.

Stay for the whole three hours or just for a part of it. The service has 6 sections and ends outside on the portico, the space between the church and world Christ came to save. This is a spacious service, with periods of silence, in which we place ourselves near the cross of Christ. Each section of the service ends with a hymn and if you don't want to stay for the whole service the hymn is a moment to leave without disturbing others.

There will be no collection so please put your gift in one of the boxes at the back of the church or in a basket on the portico at the end.

From the crucifixion, the disciples fled which is invariably what I want to do at the end of this service. For those who would like to gather tea and coffee and hot cross buns will be served in the crypt.

Standing in silence, we focus on Christ and the way of the cross, and are pierced by the lament 'Senzeni na?', 'What have we done?'

Revd Nicholas Holtam

The Three Hours - Friday 14 April 2006: Good Friday

Jesus Christ: The Door into Life?

Six Talks by Douglas Board

Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'
(John 14: 6)

'Listen! I am standing at the door knocking;
if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you
and eat with you, and you with me.'
(Revelation 3: 20)

'Of all the elements of Christianity,
the most repugnant is the notion of the Christ who took our sins
upon himself and sacrificed his body in agony to save our souls.
Did we ask him to?'
(Polly Toynbee, writing in The Guardian, 5 December 2005)

'Blessed are the eyes that see
The things that you have seen
Blessed are the feet that walk
The ways where you have been.

'Blessed are the eyes that see
The agony of God
Blessed are the feet that tread
The paths his feet have trod.

'Blessed are the souls that solve
The paradox of pain
And find the path that, piercing it,
Leads through to peace again.'

(G A Studdert Kennedy)

The service is in six parts.

Reading		Talk
Matthew 26: 26-41, 47-50, 57	The last supper and Jesus' arrest	1 – The door into devastation
John 18: 15-38	Trial by the high priest and by Pilate	2 – The door into guilt
Luke 23: 13-25	The crowd bring the trial to an end	3 – The door into anger
Matthew 27: 3-10	Judas tries to return the	4 – The door into guilt

	money	
Luke 23: 32-43	Jesus crucified with two criminals alongside	5 – The door into faith
Mark 15: 33-47	Jesus' death and burial	6 – Jesus Christ: the door into life?

Concluding collect for each part:

Almighty God
 You have led us today
 to wait for you in the silence of the cross.
 Show us heaven, if we are afraid of death.
 Renew our hope, if we are afraid of life.
 Heal us, if we are afraid of you.
 In the name of the one whom we crucified we ask. Amen.

Blessing at three o'clock:

May the glory of God the Father
 who made the world for love
 shine upon you in eternity.

May the forgiveness of God the Son
 who entered our world out of love
 touch you from the cross.

May the power of God the Holy Spirit
 who changes the world through love
 inspire you to love yourself and your neighbour. Amen.

TALK ONE – THE DOOR INTO DEVASTATION

Come. Come with me to a place of devastation. It's just over two miles due north of here, between King's Cross and Russell Square on the Piccadilly line.

Steve Betts, a sergeant in the transport police, describes his work there on 7 July last year: It was pitch black and we had torches. The tunnel where the train was, was about 150m down the track round a corner, and there were still a few wounded coming towards us as we approached. As I walked down the track, I heard someone cry out for help but I could not see them. I called out back and looked around but it was very smoky and dusty and they did not answer.

I got into the train and it was quite obvious that this was something horrendous. There were people with limbs missing, huge open wounds with their organs showing and people were crying out and moaning and asking for help.

I thought, this is the worst thing that I have ever seen. I am not very good in enclosed spaces at the best of times and we had to climb over bodies and body parts to try to help people and see who was still alive. I thought this is the end of the world, right here in this carriage, but you have to do your job.

We don't have to go two miles to find devastation. One November bombs exploded fifty yards from where you are sitting, in Duncannon Street and also by Edith Cavell's statue. It was 1940, and the east window, and several other windows, were blown in. Sometime next year, these plain wartime replacements will no longer be here to remind us.

Fifty yards from devastation? – what about five? I look around. Wherever you are sitting this Good Friday, you are less than three rows from someone who in the last few months has lost a close member of their family. Or I look at our prayer board. Two weeks ago one prayer there was for an aunt, who had just had surgery for cancer, and for the writer of the prayer 'to find out what I should do with my life'. The writer went on, 'Thanks for the life to decide.'

Even five yards may not be necessary. Perhaps devastation has found us. Some bombs explode on the inside of the body.

In his comprehensive and graphic account of depression entitled 'The Noonday Demon', Andrew Solomon describes how depression came for him. He was a lively, ambitious 31 year old author who, as he wrote in 1994, *did not experience depression until after I had pretty much solved my problems. My mother had died three years earlier ... I was publishing my first novel ... I was getting along with my family ... I had emerged intact from a powerful two-year relationship ...*

when his life changed like Humpty-Dumpty's, and all the king's drugs and all the king's therapies could not put him back together again: I can remember lying frozen in bed, crying because I was too frightened to take a shower, and at the same time knowing that showers are not scary ... with all my force in my body I would sit up; I would turn and put my feet on the floor; and then I would feel so incapacitated and so frightened that I would roll over and lie face down ... I would sometimes start to cry again, weeping not only because of what I could not do, but because the fact that I could not do it seemed so idiotic to me. All over the world people were taking showers. Why, oh why, could I not be one of them?

In our minds we are also at another place of devastation, a hill outside Jerusalem two thousand years ago. In Jewish reckoning, days begin at sunset – so for a band of disciples, many of them in their twenties or thirties, who had spent perhaps two years following around an itinerant preacher, Good Friday began with supper on Thursday. By what we would call Friday evening, the day would have become for them one of unqualified devastation: and for the preacher, death.

Can we be there with more than our minds? Can we be there with our souls, our feelings, perhaps in some sense our bodies? Last night the temperature in Jerusalem was 7°C and it was expected to climb to a hazy 26°C at noon today. Then, it was also spring, and cold at night.

We have come today to be emotionally present at the death of Jesus Christ. Of course we, the television generations, are used to being anywhere we want. We've been to the moon, to the bottom of the sea, inside the human heart – on television. But as the Negro spiritual asks, *are* we really there – present with all our thoughts, and all our feelings: or are we watching behind a protective screen? Let me finish with part of a poem by David Ignatow. It's about a person behind a screen – a modern person – in fact the legendary American newsreader, Walter Cronkite. Ignatow imagines Cronkite watching an unprecedented, incredible death: except that because of the screen, he's not there at all.

*This is the twentieth century,
you are there, preparing to skin
a human being alive. Your part*

*will be to remain calm
and to participate with the flayer
in his work as you follow his hand,
the slow, delicate way with the knife
between the skin and the flesh,
and see the red meat emerge.
Tiny rivulets of blood will flow
from the naked flesh and over the hands
of the flayer. Your eyes will waver
and turn away but turn back to witness
the unprecedented, the incredible,
for you are there
and your part will be to remain calm.*

TALK TWO – THE DOOR INTO DENIAL

Over the last century we have come to realise that we have a subconscious and it is powerful. At times, it can make realities which are too much for us to cope with disappear. Fish have gills, which let in the ocean but not all of it; and human minds have what psychology has called 'denial'.

Looking at the reading with this insight, we notice:

- Pilate asks 'What is truth?';
- Peter disclaims being a disciple; and
- Pilate asks 'So you *are* a king?'

Pilate, the man of affairs, filters reality with the mocking question, 'What is truth?'. And so do we. We are busy people: if not with affairs of state, then with affairs. Pilate was not asking to be mailed, through time-travel post, a copy of Jostein Gaarder's 1991 philosophy book 'Sophie's World'. According to that story, we and Pilate are pressed hard with other questions: *Could you pass me the butter? How's the stock market? How much are tomatoes? You know that Lady Di is pregnant again?* Denial defines how much truth we are in the market for.

Peter demonstrates another kind of denial in which we engage regularly. The psychological denial took place during our *first* reading, not our second. Even though Jesus' prediction is specific – *this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times* – the claim is too shameful to Peter's image of himself. His mind filters it out. Beside the charcoal fire in the high priest's courtyard, when the cock crows, Peter's experience is actually the opposite of denial. The filters don't work. Reality gets through. He's not brave. He's not principled. On this occasion he is what he feels like he is: a disgrace. We've all been there.

There is a serious challenge in discovering that other people love us better than we do ourselves. Jesus already knew what Peter would do, yet loved him; and this is common. Those who encounter me have only the experience of the flawed, real me; yet some love me. When the cock crows, who alone is surprised? Not Jesus: Peter.

Which leaves Pilate's question, 'So you *are* a king?'. Let's go there, but by way of a modern cemetery: the Père-Lachaise in Paris.

As we come to understand the place of denial in the making of humans, we have to acknowledge that some denial is unavoidable. Some denial is healthy. It is, in fact, of the essence of being human. Ernest Becker, the Pulitzer prize-winning cultural anthropologist, wrote in his book 'The Denial of Death': *To grow up at all is to conceal the mass of internal scar tissue that throbs in our dreams.*

And yet too much denial also kills us. In today's West, more than any humans before us, those of us who are affluent can set the filters on our realities narrowly. We can exclude realities which do not fit our preferences. In Becker's words: *Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing.*

The challenge to us of death is different from the challenge to us of dying. The challenge of death was Becker's priority: the challenge described by existential philosophers and writers. Using the insights of psychology and anthropology, Becker stared in the face the questions which most of us wish to avoid. He looked at the world and at humans full on, and arrived at this conclusion: that to achieve their fullest potential in a life limited by death, in general humans needed a religious belief system. In a striking phrase he said: *Man should cultivate the passivity of renunciation to the higher powers no matter how difficult it is.*

That phrase is particularly striking to anyone familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous – the social movement which began in the United States in the 1930s. By 1939 AA had crystallised in its famous Twelve Steps the need for alcoholics to accept *a Power greater than ourselves*, also described as *God as we understand Him*.

The connection takes further shape in Ernest Kurtz's history of AA, where he writes: *Denial, after all, had been earmarked by Alcoholics Anonymous to be the characteristic symptom and deep core of alcoholism.*

After a century of human psychology, and no less after a century of expanding resort to alcohol and other drugs, our society has become uniquely qualified to identify the most dangerous denial: the denial of our own mortality; the longing to be our own god.

Let me illustrate with an icon of the drug revolution. In 1971, three years before Becker's book, the singer, song writer and sex object Jim Morrison was buried aged 27 in Père-Lachaise cemetery. He would have laughed at the idea that he expressed the denial of death. The opposite surely! – he had the filters of experience jammed wide open. He sought prodigiously any new experience which drugs could give him. He called his band the Doors because, in his words, *There are things known and things unknown, and in between are the Doors*. Not frightened of death, he toyed with it, asking friends to drive cars fast and throwing himself out of them. He was drinking in life to the full, not caring if he threw up afterwards.

He founded the Doors with Ray Manzarek, who says this: *At the time we had been ingesting a lot of psychedelic chemicals, so the doors of perception were cleansed in our minds ... we saw music as a vehicle to, in a sense, become prosyletizers of a new religion, a religion of self, of each man as god.*

Morrison tried many drugs, but his favourite, by far, was alcohol. Alcohol and denial feed each other. And Morrison's denial of death was this: he could not bear the thought of dying old. He wanted to experience himself as immortal, as god of his own world: and growing older, growing frailer, becoming passé would destroy all that. It was more important to him to be king of the young.

Pilate's question 'So you *are* a king?', becomes a question for each of us. The scornful crown of thorns and the inscription 'King of the Jews' (with the invisible postscript, 'he *thinks* he is!'), will sit above Jesus' head. After the psychological revolution we are challenged to look for the crown and the inscription above every character's head: Pilate, king of what? Peter, king of what? Judas, king of what? And myself, king of what? – with the same ghostly companion, 'he *thinks* he is!'

Charlotte Elliot's hymn expresses the opposite of denial. It says, I come as I am. And this being Good Friday, if I come followed by a notice on a pole which says 'King of – ' (brackets – 'he thinks he is!'), then God says, 'That's OK'.

TALK THREE – THE DOOR INTO ANGER

When we experience a tragic loss, denial is a common first reaction – 'It can't be me.' A later stage of reaction is commonly anger – 'Why isn't it her, or him?'

Jesus is clear about the importance of anger. In the sermon on the mount, he stresses that resolving your anger with a brother or sister takes priority even over offering gifts to God. How much more important, then, to resolve any anger we may have with God.

The psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross observed in her famous book 'On Death and Dying': *It [was] unwise to tell a little child who lost her brother that God loved little boys so much that he took little Johnny to heaven. When this little girl grew up to be a woman she never solved her anger at God, which resulted in a psychotic depression when she lost her own little son three decades later.*

Even if one feels angry with God: how to express it? This is one of the gifts of the incarnation – the gobsmacking Christian belief that God entered our own history as one of us. It's a belief which needs to be examined closely. But just granting it true for the next couple of minutes, it implies that *we cannot offend God* by the act of communicating with him or her as if with another human being. We may offend by what we say, but not by the act of saying.

This intimacy with God was taught to us by Jesus. He told us to pray to Abba – 'Dad' in Aramaic. Jesus tells us: God is not distant. God is not tyrannical. If we're mad and we yell and stamp our feet, he's no sandcastle; he won't fall over. Each of us needs to find our own language in which to claim that relationship.

I quote Polly Toynbee in the order of service. In a cruel irony, she may never be able to resolve the anger which pours through that quotation, unless - at least for a moment - she can imagine that the God with whom she is so angry might actually exist.

'Intimates' is a short poem by D H Lawrence, about feeling angry with someone very powerful; in this case, a woman.

Don't you care for my love? she said bitterly.

*I handed her the mirror, and said:
Please address these questions to the proper person!*

*Please make all requests to head-quarters!
In all matters of emotional importance
please approach the supreme authority direct! –
So I handed her the mirror.*

The crowd in front of Pilate was certainly angry. A few days earlier, Jesus had entered Jerusalem to cheers and hosannas – that was the home crowd. Jesus had his fans. Good Friday was the away fixture, and Jesus had done plenty to make many people very angry.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and to worship at the Temple – the sacred centre of Judaism. But he had associated with people who had desecrated it. It was in the middle of the night one Passover, in the years 6-9 AD, when some Samaritans had strewn human bones in the Temple porches and all over the sanctuary. But Jesus associated with Samaritans.

Jesus taught in the Temple in Jerusalem. But he had become increasingly scathing about those who had religious power. The time of Jesus was a time when powerful new Jewish classes had arrived. Scribes, which one could not become without decades of study. Pharisees, closed communities which admitted members only after proving their ability to live in ritual purity. How they must have been angered by Jesus saying: *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them ... you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.*

There was more. Throughout the cultures which gave rise to Buddhism and Hinduism as well as to the world-views of Greece, Rome and Scandinavia – the shared wisdom was that the gods were many. But in the Semitic world, it had been clear for centuries that there was only one God, the creator and sustainer of the world. In the precious cradle of Judaism, the name and the honour of the one Almighty God were uniquely sensed and protected, and nowhere more so than at the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet Jesus claimed an intimacy with him, and an authority directly from him.

The twelfth century Jewish teacher Moses Maimonides can help us understand what was at stake. If a Jew transgresses a positive mitzvah or duty (for example, honour your father and mother) and then repents, that person is forgiven on the spot. To transgress a negative mitzvah (for example, do not steal) and then repent, is to be forgiven from the next day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. To transgress a commandment which carries karet, the penalty of death (for example, do not commit adultery) - and then repent: *the effect of that repentance and the effect of Yom Kippur would be suspended. The suffering of the individual would instead complete the process of atonement.* But if an individual profanes the Divine Name, then *repentance, Yom Kippur and suffering, all three of them, would be suspended. Death alone would bring atonement.*

Earlier, I examined the nature of denial. It seems to be something which we cannot do without, but should not try to luxuriate in: something we have to face and pass through, but not remain there. A doorway, if you will. In the shadow of excessive forms of denial, such as alcoholism, I also suggested that there was something darker: the will to be one's own god, the religion of self.

So it may be with anger. Who are we angry with? Perhaps God, perhaps distant forces, perhaps someone close to us or perhaps ourselves. We will probably have to face some kind of it, face it and try to pass through. Anger may be another doorway: when the time comes, we should stride up but not linger. If Jesus is right, then we should stride with some urgency.

But evil does exist, inside all of us and outside us. And all the evil in the world hangs on two commandments. The first is 'I am God', the commandment of the religion of self. The second is 'Whoever I trample on makes me stronger', the commandment of the religion of violence.

Phaly Nuon, a victim of the Khmer Rouge, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in helping other victims to recover. Here is one thing which happened to her. Before it came having to watch the gang-rape and murder of her twelve-year-old daughter. After it came losing her new-born because her breasts ran dry; and being abused by workers in an aid camp.

She was brought with some fellow labourers to a field outside town. Then they tied her hands behind her back and roped her legs together. After forcing her to her knees, they tied her to a rod of bamboo, and they made her lean forward over a mucky field, so that her legs had to be tensed or she would lose her balance. The idea was that when she finally dropped of exhaustion, she would fall forward into the mud and, unable to move, would drown in it. Her three year old son bellowed and cried beside her. The [new-born] was tied to her so that he would drown in the mud when she fell: Phaly Nuon would be the murderer of her own baby.

This evil says, I am bored. I am God. Your agonies may mildly lift the tedium of my day. But by your suffering, I grow stronger.

The revulsion, the urge to say this evil has nothing to do with me, is overpowering. Even if those people were made in the same factory, they came from another batch!

Look, look! we exclaim, what have violence and selfishness to do with me? Don't you know, are you not modern, our violence is *outsourced!* It's done by *other people!* The police who shoot have special training. The abortion clinics are inspected. *I* have nothing to do with the invasion of foreign countries. As for an ego, well don't we all have to have one of those?

Jesus said, 'Repent'. If our perception of sin has become clouded, we may not know of what we need to repent; though looking into our own heart is always a good place to start.

James Stephens wrote this poem, called 'The Twins'.

*Good and bad are in my heart,
But I cannot tell to you –
For they never are apart –
Which is better of the two.*

*I am this! I am the other!
And the devil is my brother!
But my father He is God!
Any mother is the Sod!
I am safe enough, you see,
Owing to my pedigree.*

*So I shelter love and hate
Like twin brothers in a nest;
Lest I find when it's too late,
That the other was the best.*

The opposite of repentance might be to do something demonic. Or it might simply be, in an unbelievably cruel world, to hedge your bets.

TALK FIVE – THE DOOR INTO FAITH

Is there life after death? 'No' is a reasonable answer, and one given in Jesus' day by the Sadducees. On this view, this is all there is, for all of us, including the 11 million children who die each year before the age of 5. Seen like this, the belief in an after-life is part of the denial of death; shutting our eyes tight in fright, in front of the abyss of meaninglessness. It's a reasonable view.

This view might go on to understand Jesus as an ordinary person with unusual gifts. He reached people whom others did not. He sought peace, refused violence and brought forgiveness. And, as seekers of peace often do, he ended up being killed.

Many of us were shocked last August when, during worship at Taizé in France, Brother Roger was stabbed by a woman and killed. Brother Roger founded the Taizé community to reconcile different Christians and young people of different countries. In his book 'God is love alone', he wrote:

I cannot forget an evening in the summer of 1942, when I was still on my own in Taizé. I was writing at a small table... I knew I was in danger because of the refugees I was sheltering in the house. Some of them were Jews ... Members of the civilian police force had repeatedly come to question me. That evening, with fear in the pit of my stomach, a prayer of trust took hold of me. I said to God, 'Even if I lose my life, I know that you, the living God, will continue what has begun here, the creation of a community.'

Now in passing, are those the words and actions of someone in denial about death? But let us return to the reasonable view which I stated earlier. This life is all there is. Jesus was a good man. And to be concrete, let's say a man at least slightly like Brother Roger.

Really? Of all the dumb ideas in all the towns in all the world, we have to pick this one?

Jesus says, 'Today you will be with me in paradise'. Let's capture what this shocking sentence says. You leave St Martin's and get on the tube. At the next stop a man sits next to you. Like Jesus, he is about 30 and Middle Eastern in appearance. He is carrying a rucksack and a religious text. After muttering to himself about Elijah he turns, looks you in the eyes and says, 'Today you will be with me in paradise'?

Phaly Nuon, pitched like a human flagpole over a muddy grave, did not say to her three year old, 'Today you will be with me in paradise.'

Brother Roger did not teach, 'I am the way, and the truth and the life.'

As C S Lewis encapsulated for more than one generation, Jesus may have been *mad, bad or God*, but the idea that he was an ordinary nice man simply doesn't fit.

What is the Christian God-idea? The millennium sculpture on the portico, showing a human baby present in the chaos of creation, represents the idea in the opening words of John's gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Down the aisle of the church the baby faces the cross in the east window. This God-idea is a cosmic story which goes from the beginning of time through a cross outside Jerusalem. What is this story saying?

The Jewish and Christian story of how sin came into the world is the Garden of Eden. In the garden is a forbidden tree, and whoever eats of it, will have their eyes opened. They will know good and evil and they will die. Adam and Eve eat, and God drives them out of the garden, blocking their return with angels and a flaming sword.

Today we have another garden, Gethsemane, and the path chosen by Jesus in Gethsemane which leads to another tree: the cross.

In telling the Christian story today, in the light of psychology, we have come again and again to a reality. Our lives can only be, and grow, if we enter certain things and pass through them. These things are like doors: for opening, for walking through but not for lingering. We are born needing denial, but we must not linger there. We are born with egos which seek to be gods, but we must not linger there. We are born children of a violent evolution. We discover anger, but must grow through it. We discover guilt, and must grow through that as well.

And we discover sin, which can kill us. Sin like the Red Sea. Like the Israelites we go into it, with only God to trust that we can come out alive. Where we cross there might be a shallow path, but no dry one. We get soaked in sin. We lose our bearings. And large waves are sucking, sucking, our feet and the sand under them.

That's why the rite of becoming a Christian is baptism in water. And though the lyrics never mention it, it's the ferocity of the sea which powers the hymn 'Amazing Grace'. Written by John Newton, a slave-trader who went to sea at the age of 11, he became a Christian and then a priest, after aged 23 steering a waterlogged ship in the face of apparent death.

At the two ends of our crossing of the Red Sea there are two trees, like doors. The tree in the Garden of Eden is the door into sin, and the cross outside Jerusalem is the door into eternal life. They are doors which can only be crossed in one direction.

The doors are open. The journey is meant to be. This is not all there is. There is a destination.

But right now where we are is stuck crossing the Red Sea, in a storm. Shall we send a postcard to a friend, saying 'Wish you were here?' Let us send Marcia Lee Anderson's poem, 'Diagnosis'. She wrote it about mental illness, but so apt are its sentiments, the postmark on it could be simply this: 'outside Eden, after the Fall'.

*We multiply diseases for delight,
Invent a horrid want, a shameful doubt,
Luxuriate in license, feed on night,
Make inward bedlam – and will not come out.
Why should we? Stripped of subtle complications,
Who could regard the sun except with fear?
This is our shelter against contemplation,
Our only refuge from the plain and clear.
Who would crawl out from under the obscure
To stand defenceless in the sunny air?*

*No terror of obliquity so sure
As the most shining terror of despair
To know how simple is our deepest need,
How sharp, and how impossible to feed.*

TALK SIX – JESUS CHRIST: THE DOOR INTO LIFE?

In 1981, twenty-five years ago, during my first period of therapy, a film came out called 'An Officer And A Gentleman'.

It was St Martin's – in fact our unit serving homeless people, where I was a volunteer – which helped me to find therapy, and thereby to find some parts of myself which had gone missing.

In the film the dark-stubbed, motorbike-riding hero played by Richard Gere finds salvation and Debra Winger by passing a thirteen-week course to qualify as a US Navy pilot.

I can remember vividly a conversation with my counsellor about this film. The counsellor asked me who I saw myself as in the movie. I gave him the answer, slightly puzzled that you could get to be a counsellor without being able to spot my close similarities with Gere. That surprises me, he replied, drawing my attention to Gere's buddy and fellow trainee played by David Keith. Keith's character is slightly chubby and dutiful as pie. He commits suicide, having come to believe that both his parents and his girlfriend care more for the status of a naval pilot than for him.

Beginning with the Last Supper, with whom in the account of Good Friday does each of us identify?

Peter, perhaps – a chunky, decent bloke. He has his failings but does end up running the Church. Perhaps the repentant on the cross? Or the watchfulness, faithfulness and practicality of Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Jesus, who saw where the body was laid. But if there is a key to Good Friday it is, whose situation does our own *in fact* most resemble?

That question presses us. But Jesus' end is approaching, and two other questions press harder. How shall we live our own lives - are *we* changed in any way by Jesus' life? And what do we make of *his* life and death?

I have suggested a view of the world in which a cosmic struggle is unfolding. The struggle is between three kingdoms: the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of self and the kingdom of violence. In the story of the universe, the kingdom of heaven will win: and it is the kingdom of love, acceptance, generosity, honesty and astonishing creativity which Jesus described and attempted on this Earth to live. But the story whose outcome is not known is mine, and yours, and the story of the person next to you: to which of these kingdoms will we give our innermost allegiance, the keys of our heart?

The conclusion's not foregone. Remember James Stephens:

*So I shelter love and hate
Like twin brothers in a nest;
Lest I find when it's too late,*

That the other was the best.

We are offered the same three gifts as Jesus was offered by the wise men. Gold, symbol of material power: the kingdom of self. Frankincense, symbol of closeness to God: the kingdom of heaven. Myrrh, symbol of death: the kingdom of violence. I say to you: choose heaven.

And what of Jesus himself? Who was he, or is he, really?

I have a dream in which three women walk ahead of me to the top of a misty hill. As they reach the hilltop the mist lifts. We are brought up short by a timber wall, thick and high, which runs to either horizon. Near us at the foot of the wall, some lilies are growing.

The figures turn. The one on my left wears a gold crown, and she is called Ego. On my right is Violence, who carries on her back a flask of myrrh. The one in the middle holds frankincense. Her name is The Promised One.

Ego says, 'You couldn't have done any of it without me! To make children of God you needed me!'

Violence says, 'And me! All life in the sea, on the land and in the sky depends on violence and death.'

The one in the middle touches the other two on their arms. 'You were both needed,' she says. 'But the time to fulfil the purpose of all things has come. I move on, but only with one of you. And only if that one is willing.'

During the time that Ego is quiet, whole generations rise and fall. At the end of things she takes off the gold crown, puts it by the lilies and says, 'I am willing'.

Violence erupts, her fists shaking. 'How dare you! You will still need me where you are going! Let me build you a hell!'

But the eyes of The Promised One say no, and she moves to stand in front of the timber wall, her arms raised as if blessing the world. By her side Ego does the same, and someone says, 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Although the voice is low and choked, you can tell it is Ego, because it says 'Remember *me* when you come into your kingdom.'

Violence stands in front of them, in turn. The lilies turn out to be as hard as nails, because not everything in life is as it seems. She takes them and, using the crown for a hammer, she pounds the limbs of the other two into the wood. And as she pounds, the wood begins to change, turning into a door.

Let's return to Jerusalem. The character in the crucifixion whose situation mine most resembles is, I suspect, the unrepentant criminal. At least part of me identifies with him. He challenges Jesus, angrily, logically: if you can save anybody – and you say you want to save everybody – save yourself and us! It really is the last straw, to be crucified next to a religious nutter and an incorrigible sycophant – *we indeed have been condemned justly!* Speak for yourself! What's just about any stinking part of it?

Does Jesus swing his head to look at his angry challenger? He does, because time after time in his life he chose to go to the difficult place – and you swing your head because of the flies.

And the look he gets back? Anger, yes. Perhaps denial? Perhaps guilt? Perhaps -
Perhaps –

Perhaps that look is for each of us to decide. In Luke's gospel, the cock crows and Jesus looks wordlessly at Peter. A look can be enough.

All those words: all those religious formulae that get in the way: it's not God who needs them.