

Good Friday Reflections Text 2

Devotion - Matthew 27.54-61

One of my favourite choral works for Passiontide is Pergolesi's Stabat Mater. If you don't know it, the poem dates from the 13C (possibly even earlier) and is a meditation on Mary's grief and sorrow as she stood beside the cross, watching her son die. Pergolesi composed his setting of the devotional poem when he was dying of tuberculosis and the mournful, plaintive music captures the anguish of Mary, and all those who watch with her, at the foot of the Cross.

There is little respite in the accounts of the death of Jesus but amidst the betrayal, agony and abandonment there were also moments of devotion. Not everyone deserted him. St John tells us that Mary, Jesus' mother was standing 'near the foot of the cross', as the 'sword' that Simeon had foretold 'pierced her soul.' Beside her was the apostle John, who, at Jesus' request, took her back to his home.

There were more faithful women there too. Matthew tells us that they had followed Jesus down from Galilee and, like Luke, he lets slip that it was this group of women who had been supporting Jesus financially. They kept watch, 'looking on at a distance'.

Golgotha was, in effect, an open-air torture chamber: a truly horrible place to be. Bodies writhing and sinking in agony; punctuated with shrieks and groans; curses and blasphemies. The indifference and laughter of the soldiers gambling at the foot of the cross. The taunts of passers-by, 'He saved others, he cannot save himself'. How true!

Why did the women stay? Because they loved him and love always wants to be close to the beloved. They watched and did not turn away. As anyone who has sat by the side of someone dying, that takes a special kind of courage. Even more so, when the person is a condemned criminal. They would always be associated with him and more than that, according to the Jewish law – 'cursed is every man who dies on a tree'. Jesus was made ritually unclean by the process of crucifixion, and they were still willing to remain there, next to the pollution. Their watch was one of faithful endurance and they kept it to the end, so that they saw where Jesus was laid.

And Joseph of Arimathea, who found the boldness to ask Pilate for Jesus' body. His was another form of devotion. A member of the Sanhedrin, he had already demonstrated his courage by not supporting the vote to get rid of Jesus, now he was willing to risk permanent social humiliation and religious exclusion by giving Jesus a burial place. Indeed, a burial place that had been made for himself. John's Gospel tells us that Joseph was joined by another Pharisee, Nicodemus – the one who came to Jesus by night. Now he too was willing to make a public declaration that he was a disciple. In these men devotion was both courageous and generous. And, like the women who anointed Jesus in the house of Simon the leper, they 'did what they could'.