

Good Friday Reflections - 2017

Each of these short reflections has a theme. They are themes taken from a series of poems by Ruth Padel called 'Seven Words and an Earthquake'; they speak of the crucifixion of Jesus, but occasionally modern ideas break into the text; the centurion with the digital timer. The first theme or word for reflection is Forgiveness.

I. Forgiveness

The poem, the word 'Forgiveness' sets the scene and begins by speaking of the arrest and the scourging of Jesus:

*Alone last night at full moon, you prayed so hard
your sweat was blood. Capillaries broke like straw
and leaked into your pores. Handcuffed*

*you found others to care about. The guard
who whacked you in the mouth
for keeping silent under questioning; squaddies*

*expert in the flay, who sliced skin off your back
and shoulders; the centurion with digital timer
who posed by your naked body.*

This poem describes in graphic detail the act of nailing a person to a roughhewn cross. After describing the pain and horror the poem finishes:

*There's more where that came from, the whole human brew
of jealousy and spite. So you displace. You think of the others.
Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*

These are words from Luke's Gospel. The poem endeavours to take us into the darkness, this is as far removed as you can be from God and grace, and yet God is there embracing the hell which is the cross. Luke wants to say that the way we need to understand this is to, what the poet calls, displace. *So you displace. You think of others.* To learn to forgive our enemies, learn to attend to the suffering of others...*you found others to care about.*

Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

II. Comfort

From the poem the word Comfort:

*Pedlars sell souvenirs. Citron peel
litters the ground. Up here, a dripping sound.
Whimper-sobs like a run-over dog. Hours crawl by
Like a serpent mortally wounded. Soldiers toss dice
In the dirt. We are paying, the blue air whispers,
for what we did wrong. Someone curses in Aramaic.
Furies rise from black earth. Remember me when you come*

*into your kingdom. With hanging head
it's a struggle to even inhale, let alone speak,
but again you think of the other. That's the deal.*

Today you will be with me in paradise.

We live in a society preoccupied with the search for happiness. But it is ours, because we live. Today we rejoice in these words, because Jesus says to us too, Today you will be with me in paradise, all we have to do is learn to accept this gift when it comes. The Good Thief pulls off the most amazing coup in history. He gets Paradise without paying for it. As we all do. We just have to learn how to accept gifts. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

III. Relationship

At the wedding feast in Cana and now at the cross Jesus calls Mary his mother, woman. Is Jesus trying to protect his mother from the horror? Distance himself from her? She was told 'a sword would pierce your own heart to.' We can only begin to imagine, but clearly a new family is formed at this point that is so radically different that bonds clearly need to be broken and remade in new ways. At one point in the gospel account Jesus says 'who is my mother and who are my brothers?' We are called to be brothers and sisters, we are called like Mary to say yes to God.

The poem:

*That time he was sleepy as the moon
and she carried him three hours to the priest.*

*The chip of kingfisher Lapis she tied around his wrist
To turn away the evil eye – where did that go?*

*He was shy in the playground.
Afraid of heights*

*of fire at night. Yesterdays glisten
like photos melting together in the rain*

*Prints of small feet in wet sand.
His first step without holding her hand.*

*Keeping him quiet in siesta, mending clothes
Through those long mother-afternoons.*

*You think will never end. The first glint of a tooth,
first pair of shoes. Whose days were those? Blink
and they're gone. Is he most her son
not back then but now, when he disowns her*

and gives her to his friend? "Woman, behold thy Son, Son, behold thy Mother".

IV. Abandonment –

From the poem, the word abandonment.

*Eclipse. Where's the healing now? You've lived
for others feelings. You've seen darkness over earth,
the forked stick on the path. Now its mucus on the lip,
mouths of wounds peeling to black. You long to melt to air.*

*but you've no choice except the ancient tongue
called vulnerability. This was it, your one shot at experience:
circumference of human skin, swirling bitumen of self.
This the ocean floor of all you've been –
that you're alone with pain, that's what you're for.*

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The abandonment of Jesus is a complete one. He is abandoned by the law, his religion, his people, his friends. Few of us can even begin to appreciate such dereliction. Perhaps it is in the cities of Syria today that we might find such a sense. The great writers like St Augustine and St John of the Cross see in this cry of dereliction the cry of humanity. Christ in his cry of abandonment creates a space for us, a space for us wherein seeing the pain of our world we cry out. There is so often a sense of impotence, there is so often nothing we can do, except believe that in the cross something is being done, God is present.

V. Need

As a hart longs for flowing streams,
so longs my soul for thee O God.
My soul thirsts for god
for the living God
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My Tears have been my food
day and night
While they say to me continually
'Where is your God.'

Need is the next theme; the poem ends –

*it's almost over. Ratchet of the heart
valve splitting. The flame almost blown out
in a storm lantern that lit the universe*

*for other people. Still you cannot ask
direct. The wrecked lungs gasp*

at hyphenettes of oxygen. The heart, submersed,

*struggles to shift sluggish thickening red cells
but the dehydrated tissues won't stop sending
stimuli to the brain till you gasp it out. **I thirst.***

Jesus cries out 'I thirst;' typically this is from John's gospel. For John the majesty, the glory of God, is revealed in Jesus' helplessness.

VI. Fulfilment

The poem ends:

*The story, the gash in time
begun with an outcast birth, is never sealed
but you have to feel it all. You can't do numb.
Fire-bolts of steel through your palms. Tissues tear
in your back when you shift down the splintery timber.
No morphine to tip in your throat but your nearly
there and you whisper, Done. It's done.*

Fulfillment, or perhaps we should say Achievement – **It is finished**. All our themes so far have been those of displacement. He displaces the pain onto others. Jesus forgives those that are executing him, he comforts the penitent thief, he places his Mother into the care of the beloved disciple and he into hers. He then looks to God and finally having suffered so much there is a sense of fulfilment. It is finished, achieved. I have entered completely, totally into the despair of humanity. Jesus at this point has admitted need. Jesus stands in our place, a place of the need of God, our place. It is indeed finished, it is accomplished. Was admitting pain itself the accomplishment, as if it's not till you accept you need help that you can resolve suffering and come home to yourself?

The curtain of the temple is torn, there is no longer any need for this separation between God and humanity, in Jesus' need we have become one with God. The work of reconciliation has been accomplished...**it is finished**.

VII. Reunion

*Who are the guilty? One more breath enters the lungs.
This is neither silence nor speech but a cross roads,
A sunset at dawn. Asphyxia, head on the chest,
The far point of powerlessness*

*in the eyes of a blinded robin. The throb of yellow
jelly in the heart has nearly stopped. What will it be
to join the Other who you know is here with you?
Can you give up your soul?*

This is Jesus' supreme act of trust. Having cried out in abandonment, he now commits himself to God. This is where faith begins. Not in our certainty, but in our deepest doubts and fears. It is at the moment

when we can no longer believe, but still reach out into the darkness that our lives of faith begin. We live today in a society more secure than ever. Our health and wealth, our safety and well-being have never been more secure and yet we live in a community riven with fear and anxiety. We find no rest.

Ambrose of Milan wrote a commentary on the six days of creation. He wrote God created the heavens, but I do not read that he then rested. He made the earth but I do not read that he then rested, he made the stars and the sun and the moon but he did not rest there. What I do read is this: he made humanity, and then found rest in one whose sins he would be able to forgive.

God rests in us as we rest in God. Through Christ our sins are forgiven, we are reconciled, there is reunion.

“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit”.

Sermon

The series of poems by Ruth Padel 'Seven Words and an Earthquake' based on the Seven Last words of Jesus conclude with a final stanza called **Afterword**.

*The voices of self are over. A sepia
penumbra clears round a moon of blood.*

*The ancient temple cloth, sixty feet high,
four inches thick – twisted scarlet,*

*blue and purple thread protecting other people
from the sacred –*

*tears in two. Earth trembles and will not stop.
Feldspar, formed on the abyssal plain.*

*of the ocean floor, splits presto
and goes on splitting. Rocks crack*

*like cannon fire and the East Nazareth
mountains echo in after shock*

*over the limestone braille
of the Dead Sea Rift or Fault*

*over aquifers, flint and fissured chalk
and barbed wire on the Mount of Olives.*

*Violence. Take your finger off the edge
and it snaps back like a rubber band.*

*Buckling. Compression. A spear jabs
through an interspace between the ribs*

*and water gushes out with blood from the fluid sac.
This is the end of everything you've been.*

*God is what God does. You are the earth.
The outer world, body's integument, layers*

of all that's happened in a life.

God is what God does.

When we are asked where is your God by those who point to the tragedy of the world, we can do nothing else but point to the cross. When we are tempted to despair, when our doubts threaten us

we can do no more than bring everything to the foot of the cross in the knowledge that God is there, has been there, and is there is everything that so mars our world.

So, the cross is indispensable if we're to understand God, to free our imaginations, to find true human freedom, and to picture genuine social alternatives. The cross is the act that sets us free from sin, on our way to claiming that freedom on Easter Day, at Pentecost, and whenever we celebrate the Christian saints. Friends, the cross is not an Aztec-style sacrifice to preserve the status quo, to pacify an angry God, to restore a deformed world by performing the right ritual, though it certainly does evoke comparisons with all that. Instead, it's the destruction of that stable, comfortable world, and it's God's invitation to do the world in new ways—through the adventure of faith, through the adventure of Church, through the adventure of being a Eucharistic community.

That way, the cross also becomes the pattern of a new kind of human life that we can join in. Beyond looking out for number one, beyond me and mine versus you and yours, beyond leave well alone, beyond everything that St Paul calls the wisdom of this world, God's alternative wisdom revealed by the cross offers us new conditions, a new start, and a new identity. Any other solution would simply have left everything as it was.

And as we are reminded year in year out on this day, nothing can ever be the same again.