

H O L Y



W E E K

MONDAY APRIL 6TH – FRIDAY 10TH

2020

Readings, reflections and prayers are from
AT HOME IN LENT
Exploring Lent through various objects around
the home.

by

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INTRODUCTION

Is your home your spiritual castle?

The origins of the proverb 'An Englishman's home is his castle' dates back to the 16th century. In 1628 'a man's house is his castle' was enshrined in law. Another century later William Pitt the elder said in parliament that the poorest man may in his cottage bid defiance to all the forces of the crown.

It is now the modern right of the police and bailiffs to force their way into premises only with the necessary warrant or court order, we generally believe and behave as though home despite what goes on under its roof is a private sanctuary, a safe haven where our belongings are housed.

Increasingly, we have more and more possessions and our homes are becoming warehouses for objects whose use, meaning and significance varies widely. It is said that nature abhors a vacuum, in modern times this means that no matter how big your home is, it will likely be full of stuff!

Gordon Giles in his book for Lent has an original way of encouraging us to consider our own faith journey in the light of the Easter story. Crossing the threshold of a Christian home, Gordon Giles spends each day with different household objects gleaning spiritual lessons from its use and history.

There are 46 objects used one for each day of Lent in his book. We will consider the five objects for our Holy Week early morning meditations.

Diary of the events on final Journey to Jerusalem Monday of Holy Week

- Cursing of the Fig Tree -Matthew 21:18-22
- Clearing the Temple Mark 11:15-17
- Return to Bethany Mark 11:19

SPEND SEVERAL MINUTES IN SILENCE IMAGINING YOURSELF AS AN OBSERVER OF ONE OR MORE OF THESE EVENTS – WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BE THERE?

Monday of Holy Week

BILLS

Render to God

Matthew 22:15-22 English Standard Version Anglicised (ESVUK)

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's."

Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they heard it, they marvelled. And they left him and went away.

When Jesus is asked, 'Should we pay tax to the emperor or not?' the key word is 'or'. It is a closed question, restricting Jesus to an either/ or answer. It is also a trick question, because to answer 'No' would be rebellious against Rome, and to say 'Yes' would be tantamount to blasphemy. Jesus is not drawn though, nor forced to take sides, but tells the Pharisees' disciples to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. The attempt to confine him to an either/ or mentality fails, as Jesus sidesteps it and asks them an awkward question, to which they must give a closed answer: 'Whose head is this? .. The emperor's' (vv 20-21).

Jesus uses a technique made famous by the Greek philosopher Socrates. The Socratic method was immortalised by Plato, who in recording the philosopher's deeds and sayings showed us a master of the method of question-and-answer teaching. This famous account of Jesus catching out the Pharisees reveals how it is possible to mentally manoeuvre an opponent into a corner by understanding and then exposing their hidden preconceptions. The Pharisees' disciples approach Jesus with the Herodians - supporters of the Roman puppet King Herod - and they are actually asking him whose side he is on. The Pharisees pretend to support Roman rule in order

to cause trouble, and this is why Jesus accuses them of hypocrisy. So to support Roman taxation was to support the Roman occupation of Judea, but to object was to support insurrection. It was an awkward question, putting Jesus in a tight spot. Jesus' ultimate answer, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's (v. 21), is a --both/and --answer to the, --either/or-- question.

Jesus' interlocutors don't like a blurred answer like this, but nowadays we live by such fuzziness. In a sense, Jesus gives a 21st-century answer to a first-century question. Jesus' general response to being asked an awkward question is to ask an awkward question in return. We might remember that Jesus does a similar thing when the woman caught in adultery is brought before him (John 8:1-11). He says to the scribes and Pharisees, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' They all slink away.

In these situations, Jesus is effectively saying, 'Think differently. See it another way. Don't squeeze things into your box that isn't my box.' For God's ways are not our ways. The kind of kingdom to which Christ points us is different: different rules, and a different logic apply. This way of thinking was strange to the closed-minded Pharisees. Jesus' logic is not that of the Jewish law, which basically said, 'Do this, that and the other and you will be saved'. Rather, Christ's logic comes from the basic fact that God is our creator, redeemer and sustainer who no longer operates from a position of law but of loving mercy.

In that logic, there is no need to see the emperor as an enemy to hate, nor even as the opposite, a friend.

In Christ, even enemies are to be loved (see Matthew 5:44). The emperor is who he is, and God is who he is.

The emperor is the one in charge and taxes are due to him because taxes are payable to the ruling authorities. It was ever thus and remains so. But God is God, and Jesus is effectively implying that the Pharisees do not actually know what that means. It does not simply mean that God is the one who sets the laws, punishes transgressors and demands resistance to earthly powers. Rather, it means that God is - well, God; no more, no less. God is God not the emperor, whose head is on the coin and who was considered by some to be a god. On one level, the question Jesus is asked is, 'Which of these is God: the emperor or God?' It is not linguistically possible for anyone or anything other than God to be God. God is God, and God is God.

The paying of taxes is a side issue. Pay taxes, by all means, Jesus says. It is a good idea and saves a lot of hassle if one does. The same can be said for other bills, invoices and debts. But we should make sure that we also give to God the praise and honour due to his name. So it may be that a tax or gas bill can be a reminder that, because God has paid the debts of sin through our redeemer Christ, we owe to God a duty of praise and honour. Like so many things in our homes, bills have a mundane (worldly) purpose or function, but they can also be a spiritual reminder of our status under God and our higher calling as a disciple of Christ.

Whatever dilemmas, decisions, conundrums and confusions come our way, we need to do what is necessary in our day and age. We pay our bills, fill in forms, renew licences and keep the law of the land. But through it all, we must not neglect to render to God what is God's, giving God the praise and honour due to his name. Money is what it is, and we have as much of it as we have. Taxes are as certain as death, as Benjamin Franklin might have put it, so we accept the price we pay on earth and pay our dues as best we can. Yet on the other side of the coin is the sure and certain fact, and the sure and certain hope, that God is God, and God is God: our maker, our debt- payer and the eternal presence in our lives.

Creator God, by your Spirit, help us always to remember that you, and no other, are God, to promote peace and to live as those whose debts have been paid in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Diary of events ..Tuesday of Holy Week

- Reaction to Cursing of the Fig Tree whilst going back to Jerusalem. Mark 11:20-21
- Debates with the religious leaders in Jerusalem and teaching in the temple. Matthew 21:23 – 23:39, Mark11:27—12:44
- Talk about future times on Mount of Olives as they return to Bethany. Matthew 24:1-25:46; Mark13:1-37

SPEND SEVERAL MINUTES IN SILENCE IMAGINING YOURSELF AS AN OBSERVER OF ONE OR MORE OF THESE EVENTS – WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BE THERE?

Holy Tuesday

Purse

Money talks

Matthew 27:3-8

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.' Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.' After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

Here we have the most famous purse in history. We can assume that the 30 pieces of silver that Judas was paid for betraying Jesus were either given to him in some kind of purse or that he put them into one. He also held the 'common purse'; which, according to John, provided him with the means to be dishonest with the disciples' kitty (see John 12:4-6). Other purses we find in the New Testament are those that the disciples are instructed to leave behind when sent on their mission (see Luke 22:35-36). The coins that Judas was given to put in a purse were shekels from Tyre, which were the only valid currency in the temple in Jerusalem. They were minted between around 126BC and AD57.

We come across one of them when Jesus is questioned about the temple tax, and he tells Peter to get one out of a fish's mouth: 'Take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me' (Matthew 17:27). The tax was evidently half a shekel per man. Judas was paid with the same coinage, collected from faithful Jews, and paid out to secure the capture and death of Christ. The coin itself had on one side the head of Melqart, a god of the Phoenician city of Tyre, and on the other an eagle, with the Greek inscription 'from the holy and inviolable Tyre'. It would have weighed just over 13 grams and was around 24 mm in diameter. It is still possible to see and even purchase examples of these today.

Money endures, and the fact that we can buy ancient coins says something about its longevity, even if its value varies. We have always carried money and, until clothes with pockets were conceived of in the late 16th century, purses were a necessary unisex item. While there are many modern household artefacts that would have astounded the disciples, the purse or wallet has remained largely unchanged. A purse to Judas was pretty much what it is to us today, and vice versa (without the designer labels!).

The first 'money' seems to have originated around 2000BC, when in ancient Mesopotamia and then in ancient Egypt it was associated with grain stored in temple granaries. Money was more like a receipt, rather than something to spend, and metal coins were used as tokens to represent the value of goods or commodities invested or banked.

The valuable goods themselves did not need to be moved about often, but were represented by coins. However, the value of a circulating coinage could only be as reliable as the storage locations, which themselves might be subject to siege, war or destruction.

A coin indicating that one had so many bushels of grain stored was of little value if the grain had been destroyed or stolen! As a result, coins themselves began to gain value in their own right, and it is only more recently that money has returned to the idea that the sum mentioned on a banknote is not actually the money but a promissory reference to it. A cheque carries this idea further.

In our modern, technologically assisted age, there are real philosophical questions to be asked about whether money actually exists and whether the 'same' money can be accounted for more than once, such as when banks lend out money they do not really have and so forth.

Some financial shenanigans and crises of recent years hinge on the fact that one might not need to have the money in order to spend or lend it.

The spirituality of money is a contentious matter and, if we examine the contents of our purses, we may be inspired to reflect on live issues such as borrowing, lending, debt, poverty, benefit payments, taxation, pensions, investments, interest rates, inflation and charity.

All these issues are to be found lining our purses alongside our coins, notes and plastic cards, even though our individual ability to change the world of money is negligible.

So many people are controlled by money, and have little or no control over their finances.

With some banks and loan companies charging extortionate interest rates per annum on unarranged overdrafts, debt is a huge issue today.

I am the chair of a credit union and know that there are many people today for whom a sudden bill of £400 would send them into debt, to add to the vast numbers of people who already are in debt. Money is not so much a possession, or a public good or evil, but it is a language and we know that 'money talks'.

So what does the money in your purse say to you when you peer inside? Does it make you grateful, sad, glad, greedy or compromised? Does its presence in your purse remind you of those whose purses are empty? Are you poor yourself, struggling to make ends meet? Or does your purse, empty or full, remind you of Judas, maligned over his use of money and ultimately destroyed by it?

This week, as we approach the betrayal, arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, we might remember that it was his friend Judas' purse that betrayed him. Seduced by the promise of wealth and by the power that handing Jesus to the authorities gave him, Judas 'sold out' his Lord and soon realised that he could no longer live with himself for having done so.

Money problems lead to many suicides today. Our money is not only the currency of life; it is also the currency of death and despair. We can never know Judas' motives, but we can sense the soul- destruction those temple coins caused him.

So we should have some compassion, even for Judas, and remember that he did repent but could not undo the damage he had done. Yet his betrayal of Jesus set in motion the wheels of the climactic days of salvation. Judas himself, like the money itself, is ambiguous and complex, being able to both do harm and enable good. When you look into the dark recesses of your purse, pray for light, and remember Judas and the fate of so many after him who have been betrayed and destroyed by money.

Saviour Christ, who understood the conflictedness of Judas and knows the complexities of modern life, spare and save us from the destructive power of money, that our purses may be always open to the needs and sufferings of others. Amen

Diary of events Wednesday of Holy Week

- Jesus and the disciples remain in Bethany.
- Judas returns to Jerusalem to plan for his betrayal of Jesus. Matthew 26: 14-16; Mark 14:10-11

SPEND SEVERAL MINUTES IN SILENCE IMAGINING YOURSELF AS AN OBSERVER OF ONE OR MORE OF THESE EVENTS—WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BE THERE?

**Holy Wednesday
Towel
Wrapped in service**

During supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.' After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.' John 13:2-15

We have towels in the bathroom, kitchen and toilet. Wherever there is running water, we have towels to wipe and dry our hands. Paper towels, linen towels, tea towels, snuggly soft bath towels - they all have the same purpose, and we never give them a second thought, because they are ubiquitous, ever present in our homes. If for any reason they were absent, we would notice very quickly.

In the same way, in today's passage, the towel is very much present, but it is the last thing we notice, if at all. Like the tea towel in the kitchen, we take it for granted and focus on other things. Yet without that towel that Jesus put on to dry the disciples' feet after washing them, the story would be very different.

In reading and hearing the profound account of how Jesus invites his friends (who are effectively his family) to supper and how he washes their feet, teaches them and institutes the Lord's Supper - the Communion, Eucharist or Mass in all this, the humble towel is barely an accessory.

There are other towels associated with Jesus that are less humble. The most famous is probably the Mandylion of Edessa, allegedly created after King Agbar of Edessa (now Urfa in Turkey) sent a painter to the Holy Land to make a portrait of Jesus. He was unable to do it because of the dazzling light emanating from Jesus' face, but the legend says that Jesus wiped his face on a towel after washing and his image became indelibly printed on it.

Not surprisingly, various healing properties were later attributed to the Mandylion, which is still housed in the Matilda Chapel in the Vatican. In Spain, the Sudarium of Oviedo, another linen face cloth, is claimed to have been used to cover Jesus' face at his burial (see John 20:6-7), although it does not have an image of a face on it. Some people have connected this cloth to the even more famous Shroud of Turin, which for centuries has sparked controversial theories about whether it could possibly be the linen grave-cloth in which Jesus' body was wrapped.

Another famous story concerns St Veronica, who is supposed to have wiped Jesus' face with a cloth as he passed along the Via Dolorosa, perspiring from the burden of carrying the cross. This act of compassion, however, appears to be legend. The Bible says nothing about a woman or anyone else having a towel handy as Jesus struggled along the Way of the Cross, and her name, Veronica, also indicates that she did not exist. While it is thought to mean 'true image' - a hybrid of Latin (*vera*) and Greek (*eikon*) the name is in fact a variant of Berenice, a wholly Greek name from *pherein* ('bring') and *nike* ('victory').

'Bringer of victory' is a name we would be more likely to apply to Christ himself, for in taking up his cross, dying upon it and rising on the third day, it is he who deserves such a moniker.

The victory that Christ brings is not a warlike, triumphant one, but rather is found in servanthood. The towel that he put on in that upper room is much more important than linen cloths of dubious provenance that have become objects of devotion. It was a humble towel for a humble act of simple, authentic service to his friends.

When we understand this, it becomes clear what a topsy-turvy, first- shall-be-last thing it was that Jesus did.

Hailed only a few days earlier as king of the Jews, he treats his friends as royal guests, crawling on the ground before them to rinse dust and dirt off their feet, and then drying them with a linen towel with which he has girded himself for the long haul of 24 soles.

Peter famously resists, until Jesus insists. Jesus' serving of Peter and the others is a manner of calling: just as minutes later he would say, 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19) in breaking bread, so he does for them what they are being called to do for others. Jesus has spent a lot of time teaching the disciples, but that night, at the last supper, it is more about 'do as I do'.

While the towel gets forgotten amid all the other dimensions of the story of the last supper, it is just as important, because it is wrapped around the man who is king, serving those whom he is calling into service. It is through service that Christ brings the victory, that he truly is the Veronica, the one who humbled himself in service, first with a towel and then on a cross.

Lord, as you took up the towel of service in the upper room, wrap us in your mercy that we too may be ready to serve you in every way. Amen

Diary of events Thursday of Holy week

- Preparations for the Passover. Matthew 26: 17-19 ; Mark 14:122-16
- Passover meal & Last Supper. Matthew 26: 20-35; Mark 14:17-26
- Farewell discourse with his disciples. John: 13-17
- Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Matthew:26: 36-46; Mark 14: 32-42

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Maundy Thursday

Alarm clock

New every morning

Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered, 'Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward.' Peter said to him, 'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times...'

Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, 'You are not also one of his disciples, are you?' He denied it and said, 'I am not.' One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, 'Did I not see you in the garden with him?' Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed. John 13:36-38; 18:25-27

On the top of many churches and some other tall buildings, there is a weather vane. Blown by the wind, it is a simple and accurate tool for determining wind direction. The first known one was in Athens, depicting the Greek god Triton, made by the astronomer Andronicus in 48BC. The Romans soon adopted this practical and ornamental idea, and they made weathervanes in honour of their gods. The gospel writers might have known of these, but they were by no means Christian or even Jewish. It was Pope Nicholas (800-867) who decreed that a cockerel vane should be put on every church tower, spire or steeple.

He echoed Pope Gregory I, who two centuries earlier had said that the cockerel was the most suitable emblem of Christianity because it is the emblem of Peter, to whom Christ gave the care of the early church (see 'Keys', p. 28). A deeper significance lies in why the cockerel would be the symbol of Peter, who is more often associated with crossed keys: it reminds us of Peter's human frailty and flawed nature. We are like that too, and the weathercock gives both an historical reminder and a call - a reminder that Peter denied Christ before the cock crowed and the call of the witness (or martyr) not to deny Christ.

Peter was simply the first person to deny Christ, and he will not be the last. While we try to remember all those who in the steps of Peter have suffered and died for their faith in the Lord Jesus, there are countless more who denied the faith, disowned Jesus and caved in under pressure. The shadow side of persecution, under which some become heroes, is that many more cannot endure, and reluctantly let go of that which got them into trouble in the first place, that which offends their persecutors or simply that which, because they believe it, brings pain, humiliation and sometimes even torture and death to their families and friends. This is the cruellest and lowest form of torture, to perpetrate violence not so much against the one persecuted for their faith or beliefs, but against their family members.

Long before Macbeth had Macduff's family murdered in his absence (Macbeth, IV.iii), the unjust were inflicting grief as well as physical pain on their victims.

Depraved humanity has known for a long time that the best way to hurt someone is to hurt someone they love rather than threaten them directly. Countless millions have endured that and surrendered their faith or integrity to save their loved ones. We should be cautious in judging them. This affects Peter too, because he may well have felt that some of his actions led to Jesus' death and that, while he deserved punishment for his sins (as we all do), Jesus did not.

So the challenge not to deny Christ is, in some contexts and situations, unbearably hard. A weathercock sits on the top of every church spire to remind us not to deny Christ, but while the crow of the cockerel made Peter recall Jesus' prediction of his denial, this is not of course the typical function of a cock's crow. A cockerel serves as an alarm clock; it is a messenger of dawn, of the breaking of a new day. On that particular day, the cock's crow is the harbinger of the darkest day ever Peter has been waiting in the courtyard all night since Jesus' arrest, to see what would happen, and what happens is not what he expects: the cock crows with its customary 'Get up! Day is dawning!' cry, but to Peter this is a sound of deep despair, because it calls him into a new dawn in which he is harshly reminded that he is a denier, the first ever, of Christ.

If we dread the sound of our alarm clock each day, and think it is a mournful, annoying call into the world, then Peter's wake-up call on Good Friday morning was a raucous squawk from the depths of hell. And it wracked him. He bore the shame and burden of it not only as he witnessed Jesus' crucifixion a few hours later, but to his own martyr's grave in Rome.

The gospel of Mark says, 'Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept' (Mark 14:72).

Peter's weakness, referred to so often, and confidently frowned on by Christians and others since, can remind us of some home truths each morning when our alarm clocks hail and haul us into a new day. In the light of a new day, some of what happened in the previous one looks or feels different, and we can wake with a great sense of regret for something we got or did wrong yesterday. Or the alarm clock beckons us to excitement, opportunity and joy: what shall I do today? As you fumble for the switch, looking at the alarm clock through one eye, wonder how you, like Mary, can magnify the Lord today (Luke 1:46).

What is it, in faith, that your alarm clock says to you (apart from 'Get up!') each morning? To what do you wake each new day, and to what calling? Whatever it is, give thanks for it. The hymn by John Keble (1792-1866) begins, 'New every morning is the love, our waking and uprising prove, through sleep and darkness safely brought, restored to life and power and thought.' That is true, and was true, even for Peter on the day that the friend he denied would be crucified. Even then there was new love, greater love than had ever before been shown, as the cock crowed, heralding a day of both suffering and salvation, the combination of which made for a truly 'good' Friday, on which everything would change. May the alarm clock by the bed always be a reminder that God's love comes every morning afresh, calling us to new tasks, new joys and new hope.

Lord Jesus, your love is new every morning, and gives us mercy and hope each day. As we wake from sleep, call us into the new dawn of salvation's day, and give us grace and courage to own our faith and proclaim your glory. Amen

Diary of events on final Journey to Jerusalem

- Perhaps in the very early hour, betrayal by Judas and arrest. Matthew 26:57-56 ; Mark 14: 43-52
- Jewish trial – three phases: appearing before Annas John 18:13-24; before Caiaphas and part of the Sanhedrin Matthew 26: 57-75 ; Mark 14:53-65 and before the fully assembled Sanhedrin Matthew 27:1-2; Mark15:1.
- Roman Trial – three phases: appearing before Pilate Matthew 27: 15-26; Mark15:6-15 then before Herod Antipas Luke23:6-12; and Pilate again Matthew 27:15-26; Mark15:6-15
- Crucifixion --Matthew 27: 27-66; Mark 15:16-39

SPEND SEVERAL MINUTES IN SILENCE IMAGINING YOURSELF AS AN OBSERVER OF ONE OR MORE OF THESE EVENTS – WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BE THERE

**Good Friday
Crucifix
Badge of love**

For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (Corinthians 1:17-25)

Many people have crucifixes, in the bedroom, in the hallway, anywhere really. Some schools have them in every classroom, and many people wear one around their neck. The cross has become a kind of Christian badge: a symbol of faith, to remind ourselves of our crucified Lord, and perhaps to show others that it is he whom we follow.

Some people wear a cross in the same way they wear a lapel badge of some organisation or club they belong to or as they might wear a poppy or other charity-supporter's badge.

Others wear a cross, sometimes hidden, because being a Christian is something so inherent to their being that the wearing of it is fundamental to their identity.

Recent controversial legal cases that have presumed to prescribe whether employees of airlines and hospitals may wear a cross have caused great concern, as for some the right to wear a cross is the same as the right to be a Christian in the first place. In a 'Christian country', such as the UK, it is worrying indeed that the cross is sometimes seen as a symbol of faith that might cause offence and that a citizen may in some circumstances be banned from wearing, either visibly or at all. It is a basic human right to have freedom of thought, conscience and religion, but there are those who would draw a distinction between what one believes inside and what one wears on the outside. Nevertheless, in 2005 a school in Derby suspended a student when she refused to remove a cross she was wearing. Three years later, a court in Spain ruled that crosses should be removed from state schools. On the other hand, in the Canadian province of Quebec in 2008, a judgement declared that it was not a breach of others' human rights to have crucifixes in public places, such as schools, law courts and parliament buildings. Likewise, in an Italian case in 2011, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that crucifixes are acceptable in state classrooms, describing them as an 'essentially passive symbol' with no obvious religious influence. Still, in 2013, airline employee Nadia Eweida had to go to the same court to maintain the right to wear a cross at work, and obtained a ruling that to manifest one's religion is a 'fundamental right'. After nearly 2,000 years, the cross of Christ is still controversial.

However, as we are all too vividly reminded on this most holy of days, the cross is not simply a symbol or a badge of faith. The cross has been domesticated so much that it is worn as jewellery or hung on a wall. While crucifixes were originally made as objects to aid devotion and assist prayer, over time some have been made and used as ornaments, objects of aesthetic beauty or furnishings. Some crosses - in our homes, for example - are so much part of the furniture that they go unnoticed. As such, as the apostle Paul might put it, the cross is emptied of its power. In this, the fate of the cross in modern society mirrors the attitudes shown towards it in its own day. It is an embarrassment, emptied of its power and meaning. The cross is not a symbol, an ornament or a piece of jewellery.

It was a brutal, oft-used, do-it-yourself improvised structure of torture and execution. In Roman Palestine around the time of Jesus, using trees and cross-beams roughly hewn, criminals were unceremoniously nailed or tied to them in excruciating, breath-depriving, blood-draining, heat-scorching ways, and were left in sun-baked public places to choke and bleed to death.

While it was the Emperor Constantine who in 312 first decided that the cross was a symbol under which to fight in battle, thus turning the cross into a badge, any recognition of what a cross was for, and what it did to its victims, makes the idea that it is simply a religious symbol laughable.

The cross is as offensive now as it was at the time of the first Christians.

To Jews, the fact that Jesus was crucified made him cursed (see Deuteronomy 21:22-23), while to Greeks (non-Jews, or Gentiles) the idea that someone who is God would allow himself to be crucified is utter nonsense. Gods are powerful, almost magical, beings to be worshipped, feared and adored, so a god who is so weak as to be humiliated by being killed in such a mystifyingly horrible way is so fanciful as to be beyond credibility.

After the resurrection, the first disciples had this double barrier to overcome in persuading anyone who would listen that Jesus, who the Jews called a blasphemer and who the Romans called a rebellious troublemaker, was the Messiah, the Son of God. It is remarkable that any of them got anywhere. But they did, in spite of early obstacles and much martyrdom, get everywhere, such that now the story is so ingrained in western culture that the cross has been emptied of its power, as so many people nowadays have no idea what it truly represents. While a court can rule that it is a passive symbol - a harmless badge - we remember that countless martyrs have died for the truth it points to and are dying still. There is a great irony in the fact that the depiction of an instrument of torture and death can even today provoke both indifference and murderous hate on the same planet at the same time.

Yet, if the cross is a symbol of anything, it is not indifference or hate, nor even suffering or glory. It is, in fact, obviously, a symbol of love.

If you have one around your neck or on your wall, you are wearing or displaying an object that declares that God loves you and that you love God.

Whether your cross is a crucifix with the outstretched embrace of Jesus on it, or a cross as empty as the tomb on the third day, it is pointing not only to the death of Jesus but also to his resurrection. In that death and resurrection, we see and receive a love so amazing, so divine, it demands our soul, our life, our all.

Jesus, by your cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world. As you embraced us on the cross, may we so embrace all who suffer or are in need of grace. Amen

A LITTLE EXTRA TO MEDITATE ON OVER HOLY WEEK

Search Me, O God, and Know My Heart

139 O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.

³ You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.

Psalm 139 English Standard Version (ESV)

You alone, O God, are infinite in love

You Alone can speak to our condition.

You alone can search the mind and purify the heart.

**You alone can flow over our darkness with the ocean
of eternal light.**

George Fox 1624—1691

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