

GOOD FRIDAY 2024 **DESPAIR AND HOPE** dtw TG

The Nicene Creed reminds us it was: “*for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.*”

National Geographic have produced *The Story of Jesus* in their trademark yellow magazine cover. This special issue traces the gospel accounts with historical, archaeological, and geographical details and some stunning illustrative paintings created over the centuries. Two paintings are particularly arresting: *The Flagellation of our Lord Jesus Christ* – painted in 1880 by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, and the other *Christ on the Cross*, painted in 1632 by Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velazquez. In both cases the artists had carefully researched how the Romans punished and crucified people. The deliberate and intense suffering, stigma, disgrace and degradation is hard to look at, let alone comprehend.

The extraordinary claim of Christianity is that Jesus allowed himself to be in this situation and did so for the sake of all people. As St. Paul puts it: ‘For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.’ (Rom 5.6-8)

In his *Letters from Prison*, published after his execution which took place just three weeks before the Second World War ended, the martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote on the theme of suffering: *It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human command than to suffer in the freedom of an act undertaken purely on one’s own responsibility. It is infinitely easier to suffer in community than to suffer in loneliness. It is infinitely easier to suffer openly and in honour than to suffer apart and in shame. It is infinitely easier to suffer by risking one’s physical life than to suffer in spirit. Christ suffered in freedom, in loneliness, apart and in shame, in body and spirit, and many Christians have since suffered with him.*

On the cross, we hear from the lips of Jesus some of the most enigmatic and heart-rending words in all the sorrowful history of humankind, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” His words are not unique – they quote Psalm 22 which is said or sung in full as the Sanctuaries and altars of our churches were stripped last night. And it is said again today. It was a cry of such agony of spirit that even hardened bystanders were moved. One of them ran and got a sponge filled with vinegar for him – there was something different about the unusual tragedy of this man, Jesus. What did these words mean for him right there and then? We can never hope to plumb the whole depth of that enigma. We do know that the final words of that psalm end in triumph and exultation. They therefore reflect the full tension between despair and hope that hangs there on that wooden scaffold and hangs upon the life of each of us as we acknowledge our own demons as well as our graces.

The Christian faith is not arrived at from a stance of airy optimism. Christ is the hope of the world because he has known the depth of the world’s despair, despair as in Gaza, despair as in Ukraine, despair in so many places around our world. Neither is the Christian faith a facile, empty set of clichés, born out of a desire to shield us from the reality of what it really means to live and die as a human being. The message of the cross is of no hope whatever if it has not come to us out of some personal knowledge of despair and hopelessness. But understand the tension: when you and I are at the end of our rope, when the sordidness of life gets to us, and it does from time to time, when we see the innocent suffering of others, when we feel depression, we see people being abused and trodden upon – God is at the other end. Even

at his moment in extremis on the cross, Jesus cried, "My God, My God...even here Jesus is faithful to the uttermost. God is still God. God is still to be trusted. God is still to be called upon and still to be proclaimed, "My God!"

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Philosopher, described as the father of existentialism, wrote these words in 1855: *What pleases God even more than the praises of the angels is the one, who in the last lap of his life, when God is transformed as though into sheer cruelty, and with the cruellest imaginable cruelty does everything to deprive him of all joy in life, the one who continues to believe that God is love and that it is from love that God does this. Such a one becomes an angel; and in heaven can surely praise God. But the apprentice time, the school time, is also the strictest time. Like the one who thought of journeying through the whole world to hear a singer who has a perfect voice, so God sits in heaven and listens. And every time God hears praise from one who is brought to the uttermost point of disgust with life, God says, "This is the right note"; God says, "Here it is", as though making a discovery.*

At this time in Lent and Holy Week in 2016, I was doing a short Locum at Gisborne-Macedon in Victoria. At the top of Mount Macedon there is a huge memorial cross. I gazed on that mount every day from the vicarage window, and I wrote a piece that I named: ***Mount Macedon Passion***

*You have withdrawn from my sight;
I feel abandoned by you.
Where are you when I need you?
Your silence is deafening.*

*I want to believe you are there
in this my hour of peril.
Why would you desert me
when you are my only hope?*

*A thick cloud has descended;
I long for your deliverance.
I thirst for your righteousness;
I cry out in the darkness.*

*But still I am trusting in you;
But still I await your presence;
But still may your will be mine;
I commit my spirit into your hands.*

May we come ever so closely to Jesus this day, placing our own lives, our weaknesses, and graces, along with the despair and hopes of our troubled world, at the foot of the cross. Richard of Chichester's partly familiar and moving twelfth century prayer was written as his response to Jesus' torture, shame and execution: Let us pray...

Thanks be to thee, Lord Christ Jesus, for all the benefits which thou hast won for us, for all the pains and insults which thou hast borne for us. O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may we know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, (day by day) Amen