

STATIONS OF THE CROSS MEDITATIONS 2016

FIRST STATION

Jesus is condemned to be crucified

The Judge of the world, who will come again to judge us all, stands there, dishonoured and defenceless before the earthly judge. Pilate is not utterly evil. He knows that the condemned man is innocent, and he looks for a way to free him. But his heart is divided. And in the end he lets his own position, his own self-interest, prevail over what is right. Nor are the men who are shouting and demanding the death of Jesus utterly evil. Many of them, on the day of Pentecost, will feel ‘cut to the heart’ (Acts 2. 37), when Peter will say to them: ‘Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God... you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law’ (Acts 2. 22ff.). But at that moment they are caught up in the crowd. They are shouting because everyone else is shouting, and they are shouting the same thing that everyone else is shouting. And in this way, justice is trampled underfoot by weakness, cowardice and fear of the diktat of the ruling mindset. The quiet voice of conscience is drowned out by the cries of the crowd. Evil draws its power from indecision and concern for what other people think.

SECOND STATION

Jesus compelled to bear the Cross

Jesus, condemned as an imposter king, is mocked, but this very mockery lays bare a painful truth. How often are the symbols of power, borne by the great ones of this world, an affront to truth, to justice and to the dignity of man! How many times are their pomps and their lofty words nothing but grandiose lies, a parody of their solemn obligation to serve the common good! It is because Jesus is mocked and wears the crown of suffering that he appears as the true King. His sceptre is justice (cf. Ps 45. 7). The price of justice in this world is suffering: Jesus, the true King, does not reign through violence, but through a love which suffers for us and with us. He takes up the Cross, our cross, the burden of being human, the burden of the world. And so he goes before us and points out to us the way which leads to true life.

THIRD STATION

Jesus falls under the heavy Cross

Man has fallen, and he continues to fall: often he becomes a caricature of himself, no longer the image of God, but a mockery of the Creator. Is not the man who, on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho, fell among robbers who stripped him and left him half-dead and bleeding beside the road, the image of humanity par excellence? Jesus' fall beneath the Cross is not just the fall of the man Jesus, exhausted from his scourging. There is a more profound meaning in this fall, as Paul tells us in the Letter to the Philippians: 'though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men... He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a Cross' (Phil 2. 6-8). In Jesus' fall beneath the weight of the Cross, the meaning of his whole life is seen: his voluntary abasement, which lifts us up from the depths of our pride. The nature of our pride is also revealed: it is that arrogance which makes us want to be liberated from God and left alone to ourselves, the arrogance which makes us think that we do not need his eternal love, but can be the masters of our own lives. In this rebellion against truth, in this attempt to be our own god, creator and judge, we fall headlong and plunge into self-destruction. The humility of Jesus is the surmounting of our pride; by his abasement he lifts us up. Let us allow him to lift us up. Let us strip away our sense of self-sufficiency, our false illusions of independence, and learn from him, the One who humbled himself, to discover our true greatness by bending low before God and before our downtrodden brothers and sisters.

FOURTH STATION

Jesus is met by his blessed Mother

On Jesus' Way of the Cross, we also find Mary, his Mother. During his public life she had to step aside, to make place for the birth of Jesus' new family, the family of his disciples. She also had to hear the words: 'Who is my mother and who are my brothers?... Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is brother, and sister and mother'" (Mt 12. 48-50). Now we see her as the Mother of Jesus, not only physically, but also in her heart. Even before she conceived him bodily, through her obedience she conceived him in her heart. It was said to Mary: 'And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son. He will be great and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David' (Lk 1. 31ff.). And she would hear from the mouth of the elderly Simeon: 'A sword will pierce through your own soul' (Lk 2. 35). She would then recall the words of the prophets, words like these: 'He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he was like a lamb that is led to slaughter' (Is 54. 7). Now it all takes place. In her heart she had kept the words of the angel, spoken to her in the beginning: 'Do not be afraid, Mary' (Lk 1. 30). The disciples fled, yet she did not flee. She stayed there, with a Mother's courage, a Mother's fidelity, a Mother's goodness, and a faith which did not waver in the hour of darkness: 'Blessed is she who believed' (Lk 1. 45). 'Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (Lk 18. 8). Yes, in this moment Jesus knows: he will find faith. In this hour, this is his great consolation.

FIFTH STATION***Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene***

Simon of Cyrene is on his way home, returning from work, when he comes upon the sad procession of those condemned for him, perhaps, it was a common sight. The soldiers force this rugged man from the country to carry the Cross on his own shoulders. How annoying he must have thought it to be suddenly caught up in the fate of those condemned men! He does what he must do, but reluctantly. Significantly, the Evangelist Mark does not only name him, but also his children, who were evidently known as Christians and as members of that community (cf. Mk 15. 21). From this chance encounter, faith was born. The Cyrenian, walking beside Jesus and sharing the burden of the Cross, came to see that it was a grace to be able to accompany him to his crucifixion and to help him. The mystery of Jesus, silent and suffering, touched his heart. Jesus, whose divine love alone can redeem all humanity, wants us to share his Cross so that we can complete what is still lacking in his suffering (cf. Col 1. 24). Whenever we show kindness to the suffering, the persecuted and defenceless, and share in their sufferings, we help to carry that same Cross of Jesus. In this way we obtain salvation, and help contribute to the salvation of the world.

SIXTH STATION

Jesus rewards Veronica's charity

‘Your face, Lord, do I seek. Hide not your face from me’ (Ps 27. 8-9). Veronica Bernice, in the Greek tradition embodies the universal yearning of the devout men and women of the Old Testament, the yearning of all believers to see the face of God. On Jesus' Way of the Cross, though, she at first did nothing more than perform an act of womanly kindness: she held out a facecloth to Jesus. She did not let herself be deterred by the brutality of the soldiers or the fear which gripped the disciples. She is the image of that good woman, who, amid turmoil and dismay, shows the courage born of goodness and does not allow her heart to be bewildered. ‘Blessed are the pure in heart’, the Lord had said in his Sermon on the Mount, ‘for they shall see God’ (Mt 5. 8). At first, Veronica saw only a buffeted and pain-filled face. Yet her act of love impressed the true image of Jesus on her heart: on his human face, bloodied and bruised, she saw the face of God and his goodness, which accompanies us even in our deepest sorrows. Only with the heart can we see Jesus. Only love purifies us and gives us the ability to see. Only love enables us to recognize the God who is love itself.

SEVENTH STATION

Jesus falls again under the Cross

The tradition that Jesus fell three times beneath the weight of the Cross evokes the fall of Adam the state of fallen humanity and the mystery of Jesus' own sharing in our fall. Throughout history the fall of man constantly takes on new forms. In his First Letter, Saint John speaks of a threefold fall: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and the pride of life. He thus interprets the fall of man and humanity against the backdrop of the vices of his own time, with all its excesses and perversions. But we can also think, in more recent times, of how a Christianity which has grown weary of faith has abandoned the Lord: the great ideologies, and the banal existence of those who, no longer believing in anything, simply drift through life, have built a new and worse paganism, which in its attempt to do away with God once and for all, have ended up doing away with man. And so man lies fallen in the dust. The Lord bears this burden and falls, over and over again, in order to meet us. He gazes on us, he touches our hearts; he falls in order to raise us up.

EIGHTH STATION

Jesus speaks to the weeping women

Hearing Jesus reproach the women of Jerusalem who follow him and weep for him ought to make us reflect. How should we understand his words? Are they not directed at a piety which is purely sentimental, one which fails to lead to conversion and living faith? It is no use to lament the sufferings of this world if our life goes on as usual. And so the Lord warns us of the danger in which we find ourselves. He shows us both the seriousness of sin and the seriousness of judgment. Can it be that, despite all our expressions of consternation in the face of evil and innocent suffering, we are all too prepared to trivialize the mystery of evil? Have we accepted only the gentleness and love of God and Jesus, and quietly set aside the word of judgment? ‘How can God be so concerned with our weaknesses?’, we say. ‘We are only human!’ Yet as we contemplate the sufferings of the Son, we see more clearly the seriousness of sin, and how it needs to be fully atoned if it is to be overcome. Before the image of the suffering Lord, evil can no longer be trivialized. To us too, he says: ‘Do not weep for me, weep for yourselves... if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’.

NINTH STATION

Jesus falls for the third time

What can the third fall of Jesus under the Cross say to us? We have considered the fall of man in general, and the falling of many Christians away from Christ and into a godless secularism. Should we not also think of how much Christ suffers in his own Church? How often is the holy sacrament of his Presence abused, how often must he enter empty and evil hearts! How often do we celebrate only ourselves, without even realising that he is there! How often is his Word twisted and misused! What little faith is present behind so many theories, so many empty words! How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him! How much pride, how much self-complacency! What little respect we pay to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where he waits for us, ready to raise us up whenever we fall! All this is present in his Passion. His betrayal by his disciples, their unworthy reception of his Body and Blood, is certainly the greatest suffering endured by the Redeemer; it pierces his heart. We can only call to him from the depths of our hearts: Kyrie eleison Lord, save us (cf. Mt 8. 25).

TENTH STATION

Jesus is stripped of his garments

Jesus is stripped of his garments. Clothing gives a man his social position; it gives him his place in society, it makes him someone. His public stripping means that Jesus is no longer anything at all, he is simply an outcast, despised by all alike. The moment of the stripping reminds us of the expulsion from Paradise: God's splendour has fallen away from man, who now stands naked and exposed, unclad and ashamed. And so Jesus once more takes on the condition of fallen man. Stripped of his garments, he reminds us that we have all lost the 'first garment' that is God's splendour. At the foot of the Cross, the soldiers draw lots to divide his paltry possessions, his clothes. The Evangelists describe the scene with words drawn from Ps 22. 19; by doing so they tell us the same thing that Jesus would tell his disciples on the road to Emmaus: that everything takes place 'according to the Scriptures'. Nothing is mere coincidence; everything that happens is contained in the Word of God and sustained by his divine plan. The Lord passes through all the stages and steps of man's fall from grace, yet each of these steps, for all its bitterness, becomes a step towards our redemption: this is how he carries home the lost sheep. Let us not forget that John says that lots were drawn for Jesus' tunic, 'woven without seam from top to bottom' (Jn 19. 23). We may consider this as a reference to the High Priest's robe, which was 'woven from a single thread', without stitching (Fl. Josephus, a III, 161). For he, the Crucified One, is the true High Priest.

ELEVENTH STATION

Jesus is nailed to the Cross for us

Jesus is nailed to the Cross and endures unbelievable cruelty. He does not drink the numbing gall offered to him: he deliberately takes upon himself all the pain of the Crucifixion. His whole body is racked; the words of the Psalm have come to pass: 'But I am a worm and no man, scorned by men, rejected by the people' (Ps 22. 7). 'As one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised... surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows' (Is 53. 3f.). Let us halt before this image of pain, before the suffering Son of God. Let us look upon him at times of presumptuousness and pleasure, in order to learn to respect limits and to see the superficiality of all merely material goods. Let us look upon him at times of trial and tribulation, and realize that it is then that we are closest to God. Let us try to see his face in the people we might look down upon. As we stand before the condemned Lord, who did not use his power to come down from the Cross, but endured its suffering to the end, another thought comes to mind. Ignatius of Antioch, a prisoner in chains for his faith in the Lord, praised the Christians of Smyrna for their invincible faith: he says that they were, so to speak, nailed with flesh and blood to the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1). Let us nail ourselves to him, resisting the temptation to stand apart, or to join others in mocking him.

TWELFTH STATION

Jesus by death redeems the world

In Greek and Latin, the two international languages of the time, and in Hebrew, the language of the Chosen People, a sign stood above the Cross of Jesus, indicating who he was: the King of the Jews, the promised Son of David. Pilate, the unjust judge, became a prophet despite himself. The kingship of Jesus was proclaimed before all the world. Jesus himself had not accepted the title 'Messiah', because it would have suggested a mistaken, human idea of power and deliverance. Yet now the title can remain publicly displayed above the Crucified Christ. He is indeed the king of the world. Now he is truly 'lifted up'. In sinking to the depths he rose to the heights. Now he has radically fulfilled the commandment of love, he has completed the offering of himself, and in this way he is now the revelation of the true God, the God who is love. Now we know who God is. Now we know what true kingship is. Jesus prays Ps 22, which begins with the words: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Ps 22. 2). He takes to himself the whole suffering people of Israel, all of suffering humanity, the drama of God's darkness, and he makes God present in the very place where he seems definitively vanquished and absent. The Cross of Jesus is a cosmic event. The world is darkened, when the Son of God is given up to death. The earth trembles. And on the Cross, the Church of the Gentiles is born. The Roman centurion understands this, and acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God. From the Cross he triumphs ever anew.

THIRTEENTH STATION

Jesus is taken down from the Cross

Jesus is dead. From his heart, pierced by the lance of the Roman soldier, flow blood and water: a mysterious image of the stream of the sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist, by which the Church is constantly reborn from the opened heart of the Lord. Jesus' legs are not broken, like those of the two men crucified with him. He is thus revealed as the true Paschal lamb, not one of whose bones must be broken (cf. Ex 12. 46). And now, at the end of his sufferings, it is clear that, for all the dismay which filled men's hearts, for all the power of hatred and cowardice, he was never alone. There are faithful ones who remain with him. Under the Cross stand Mary, his Mother, the sister of his Mother, Mary, Mary Magdalene and the disciple whom he loved. A wealthy man, Joseph of Arimathea, appears on the scene: a rich man is able to pass through the eye of a needle, for God has given him the grace. He buries Jesus in his own empty tomb, in a garden. At Jesus' burial, the cemetery becomes a garden, the garden from which Adam was cast out when he abandoned the fullness of life, his Creator. The garden tomb symbolizes that the dominion of death is about to end. A member of the Sanhedrin also comes along, Nicodemus, to whom Jesus had proclaimed the mystery of rebirth by water and the Spirit. Even in the Sanhedrin, which decreed his death, there is a believer, someone who knows and recognizes Jesus after his death. In this hour of immense grief, of darkness and despair, the light of hope is mysteriously present. The hidden God continues to be the God of life, ever near. Even in the night of death, the Lord continues to be our Lord and Saviour. The Church of Jesus Christ, his new family, begins to take shape.

FOURTEENTH STATION

Jesus is laid in the tomb

Jesus, disgraced and mistreated, is honourably buried in a new tomb. Nicodemus brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight, which gives off a precious scent. In the Son's self-offering, as at his anointing in Bethany, we see an 'excess' which evokes God's generous and superabundant love. God offers himself unstintingly. If God's measure is superabundance, then we for our part should consider nothing too much for God. This is the teaching of Jesus himself, in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5. 20). But we should also remember the words of Saint Paul, who says that God 'through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere. We are the aroma of Christ' (2 Cor 2. 14ff.). Amid the decay of ideologies, our faith needs once more to be the fragrance which returns us to the path of life. At the very moment of his burial, Jesus' words are fulfilled: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (Jn 12. 24). Jesus is the grain of wheat which dies. From that lifeless grain of wheat comes forth the great multiplication of bread which will endure until the end of the world. Jesus is the bread of life which can satisfy superabundantly the hunger of all humanity and provide its deepest nourishment. Through his Cross and Resurrection, the eternal Word of God became flesh and bread for us. The mystery of the Eucharist already shines forth in the burial of Jesus.