

EASTER TRIDUUM 2022  
*REFLECTIONS*



FR MATT BLAKE OCD

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## *C O N T E N T S*

HOLY THURSDAY GETHSEMANE	1
GOOD FRIDAY THE WISDOM OF THE CROSS	6
HOLY SATURDAY THE PLACE IN BETWEEN	10

## *Holy Thursday Reflection - Gethsemane*

Fr Matt Blake, OCD

14<sup>th</sup> April 2022, at the Carmelite Church, Kensington

I would like to begin with a little passage from Luke's gospel that we heard on Sunday – Luke's account of the Passion, when Jesus and his disciples go to the Garden of Gethsemane – that interlude of prayer, we might say, in the midst of this great story.

*He then left the upper room to make his way as usual to the Mount of Olives, with the disciples following. When they reached the place, he said to them: "Pray not to be put to the test." Then he withdrew from them, about a stone's throw away, and knelt down and prayed, saying: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine." Then an angel appeared to him, coming from heaven, to give him strength. In his anguish he prayed even more earnestly and his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood. When he rose from prayer he went to his disciples and found them sleeping for sheer grief. He said to them: "Why are you asleep? Get up and pray not to be put to the test."*

Obviously the whole story of the passion of Jesus Christ is a prayer. But this part in particular is putting the whole story into prayer – Jesus' relationship with his Father – and at the heart of it is doing the Father's will: *Your will be done*. The whole purpose of the presence of Jesus in this world, the whole purpose of his life, death and resurrection is that the will of God be done.

Let's put it in the context of the whole story. What's happening here? Jesus has been in the upper room at an intimate gathering with his disciples; has celebrated the Last Supper. To use our terminology, he has instituted the Eucharist and the priesthood: *Do this in memory of me*. So they have had this very special and intimate time with Jesus. Now there is going to be separation. The disciples and Jesus are going to be separated until after the resurrection when they will again meet in a room. So there's going to be a time of separation and the separation is very firmly put here in the context of prayer by Luke. This is something we see so often when mystics, spiritual writers, saints, speak about prayer, profound experiences of prayer – often these are experienced in terms of separation, distance, absence of God. We would expect the opposite, of course, but prayer does not work according to the rationale or logic of this world. Often the most profound prayer experiences are in terms of absence or distance. Here, Jesus, we're told, very deliberately goes a stone's throw away and that's an interesting term. To be within a stone's throw is usually used in terms of being accessible, near at hand. Of course, God, Jesus, is always near, always near at hand; he is never at a distance, he's never absent from our lives even, and perhaps especially, when we think he is. When we think he's absent, when we think he's at a distance from us, of course he never is, he is closer than ever, he's always within a stone's throw, he's always near, accessible, listening, supporting us, giving us strength. It is we who do not see this or lose sight of it or are going through whatever it is that gives us this sense that he is absent.

So this separation that's taking place here: if we are to read the story of the passion of Jesus in terms of prayer and the spiritual life, this is preparation to enter into the most powerful and the most intimate part of the whole story. The disciples are separated from Jesus, or at least sense that they are, feel that they are, in human terms seem to be separated from Jesus when Jesus will carry out his greatest work, when God and humanity are closest upon the Cross, when God is saving humanity.

St John of the Cross, when reflecting on this puts it very starkly: *Upon the cross Jesus cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* And yet that is the deepest moment of prayer in the life of Jesus, the deepest moment of prayer in the whole prayer of humanity, relationship between God and humanity. This is the moment, John of the Cross tells us, when God is reconciling all of humanity with him, reconciling the whole human story with him. It is the moment of most intense prayer, and yet the human being – Jesus Christ in the midst of this – feels that God has abandoned him. So we have here before us one of the most profound and powerful mysteries of the spiritual life. The disciples of Jesus are now going to live through a period of separation from Jesus, but they are living through God's greatest act of love for all humanity, including, and of course especially, the disciples. The separation then is prayer and it is an act of love.

Twice in the story Jesus says to his disciples: *Pray not to be put to the test.* Here of course Jesus himself is put to the test, or we could say love is put to the test, or his fidelity to the will of the Father is put to the test. So it is Jesus who is put to the test. *Pray not to be put to the test*, even though Jesus knows, of course, that they will be tested. Prayer is always tested, love can only grow when it is tested, being tested is part of the whole process of growing and maturing. It is right that they be tested, so perhaps we could see that what he is really praying for is that the strength will be given to them to live through the test. The next day will be very testing for them; the death and resurrection of Jesus will be very testing. What they will be living as they lead the Church and proclaim the gospel will test them in every way, but the grace of God, the strength that only God can give will get them through it – not only get them through it, but with that grace of God all this testing will be seen to be God's work, the fulfilment of God's plan in them.

So what about Jesus then and his prayer here? I would just like to read one other little passage. This we will hear tomorrow afternoon when we come here at 3 o'clock for our celebration of the Lord's Passion, in the Second Reading that we have from the *Letter to the Hebrews*. There's an extraordinary line in that – the author doesn't actually tell us that he's commenting upon what happened at the Mount of Olives or the Garden of Gethsemane, but almost certainly he is. Here's what the author tells us:

*During his life on earth he – that's Jesus – offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears to the one who had the power to save him out of death and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard.*

*He submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard.* But was his prayer heard? How do we understand that? We might be tempted to say of course it wasn't, because he died on the Cross the next day, so his prayer wasn't heard; but of course it was heard. And there are two ways in which it was heard; we could say that he rose from the

dead; that's one way, but much more importantly and the way we are told it here by Luke is that this angel comes from heaven to give him strength. God doesn't remove death; God doesn't give Jesus a way out – an escape; rather he gives him the strength to live this, to go through it, to walk this road, to fulfil the Father's will, and that is the answer to the prayer.

So often in our lives we think God is not answering our prayers because he's not giving us an escape from something, or magically removing something or doing things that we think should be done. The key to understanding how God heard the prayer of Jesus here is seen in those words of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: *He submitted so humbly*. Humility – always the sign of somebody in a right relationship with God. Only when we come humbly before God, only when we submit in humility is our prayer answered; because then there is no selfishness in our prayer, there is nothing that is centred upon ourselves, it is total openness to the will of God – *what your will is, Father, not mine*. Those are the words of Jesus; they are the words we pray in the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, that prayer that Jesus gave us a little bit earlier in the gospel: *that your will be done, Father, on earth as it is in heaven*. St Teresa wonderfully reminds us that whoever only wants the will of God, who want nothing for themselves, is in heaven. Life in this world, she tells us, is heaven when we only want God's will, when we live only for his will. When that is our only desire, ambition and goal, then we are living heaven; we have heaven on earth, because heaven is wherever the will of God and the will of the human being are one. When there is union of the will, when the two become one, then there is nothing separating the person from God, then there is no inner turmoil or conflict, there is peace of heart and soul, peace in the depths of the person. That is heaven: being one with God.

So Jesus' prayer is answered here. He has the strength to do the will of the Father; he has the strength to give himself completely. His prayer is answered, the angel comes, the angel – we're not told what the angel says or what the angel does or what Jesus understood – but we see that Jesus now has the strength and the resolve to go from the garden, to go to his destiny, to fulfil God's will. So what we have got here in this little text is the whole story of the Passion – indeed we could say the whole story of the life of Jesus – shown to us, given to us, in spiritual terms. It is the moment, we could say, when Jesus' spiritual maturity is shown to us. Jesus is seen here in the fullness of human spiritual maturity, because Jesus has to grow in mind, body and spirit; he has to grow in every way that a human being does, because he is human like us, in every way that we are. We can say that in this text we see Jesus in the fullness of his spiritual maturity, the fullness of human, spiritual growth and it is that that enables him to do what is not humanly possible or to go on beyond what is humanly possible and to express what John's gospel says: *no greater love than to lay down his life*. The person with the greatest spiritual maturity has the greatest capacity to love, the greatest capacity to give of themselves.

So, to come back to the disciples then, what about them? They have the great privilege of being present for this. They are there. They go to sleep. How might we interpret going to sleep? We could interpret this in various ways; people often interpret this as the failure of the disciples – they couldn't even stay awake. That's not what it seems in Luke's gospel; we're told: *he found them asleep for sheer grief*. They are grieving; they know they are being separated from Jesus. They are grieving

– grief is love, grief is a sign of love. We could interpret that they are asleep out of love. The strain of grief, painful grief – they can take no more, they are physically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually exhausted. This is simply too much for them, humanly speaking. They need the angel; they need the strength that the angel can give; they need what Jesus receives here.

But we can also see it as part of their journey. They haven't yet reached the spiritual maturity that Jesus has reached, but as disciples, they are following him. We are told at the beginning of this passage that I read that *the disciples followed*. Jesus, we're told – *as he usually did* – made his way to the Mount of Olives. So this was a regular occurrence for Jesus and his disciples when they were in Jerusalem to go to this place to pray, they regularly did this. The disciples are following Jesus, not just physically, walking this walk from where they had the last supper to the Mount of Olives; they are not just walking there, they are also following him spiritually. They might be a little bit further back along the road, but they are following him; this is also part of the spiritual growth of the disciples.

We all fall asleep in prayer. I think that's common human experience. As St Thérèse beautifully puts it: *sleeping in the arms of Jesus*. We find ourselves doing this regularly, and there can be all kinds of reasons for it and those reasons can often be very positive ones. Sleeping in the presence of God, the sheer power of the Spirit can put a person to sleep; the sheer presence of God can put a person to sleep. Many times throughout the Bible God comes to a person when they are sleeping; God speaks to a person when they are sleeping. It can have a powerful symbolic meaning also, that we have to be asleep so that God can really communicate with us. So there can be all sorts of things happening in these disciples spiritually. They undoubtedly would look back on it years later as part of their journey, a key moment in their spiritual growth and maturing.

There's something else we could perhaps think about today as we reflect on this scene on the Mount of Olives. In other gospels it's called the Garden of Gethsemane, but Luke doesn't use that term. But what is there now? If we were to go to Jerusalem today to that place we would find there the Church of All the Nations. I actually don't know the history of that church or how it came to be there; I think it was built in the 1930s. It is a beautiful church and considered to be one of the most beautiful ones in the Holy Land, but who decided to call it the Church of All the Nations? I don't know, but it is significant. All the nations of the world. I just like to think that rather than just the disciples – they are asleep in the garden – all the nations of the world are there asleep in the garden as Jesus prays; all the nations of the world are present at this most intimate meeting between Jesus and his Father, that the grace of that meeting, the grace of that moment may touch all the nations of our world. May that be our prayer today. This was a moment of profound grace in the life of Jesus, it was a moment of profound grace in the life of those sleeping disciples there, who are there to pray and Jesus tells them to continue to pray. So it is a moment of profound grace in these disciples, however they might have felt; however it might have been experienced by them at the time. But let our prayer today be that it may be a profound grace for all the nations of our world. Let us hold the whole of our world in our hearts and in our prayer today as we also spend some time in this garden, and if we are asleep, so be it; let us pray that we not be put to the test but that the grace of that meeting, of that occasion, may touch us, touch our lives, but let us also pray that

it may also touch our world today. Our world needs the grace of that meeting more than ever. Because people visit there from every nation in the world, all the nations of the world are architecturally and indeed humanly present in that garden. May they also be spiritually present; may the angel that touched Jesus there touch all our world today, give strength to our world, give light to our world. We need more than ever the grace of this meeting.

So the disciples of Jesus, even when they were sleeping, were that day in the presence of God. They were witnesses, privileged participants in that intimate dialogue between Jesus and his Father. They were privileged witnesses to God's grace made manifest in our world. We pray for that same grace today, the manifestation of that same grace and may that saving grace save our world. Amen.

*Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/Un1AX9dhcds>*

## *Good Friday Reflection – The Wisdom of the Cross*

Fr Matt Blake, OCD

15<sup>th</sup> April 2022, at the Carmelite Church, Kensington

I would like to begin with a passage from St Paul, from his first letter to the Corinthians [1 Cor 1:17-25].

*For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the good news, and not to preach that in terms of philosophy, in which the crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed. The language of the cross may be illogical to those who are not on the way to salvation, but those of us who are on the way see it as God's power to save. As scripture says: "I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing all the learning of the learned." Where are the philosophers now? Where are the scribes? Where are any of our thinkers today? Do you see now how God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom? If it was God's wisdom that human wisdom should not know God, it was because God wanted to save those who have faith through the foolishness of the message that we preach. And so, while the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom, here are we preaching a crucified Christ, to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans, madness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

There's Paul writing to the Christians of Corinth, Christians that he went and preached to in the very early years of Christianity. It's an insight for us into how the Christian message was first preached. Paul was in Corinth long before the gospels were written – this was in the early days of Christianity. Paul went to Corinth to tell the Greeks about Jesus and he tells us that what he taught them was the Cross – Jesus crucified. Perhaps nowadays if we met somebody who knew absolutely nothing about Jesus we probably wouldn't start with the Cross. We might tell them something about Jesus first, but for Paul, no: Jesus *was* the Cross, Jesus crucified – that for Paul, as he tells us, was the power and the wisdom of God.

Where might Paul be coming from with this? Remember Paul's story a little bit, Paul was well trained in the scriptures, in the Jewish religion. Paul was living a mature spiritual life before he became Christian. However, becoming Christian made Paul aware of heights and depths of the spiritual life that he never knew existed. So foremost in Paul's mind is, what's the difference with Jesus? There is something different here, something unlike spiritual experience as we've known it up until now, and for Paul it is the Cross, that's what is different, that's what makes Jesus different, and he is spelling out the difference here, he's comparing it with the experience of the Jews and the Greeks. The Jews, he said, are looking for signs, the Jews are used to a God who did great things, led them out of Egypt, did spectacular things, a God who won battles for them, a God who showed his power and strength. The Greeks, he said, want wisdom. The Greeks loved learning, speaking eloquently, great speeches, logic, reasoning, philosophy – that's what the Greeks wanted. And here, he said, we're preaching a crucified Christ. It is not like the power that the Jews wanted, no, it's weakness. The Cross will be seen as weakness; this cannot be God; this is



weakness. And of course it makes no sense whatsoever – it is not wise, it is not wisdom, it has no eloquence. So Paul said he has come preaching a very simple message of Jesus crucified, but this very foolishness and this very weakness, what human beings call foolishness and weakness, is the very power and wisdom of God. In other words, God is not like us – that message the Cross proclaims very loudly – he is not like us; we cannot understand him on our terms. We have got to listen in a whole new way, understand in a whole new way and key to that is the Cross, key to that is the suffering of Jesus Christ.

Yesterday when I reflected a little bit on the experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. We saw there Jesus coming to the fullness of spiritual maturity, the fullness of love, of maturity that a human being can reach, that is what enabled him to live the experience of the Cross, that enabled him to go to the Cross in freedom, to go to the Cross, aware of who he is. As we will see this afternoon when we hear the account from John's gospel, Jesus is totally in control of everything, he is master of the whole situation. He's going to the Cross in freedom, in strength; he is in charge and it is this level of human maturity that gives him that. The question that then arises for us is the relationship between all of this and suffering. Where does suffering fit into this? How do we understand suffering in the light of the Cross? Or we could put it another way – how does the Cross change our understanding of this fact, the inescapable fact of human suffering? It has changed it completely: what is destructive, what destroys human life, what destroys all the goodness of a human being – pain and suffering – has been transformed by the Cross of Christ. People like St Paul can see now a wisdom in this that they could not see before. Most human suffering is destructive, it is not life-giving, it does not set a person free, it turns the person in on themselves, it diminishes the person. But the Cross reveals another face of suffering – the key to it – and someone who knew this was St Edith Stein. Reflecting on this she wrote: *It is only those who live by the grace of God* that can see suffering in this new way, those who are living totally by God's grace, not living by their own strength or their own understanding or their own concern or self-centredness. Only those who have outgrown their self-centredness can now see and understand and live this new way of seeing suffering, way of understanding it that the Cross gives us. Something that is destructive has become something that is life-giving; something that diminishes the human being is now bringing out the true greatness of the human being. That's a paradox beyond human understanding, but it can be seen and understood in the wisdom of the Cross.

I want to read a line from St John of the Cross that perhaps helps us to see this. John tells us: *The purest suffering brings with it the purest and most intimate knowing and consequently the purest and highest joy, because it is a knowing from further within.* What a powerful statement, and I just want to unpack it a little bit. First of all: *a knowing from further within.* In other words it's not a knowing from what's gone on out there; it is not a knowing from history, or from other people, or from what we should know; it's a knowing that comes from within, from the heart, from one's most deep and most intimate experience. It's a knowing from the deepest place within, which is the place where God is – that's where the person is living from, living from the deepest place within. In other words, living a life of truth, authenticity, a life of real maturity. So he speaks about the purest suffering, that is suffering that has no self-pity, self-centredness, that is free of all anger and resentment and so much else that diminishes a human being. The pure suffering John is speaking about here is

pure love, pure passion, coming from a pure heart, coming from a person who has grown and matured in human freedom and selflessness. This person's suffering has a purity; it's suffering like the suffering of Jesus on the Cross, who can just freely say *forgive them, Lord*; can freely reach out to his mother and the disciple that he loves, that can go to his death with no concern for himself, but with a real and open and sincere concern for all those around him. So this pure suffering brings with it, he said, the purest and most intimate knowing. That's the wisdom that St Paul is speaking about, that is the pure wisdom of God, that is God's way of thinking and seeing things that human beings get a little glimpse of, get a little taste of when the heart and the mind have been set free. So this purest and most intimate knowing – that's the wisdom, that's the wisdom that enables a person to look at the Cross and say *this is God*, to look at the Cross and say *this is truth*, to look at the Cross and say *this is salvation, this is life*. Only something deep within the human being, only a pure knowledge can enable a person to do that. It's that kind of knowing that brings all the people to church today, Good Friday; it's that kind of knowing that enables the Cross to become the symbol of life and victory and everything else that it stands for. So, the purest and most intimate knowing – and consequently, John tells us, *the purest and highest joy*.

There's something very striking about the discourse in John's gospel that Jesus gives at the Last Supper. There are three chapters, if I remember correctly; with a long speech that Jesus gave at the Last Supper to his disciples. The night before he died – he knows he's going to die – his disciples are there and they know there is suffering and death ahead and there is something terrible ahead, they don't know exactly what. But what's striking about that speech is the amount of times that Jesus speaks about joy – joy and peace – the complete opposite to what is being experienced and lived. *To make your joy complete*, he said to his disciples. There are a whole number of other references to joy there, how important joy is in the midst of suffering. Pure Christian suffering and pure Christian joy are the one reality, the one experience. We find this in so many of the mystics: pure joy and pure suffering going together, inseparable. Again something that makes no sense; they are the opposites in human wisdom; but in spiritual wisdom, in the wisdom of God, they are the one reality. So we can go as far as to say that the Cross is the greatest expression of human joy. That's the logic of what John of the Cross is speaking about there, that is the fulfilment of what Jesus speaks about in John's gospel – *this is to fulfil our joy* – that's what he's doing. It's the greatest expression of human love, joy, wisdom, freedom, and so much else, that's what the Cross is. So, it's the purest and the highest joy, and all of that, as we see in the thinking of St John of the Cross, the person can only know from within, from experience. Only the person who is living this, only the person who knows it from experience will understand it. We cannot reason this, we cannot explain this to somebody, we cannot rationally persuade somebody what the Cross is, what it means, what Jesus crucified means.

Paul tells us in the Corinthians he couldn't do that; he couldn't rationally do it, so he said there was no point in using philosophy or beautiful speeches. When he went to Corinth, he went there with weakness, he went there humbly, he went there to share something that makes no sense humanly speaking, but the message he went to Corinth with was extremely successful. His two letters to the Corinthians bear witness to this: the wisdom of these letters, the success of Paul's mission in Corinth, the great church that was built up there, and in all the other places where Paul founded and built up

churches. Paul is an eye-witness, and the first eye-witness that we have. to the power and the wisdom of God on the Cross. He saw with his own eyes and experienced that when he went and preached a crucified Christ, people's lives were dramatically changed in a way that nothing had ever changed human life in the whole history of human life. The power of the Cross, the wisdom of the Cross, has a unique capacity to change human beings, to change human lives and change how we see ourselves and know ourselves, in a way that nothing else ever has, or ever will have, in the history of our world. That's what Paul knew – knew, in the words of St John of the Cross, *from within*, from his own personal experience and the personal experience that he saw all around him.

Today then, Good Friday, we come face to face with Jesus upon the Cross, we come face to face with the sheer power of God. A power to change us, a power to transform our lives, a power that gives us the capacity to live human life, to live the wonderful gift of life that He has given us in a way that nothing else has enabled us to do. When we come face to face with the Cross, we come face to face with a knowledge, a wisdom, a light – something that nothing else can teach us, no amount of books or study or experience or anything else in this world can teach us. There's a lesson to be learned from the Cross that nothing else can teach us. When that power of God comes into our lives and that wisdom guides and enlightens our lives, we see everything in a new way. And in particular, what's transformed for us is suffering. Suffering doesn't make us holy, suffering doesn't bring us closer to God – the whole history of the misunderstanding of human suffering and the misuse of it proves that to us. But when somebody is living by the grace of God, when somebody has grown in true spiritual maturity, then suffering becomes a way and a means that draws them closer to God, suffering becomes a way and a means among many other ways and means that can bring a person closer to this precious wisdom. Suffering is transformed and of course ultimately what the Cross does – it transforms death. It is no longer an end, but now an opening, a door into new life, the fullness of life. Life has changed, not ended, as we say in the Preface of the funeral mass, but that's for a little later.

Let us pray for our world, for the whole human race, that this Good Friday may be a real meeting with the power and the wisdom of God, a manifestation, a making known of the power and the wisdom of God that only the Cross can make known.

*Transcribed from the recorded talk:* <https://youtu.be/pkrVm9x5Niw>

## *Holy Saturday Reflection – The Space in Between*

Fr Matt Blake, OCD

16<sup>th</sup> April 2022, at the Carmelite Church, Kensington

We speak, in the phrase that we're so used to hearing and saying, of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, it all being part of the one mystery that we celebrate over these days. But we can be in danger of omitting something between the death and the resurrection – that's where we are today – we're in that *space in between*. To get a sense of its importance I would like to read the account we read last Sunday in Luke's gospel and what he tells us about this time in between death and resurrection. It begins with *Jesus breathed his last*.

*When the centurion saw what had taken place he gave praise to God and said "this was a great and good man," and when all the people who had gathered for the spectacle saw what had happened, they went home beating their breasts. All his friends stood at a distance so also did the women who had accompanied him from Galilee and they saw all this happen. Then a member of the council arrived, an upright and virtuous man named Joseph. He had not consented to what the others had planned and carried out. He came from Arimathea, a Jewish town, and he lived in the hope of seeing the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. He then took him down, wrapped him in a shroud and put him in a tomb, which was hewn in stone, in which no one had yet been laid. It was preparation day and the Sabbath was imminent. Meanwhile, the women who had come from Galilee with Jesus were following behind. They took note of the tomb and of the position of the body, then they returned and prepared spices and ointments, and on the Sabbath day they rested, as the law required.*

What a rich text that is, telling us so much. We meet the experiences of so many different people here. The first person we meet is the centurion, a Roman soldier. A centurion, as the name itself implies, was in charge of a hundred soldiers, so he was most certainly the one who was the commanding officer of the soldiers who crucified Jesus. We find him praying, praising God. That's extraordinary – he's praising God and praying, like a faithful Jew and the words he says: *this was a great and a good man*. Note this differs from the account in Mark's gospel in which he says he was the Son of God. For Luke, no, he's at prayer; the centurion is at prayer and he's bearing witness to the innocence of Jesus. The innocence of Jesus is very important in Luke's story; at various times throughout Luke's passion narrative we're told Jesus is innocent. To use a modern term, for Luke the death of Jesus is a miscarriage of justice. Luke's gospel is sometimes described as the gospel of justice. Justice is a very important theme for Luke and the death of Jesus is a miscarriage of justice and the highest authority possible is proclaiming that here – the centurion, the commander of the Roman soldiers. Jesus is innocent.

Then we have the group of people gathered for the spectacle and we have already heard just before the death of Jesus that they were jeering him. Now we're told they went home beating their breasts – the gesture of repentance – they are repentant. We heard that phrase earlier on in Luke's Gospel in the story of the Pharisee and the publican when the publican at the temple was the one who beat his breast, we're told,

and went home, *at rights with God*. So these people who a little earlier were jeering Jesus go home, *at rights with God*. The power of the Cross of Jesus. Remember what I spoke about yesterday from St Paul: that the Cross is the power of God – the power to change lives, to change the life of the centurion, to change the lives of these people who had gathered there to watch this spectacle, as was a common occurrence when somebody was being executed. So, they gathered there. Their lives were changed. The power of the Cross.

Then we have a group, we're told – his friends. No doubt it includes the disciples and probably a far greater group of people who would have been disciples of Jesus, believers, people who would have followed him throughout his ministry. We're told *they stood at a distance* – standing was the Jewish posture of prayer – but they are praying at a distance. Remember on Thursday morning when I was speaking about the garden on the Mount of Olives, and it was Jesus who had created the distance; Jesus had gone a stone's throw away from them. That doesn't matter, from a prayer perspective we might think we are at a distance from God, but God can do great things. Sometimes the most profound spiritual experiences happen, or we become aware of them when we feel furthest away from God, or God is absent. So the distance is not a sign of being far away from him. God is doing great things; these people are still at prayer; they were at prayer at Gethsemane even though they were asleep; they are at prayer now even though they may be standing back a little bit; they are there. Sometimes in prayer the most we can do is just be there; but being there is enough for God. Just be there, just persevere, however difficult it may be, however empty it might seem to us, just be there. These people are just there, they are there in this great atmosphere of prayer.

Then we have another group, the women. These are disciples of Jesus; they have travelled with him from Galilee. We have heard about them a few other times in Luke's gospel although we hear much more about the group of men. But there was this group of women – we are given some of their names elsewhere, Mary, Salome and others. They are with him, they accompany him and they see everything that has happened. They bear witness to everything that has happened. Then we meet Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, the council of the Jews, the council that condemned Jesus. We are told he didn't agree with the others, he didn't consent, he didn't agree to condemn Jesus. He's a faithful Jew looking forward in hope to the kingdom of God. He does all that is needed: the burial ritual, the respect and dignity, the worship of Jesus. Then the women are there again, following behind, which of course is what disciples always do – follow Jesus – they're still following Jesus, from the Cross to the tomb. Again, we're told they witness everything and then they go and prepare the spices and ointments and they rest on the Sabbath, as the law requires.

Listening to this, we can't help but be struck by how similar this is to how Luke begins his gospel. Luke begins his gospel by going right into the depths of Judaism, of pious Judaism. We begin in the temple with Zachariah and Elisabeth. We are in the temple a little later with Simeon and Anna; we have Joseph and Mary fulfilling all that the law requires. The conception and birth of Jesus all take place in an atmosphere of Jewish piety, surrounded by faithful, spiritual Jews. So we have here the burial of Jesus in the whole atmosphere of Jewish piety: the rituals are fulfilled exactly; the Sabbath is observed; everything that the law requires is observed. Jesus enters this world and leaves this world as a faithful Jew in the depths of Jewish piety.

The women, this group of women, are particularly important here and they are fulfilling two functions: they are witnesses and they will be witnesses again, if we read on a little bit further, to the resurrection. They are witnessing every detail, the whole story; and they are fulfilling the details of the law. Everything is being done as it should be done.

This whole atmosphere of prayer, of closeness to God, of the power of God and God's presence are what these people bear witness to. They are witnesses to us of this, the power of the Cross of Jesus, the death of Jesus. Everything is done as it is meant to be done, it is as if we have entered a temple, it is as if we have entered a sacred, holy place. In our funeral ritual, at the graveside when we are blessing the grave, the words the ritual tells us are that Jesus hallowed the grave; Jesus made sacred, made holy, the grave – all graves – whether they be burials of great dignity and respect or the mass graves that we have in times of war as we are hearing about in Ukraine. In whatever other context a person's body or ashes are buried, wherever a person's final resting place may be, it is a sacred place, it is a temple, it is a place where God is. The final resting place of a human being is sacred because Jesus has made it sacred; Jesus has made sacred our destiny.

That, we might say, is the story as we see it, as we observe it, but what about Jesus himself? What can we know about him and his experience of death? We're not told it here. We're told about the external circumstances: he dies a criminal's death, the death a convict would die. We know about the nails and the crowning of thorns, the spear – we know all the external details – but can we know anything about the deeper, spiritual reality that Jesus is living through? We got a glimpse of it when we looked at the garden and his prayer there and his putting himself completely into the will of God – his spiritual death, as I mentioned at the time.

I would like to draw a little reflection from St John of the Cross, which might help us to enter a little bit into what the experience of Jesus would have been. And John is speaking about the death of people who live spiritual maturity, the fullness of Christian spirituality, people who have grown to that maturity that I spoke about that Jesus had in the garden, that kind of spiritual maturity. He said the death of these people is so completely different: *The death of persons who have reached this state is far different in its cause and mode from the death of others, even though it is similar in natural circumstances.* So it's similar in that the person may die of an illness or an accident. As Jesus dies the death of a convict, it would appear no different from the death of the others on crosses around him, but the inner reality is something completely different. *Their soul is not wrested from them unless by some impetus and encounter with love, far more sublime than previous ones; of greater power, and more valiant, since it tears through this veil and carries off the jewel, which is the soul.* In Luke's gospel there is the tearing of the veil just before death. *The death of such persons is very gentle and very sweet, sweeter and more gentle than was their whole spiritual life on earth. For they died with the most sublime impulses and delightful encounters of love.* [Living Flame of Love. Stanza 1:30]

So it's an act of the most sublime love, therefore there is a gentleness to this death. The death of Jesus at an external level will have seemed something cruel and painful, but at a deeper level it is something so gentle, so beautiful, because it is an act of the most sublime love, a manifestation of the greatest love of all. If that, as John of the

Cross tells us and testifies to, is the case for so many people, it must be more so for Jesus than for anybody else, because his spiritual life, his human spiritual life has reached the greatest depths possible for a human being. So the death of Jesus at a spiritual level shows us the most sublime manifestation of Christian spirituality, what it means to live the fullness of this life as Jesus did.

And then, what happens then? In the Apostles Creed we are told he descends into hell. That's an extraordinary statement when we think about it, but we heard it in Fr Thaddeus' reading at the Office of Readings today. Hell is the place of the condemned, the damned, the ones who are furthest away from God – the ones who have rejected God. It is the place of the devil, and evil. That's where he goes, he goes to those who are furthest away, who are in greatest need. Just like the centurion and that crowd that were jeering him at his death, now it is all the dead, all those who have been lost. He goes to the ones furthest away. He enters completely into death, whatever death may be. We have no idea and no way of knowing what's beyond death, nobody has ever come back to tell us; but whatever it is, wherever a human may be, Jesus has gone there, has experienced it, has lived it and has brought life there, has transformed it. So that journey into death, into the tomb, into the experience and reality of all who have died, that is the journey Jesus is on.

To go back for a moment to Luke's gospel and the story of the Transfiguration. Luke – uniquely to Luke – has Moses and Elijah speaking to Jesus about the exodus that will happen in Jerusalem, Jesus' exodus. That's what the Passover is, that's the feast that is being celebrated – the exodus, the journey that Jesus is on. Death is now the Red Sea; death is now the desert; it's the journey through death; it's the journey through suffering. Suffering and death have now have been crossed, like the Red Sea was crossed, like the Jordan was crossed, like the desert was crossed: the journey from slavery to freedom, the journey from life to death to life. This is the great exodus of Jesus, the great act of liberating everybody from every kind of slavery and in particular from the slavery of death, however that may be, whatever form that may take. Jesus has truly died; Jesus has truly gone into the world of the dead; he has taken on death in all its dimensions; there's no dimension of death that is excluded or outside of the experience of Jesus, therefore there is no dimension of death that is not totally conquered or redeemed; there is no dimension of death that we're not totally liberated from. That is what we reflect upon today, the great mystery. Today is the day we are brought into the depths, the deepest layers, the deepest places, the most inaccessible dimensions of this great story.

Today, as we have already heard in our prayers, is the day of silence, the day of mystery, the day God is working, but secretly, in the depths, in the places that we have no access to, whether that's the world of the dead or places within ourselves that are in need of healing and transformation. Today God is doing a great work in silence, hidden in mystery, and that is true in our own spiritual lives as it is in the great work that God is doing.

So Luke, in concluding the story, takes us into the depths of prayer. It is only there that we can encounter and make some little sense of what is taking place. So may today be a day of prayer, a day of silence, a day in which the grace of God does great and unexpected and incomprehensible things in each of our lives.

*Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/6e-VCHEOTtI>*