

Reflection on Good Friday Hymns

Were you there, when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

I love this hymn which began our sung worship today. But its questions are strange, aren't they, because clearly, we weren't there.

We weren't there when Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem, with crowds hailing him as King.

We weren't there when Judas slipped out from supper, and received his pieces of silver, and betrayed Jesus.

We weren't there when Jesus was arrested in the garden, as he tried to find comfort in prayer.

We weren't there when he was questioned by the Sanhedrin, and then by Pilate. Are you a King?

We weren't there when Pilate asked the crowd, '*Who shall I release to you?*' and they all shouted, '*Barabbas.*'

We weren't there as Jesus was whipped, and a crown of thorns pressed on his head.

We weren't there as he was led through the streets of Jerusalem, weighed down by the wooden bar of his cross.

We weren't there as the nails were driven through his hands and feet.

We weren't there.

But every year we choose to come together and remember. Every year we choose to allow the horror of the events to fill our minds and our hearts. Every year we choose to take time to be with Jesus in the pain, and the sorrow, and the suffering.

Every year we choose to gather, on Good Friday.

Because though we weren't there, on that dark day, 2000 years ago, we know that the events of that day have given us new life today, have bought our freedom, have won our forgiveness. We gather because we know that he did it for us.

I often wonder about the folk who stood around the cross on that first Good Friday.

We imagine his mother, Mary, and the other disciples, up close, weeping, trying to offer Jesus the little comfort that they could, in those long hours that he hung there.

Wondering how it could have come to this? Wondering if it was all over now?

And then slightly further away, those who'd heard a bit about this Jesus, and were interested, thinking about the stories they'd heard, wondering if there was something special about this man. Watching carefully as, in the midst of his pain, Jesus interacted with soldiers and family members, and with the others who hung beside him. Hearing those words, *'Woman behold your son.'* *'Father, forgive them.'* *'Today you'll be with me in paradise.'* Hearing and wondering what it could all mean.

And then the passers-by, who just happened to be going that way, as they journeyed to and from Jerusalem. They'd probably seen many crucifixions before, today's was nothing new. Busy. Disinterested. Blind. Minds full of other things. Going about their business.

And then the soldiers, those who made a living out of the cruel business of crucifixion. Those whose job it was to inflict the pain, ensure the death happened. Was it just another day's work for them, had they become hardened to the cruelty, cut off from any empathy with the suffering?

Jesus died for each person there that day, and for each person throughout history. He died for his mother, and his disciples; he died for the interested and the disinterested. He died for the soldiers. And he died for you, and for me.

I love our second hymn, *'Just as I am'* because of its honesty. I love the way that it names so many human responses to what we see on the cross. It speaks of how even as people of faith we are often tossed about by conflict and doubt. It speaks of the reality of spiritual poverty, and of fear. It speaks of humanity's blindness to what happened that Good Friday.

And it speaks of Jesus' invitation to come to him. Those open arms extended from the cross, to each and every one, to those who love him, and those who don't, to those of faith and those without it. Jesus' invitation, constantly, lovingly, longingly, extended from the cross.

And it speaks of our response, as people of faith, that just as we are, we will come.

The New Testament uses many different metaphors to try to explain what happened on the cross. We're given the language of the slave market, that through the cross we

are ransomed, we are bought, the price is paid for our freedom. And we're given the language of atonement, using the Old Testament language of a sacrifice that is made for our forgiveness. We're given the language of family relationship, that because of the cross our relationship with God can be restored, we can be adopted as children of God, as co-heirs with Christ.

There's so much richness in each of these different images and metaphors for what happened on the cross.

But I love the power of this line from our third hymn that puts it all so simply, *'It was my sin that held him there.'* It was my sin that held him there. The reason that a price needed to be paid, the reason that a sacrifice needed to be made, the reason that a relationship needed to be restored, was my sin, and your sin, and the sin of the world.

And that means every word I've spoken that I shouldn't have done, every deed done that was not rooted in love, every moment when I saw need and looked away, when I failed to love my neighbour as I love myself. The way that I contribute to unjust systems that help the rich to grow richer and keep the poor in poverty. My sin, our sin, the sin of the world.

That's why Jesus died. That's why the cross was necessary.

I remember a Bishop arguing that this line should be re-written. That it should say, *'It was his love that held him there.'* And of course, it's true, it was his love, it was Jesus' love, as a response to our sin that held him there. Both are true.

But each Good Friday, we're invited to reflect again on ourselves as sinners, on our need for God's forgiveness, and on the beautiful but sobering truth, that as Jesus hung on the cross, it was *our* sin, and his loving response, that held him there.

Several of our traditional Good Friday hymns end with a verse about our response. *'My song is love unknown'* ends with the beautiful words, *'Here might I stand and sing.... This is my friend, in whose sweet praise, I all my days would gladly spend.'*

But for me, the most powerful, the most heart-felt, the most comprehensive words of response, come in the hymn, *'When I survey the wondrous cross'* which we will end with today. With the words, *'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.'*

I guess like the rest of us, I struggle sometimes at the thought of really surrendering everything to God, of really being willing to be lifted high or cast down low, to live in plenty or to live in want, to receive blessings or to have them taken away. I struggle at the thought of really giving everything to God, of Him really being enough for me.

But it's when I contemplate the cross, when I see the love of God that took Jesus there, when I see the price that was paid, and the suffering that was endured for me, something stirs in my heart and I find that I *do* want to give everything, that I *do* want to surrender everything, that I *do* want to follow Jesus, whatever the cost.

In times of doubt, and in times of struggle, these words can become something of an anthem for our lives. It's the love of Jesus, as he hung on the cross for each one of us, that makes sense of why we do what we do. And every Good Friday we're brought back to its truth.

'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.'

Amen.