

A REFLECTION FOR HOLY WEEK

Jesus' Crown of Thorns

(adapted from a talk given by Sr Monica Delaney fmdm to a parish group in Surrey in Lent 2023)

On 6 May this year, as a Nation, we will be celebrating the Coronation of King Charles 111. We have been told that King Charles has scaled down the celebrations but nevertheless the Coronation ceremony will be packed with regal grandeur and magnificent pageantry. Besides the 2,000 invited guests, there will be hundreds of devoted well-wishers lining the route to and from the Abbey.

The ceremony will begin with the anointing of Charles, symbolising his spiritual entry into kingship. The Coronation oil, used for the anointing has been made using olives harvested from the groves on the Mount of Olives. The crown to be placed on the head of King Charles is made up of a solid gold frame, set with precious jewels and including an ermine band.

The regal clothes that Charles will wear will have been chosen with hours of discernment and care. Picture this scene for a moment, the jubilation, the colour, the reverence in the Abbey, the happy cheers of the crowd outside.

Pause

Now let us now turn to Jesus, reflecting on the hymn in St Paul's letter to the Philippians ...

*Jesus' state was divine,
Yet he did not cling to his equality with God,
but emptied himself,
to assume the condition of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross. (Phil 2:6 -8)*

Over the centuries we are in danger of getting used to the idea of Jesus on the cross. We have a crucifix in all our Churches, in our homes, or hanging at the beginning of our Rosary beads. The facial image of Jesus is often calm and peaceful. But let us take a moment to consider the reality of Crucifixion in Jesus day.

In the first Century AD, crucifixion was the most fearful, terrible form of execution. Flavius Josephus calls it "*the most miserable of all deaths*" and Cicero describes this slow death upon a cross as "*The cruelest most terrible punishment.*" From a very early age, Jesus would have seen slaves dying from Crucifixion. It was a slow torture, intended to terrorize the population and serve as a general deterrent to prevent any rebellion against the Roman

occupation. It was always a public act. The victims were left totally naked, dying in agony on the cross, in a visible place, often on a well-travelled crossroads.

Ever since Jesus began his passionate commitment to proclaiming the kingdom of God, the reign of God, Jesus was putting himself in danger from the Scribes and Pharisees, as well as the Roman elite. Jesus' love for the least and the last, for the so called 'sinners and outcasts', was at the same time exposing the injustices of the wealthy elite of his time. He was exposing the unjust way these elite took over the land of the poor, the way they demanded the best of all produce, even in a year of drought, the way the Romans laid heavy taxes or the priest unjust tithes, all in the name of Religion. In Jesus' eyes it was this greed and dominance of the Political and Religious Leaders who were responsible for the poverty of numerous men and women unjustly labeling them, 'sinners, prostitutes and outcasts'.

Jesus, in choosing powerlessness, in choosing the path of self-emptying, in choosing to befriend and love the suffering, humiliated poor, Jesus was constantly putting himself in danger of being crowned, not with the prized laurels of the Roman Empire, but with a crown of thorns.

Pause

When the time finally came for Jesus to face trial before Pontius Pilate, he would have heard his verdict of Crucifixion with terror. He knew the horror that was ahead for him. Nevertheless, he would have understood his death as he understood his life, as at the service to God's kingdom, God's reign. Day by day he had poured out his life for others, impelled by his compassion for the poor and his trust in God's incredible love for all people. He had lived his life of loving service by curing the sick, accepting sinners, offering God's gratuitous forgiveness to the least and the last, blessing all with his compassion and friendship. He would die as he had lived. His death would be the ultimate and supreme service to God's plan. His supreme gift for the salvation of all.

With this awareness, let us listen again to the hymn from the letter of Paul to the Philippians...

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Pause

As we meditate on the Passion of Jesus, we are aware of the huge contrast between Jesus' crowning and the crowning of an earthly king. For Jesus, there are no family, friends or loyal

followers. Jesus is totally alone, abandoned, mocked by jeering crowds, scourged, crowned with thorns, and finally stripped utterly naked prior to his crucifixion. Here is The Christ, The Anointed One, and yet there is no blessing for this King of Kings, no regal robes, only rejection and violence.

In this reflection we are focusing on the Crowning with Thorns. This is the account of it in St Matthew's Gospel. (Matthew 27: 27-30)

'Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped Jesus and put a scarlet robe on him and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him saying "Hail king of the Jews!". They spat on him and took the reed and struck his head.'

In the light of today's knowledge, it is thought that for anyone, other than Jesus, the crown of thorns alone would have killed a person. Pushed right into the skull and shaken backwards and forwards with blows from the reed, it would have caused a person to fall unconscious with the excruciating pain, never to revive.

Pause

We could spend this entire reflection focusing on these truly horrific physical sufferings of Jesus. However, I believe we are invited to go deeper. The evangelists would have been all too familiar with the horror of Crucifixion. Their descriptions of the physical sufferings of Jesus are therefore brief. Their focus is on the emotional suffering of Jesus.

The suffering of a man who is totally alone, completely misunderstood, whose plans for the good of all are falling apart, leaving him isolated without support. So let us look reverently at the soul of Jesus. What was going on deep within as Jesus suffers such humiliations? It is a deep, deep mystery but we will attempt to peep into the heart of Jesus to glimpse, however inadequately, his inner pain.

As Jesus was crowned with thorns and as he staggered along the way of the cross with the thorns sticking into his skull with every movement, let us recall that Jesus was, and still is, the greatest Lover our world has ever known.

Jesus is our world's eternal Lover, the Father's eternal Beloved. What must it have felt like for this eternal Lover, with a heart wide open to all people, to be totally alone, publicly condemned as a criminal, rejected by his closest friends, brutally treated, mocked, scourged, crowned with thorns? Had he failed in his mission? Had his message of love gone unheard? Had he let his Father down?

Clearly Jesus' greatest struggle was in his soul. If he was to be true to his Father and true to his deepest yearnings for God's people ...he was being called to go on loving even in this desperate situation. His deepest struggle would have been to continue to faithfully return Love for hatred, Forgiveness for brutality, Compassion for rejection, Trust for seeming failure.

The biblical scholar, Jose Pagola, reflecting on this inner struggle of Jesus, writes:

'Jesus would die, faithful to the God he had always trusted. He would go on loving sinners and 'the excluded ones' no matter who didn't like it. If they rejected him to the end, he would die as an 'excluded one' but his death would confirm what he had always lived: total trust in a God who rejects no-one from his forgiveness.

If they eventually tortured him to death on the cross, like a slave with no rights, he would die as the poorest and most despised of all; but his death would seal his message of a God who defends all the poor, oppressed, and persecuted by the powerful. He would go on loving God with his whole heart, refusing to give any 'caesar' or any 'chief priests' what belongs only to God; he would go on defending the poor to the very end. He would accept God's will even now, when God's will seemed to be his martyrdom.' To the very end he would go on trusting his Father and the mission entrusted to him until his final breath.

(Cf 'Jesus. An Historical Approximation.' by Jose Pagola - page 334)

Pause ...

What is Jesus saying to you as we attempt to enter his very soul? Can you feel Jesus' inner agony, the depth of his love? Can you sense the real Jesus? Our eternal Beloved?

Pause

Have you ever felt misunderstood, rejected by those you love, felt a failure, even abandoned, like Jesus? If so, what was your reaction? What is Jesus asking of you now, today, if such a situation arises in the future?

Pause

To end this reflection, perhaps you might like to pray the early 20th c hermit and martyr Charles de Foucauld's 'Prayer of Abandonment.' The prayer is based on the very words of Jesus, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' (Luke 23: 46)

Father,

I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you:

I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.

I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;

I offer it to you

with all the love of my heart,

for I love you, Lord,

and so need to give myself,

to surrender myself into your hands,

without reserve,

and with boundless confidence,

for you are my Father.