

HOLY WEEK REFLECTIONS

The Reverend Canon Dr Roland Riem, Canon Chancellor and Vice-Dean of Winchester Cathedral, will lead a series of online reflections over the Triduum (Maundy Thursday to Easter Day).

The reflections are based on connecting the Passion story with the poetry of R.S. Thomas and comprise music and readings by members of the Cathedral community. The reflections will be published on this webpage each day.

		Hymn	Reading	Poetry from R.S. Thomas
Reflection 1 (From Page 2)	Maundy Thursday, released on Thursday 1 st April	<i>Great God, your love has called us here</i>	John 13.1-17, 31b-35	Via Negativa, 220
Reflection 2 (From Page 7)	Meditation 1 Woman anointing, released on Friday 2 nd April	<i>Take my life and let it be</i>	Mark 14.1-9	Bread, 93
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With thanks to The Orion Publishing Group Ltd for use of the poetry of R.S. Thomas, and to Stainer & Bell Ltd for use of *Great God, your love has called us here* by Brian A. Wren.

REFLECTION 1 | MAUNDY THURSDAY

1st April 2021

Reading

John 13.1-17, 31b-35, read by Sophie Rowe

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And 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. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Hymn

Great God, your love has called us here

Great God, your love has called us here
as we, by love, for love were made.
Your living likeness still we bear,
though marred, dishonored, disobeyed.
We come, with all our heart and mind
your call to hear, your love to find.

We come with self-inflicted pains
of broken trust and chosen wrong,
half-free, half-bound by inner chains,
by social forces swept along,
 by powers and systems close confined,
 yet seeking hope for humankind.

Great God, in Christ you call our name
and then receive us as your own,
not through some merit, right or claim,
but by your gracious love alone.
 We strain to glimpse your mercy seat
 and find you kneeling at our feet.

Then take the towel, and break the bread,
and humble us, and call us friends.
Suffer and serve till all are fed,
and show how grandly love intends
 to work till all creation sings,
 to fill all worlds, to crown all things.

Great God, in Christ you set us free
your life to live, your joy to share.
Give us your Spirit's liberty
to turn from guilt and dull despair
 and offer all that faith can do
 while love is making all things new.

Reflection

Via Negativa, R.S. Thomas

Here we begin a series of meditations connecting the Passion story to the poetry of R S Thomas - poems like this, entitled *Via Negativa*, the Way of Negation:

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.

Missing, but only just missing God's touch.

We shouldn't be too hard on Peter, gusting from cold to hot in response to Jesus. God is hard to find if you are looking in the wrong place, hard to follow if your expectations are false.

Let's take a look at Jesus and Peter, these two passing as ships in the night.

First, Jesus. If we're talking ships, he is like the ocean liner. There's no stopping him, steering a stately course through death back to the Father, from whom he came in the first place.

We know his disciples will soon flee from him; but perhaps we miss the obvious: Jesus will not flee from them. He'll never flinch from the purpose of his journey, to love his own from start to finish, from beginning to end, and to love them with the abiding love that he shared with the Father from the beginning and would continue to share with the Father to the end.

How could Peter miss all this?

Yes, he's impetuous, but more than this, he's human. His horizons are set too small. He knows what to expect of a leader and he knows what to expect after a day on the road, and between these two expectations lies an imaginative abyss – a leader does not deal in dust.

But Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, and ties a towel around himself. Then he pours water into a basin and begins to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

The Evangelist paints a slow portrait of Jesus taking what the Father has placed into his hands as he faces death, namely, his disciples' feet. Their feet are in his hands. It's the epitome of what it means for God to love people to the end, to enslave himself to their creaturely need, to serve every far facet of their humanity.

The narrative gradually discloses what it means to love in practice, but the slow pace of the plot ratchets up the horror of the act as Peter observes it. When Jesus finally arrives at his feet, he feels duty bound to fend off his master's embarrassing ministrations. Maybe the other disciples have failed to understand Jesus's place at table, but he certainly hasn't. 'No, Lord, you shall never wash my feet!'

Peter is unprepared to accept this love. He's determined to make himself subservient. When Jesus insists he must be washed, Peter says, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' He wants Jesus to be above him, to be over him; not under him, loving him.

Why no! I never thought other than
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In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
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Missing, but only just missing God's hand in our lives. Peter is in the same room as Jesus, being cleansed by Jesus, being spoken to by Jesus, and yet he doesn't understand; he doesn't know where or how to look.

That's why we return to this washing of feet at the beginning of this most intense period of Holy Week, to re-set our sights on God. We're grateful to Peter for doing what we all do, being slow on the uptake and resistant to God. We're like the parched earth, unable to absorb the drops of rain landing on it.

And here lies the wisdom of Jesus as Peter refuses him: accept it now; understand it later.

And here lies the wisdom for us today. There's too much for us to take in, and too much stuff in our heads to make much progress; but here we are with Christ anyway, with our half-baked ideas and hungry hearts, both dreading and longing for His touch. And we hear again this slow story of God being right among us, but in the wrong place for us to accept him yet.

R S Thomas's poem is called *Via Negativa*, the Way of Negation. The Way of Negation is a tried and tested way to know more of the living God beyond our categories and constructs. For R S Thomas it was the only way - to look in the gaps between, to read between the lines, to crucify all false expectations.

If we are frustrated by the prospect of doing this, then we can either give up trying to find hope in Jesus, as Judas did, or accept that our frustrations are borne of a desire for God – we are hungry and thirsting for the God we do not truly know, yet whom we are longing to meet.

Christ was very straight with Peter's ignorance and desire. He needed to be cleansed, whether he understood it or not. He needed to accept the sign that he was cleansed, whether he was prepared to receive it gladly or not. Peter needed to meet Christ on His elusive terms, on the terms of Christ's cleansing.

If we want to know God, we must learn the ways of God – in echoes, footprints, and signs like the towel that Christ takes up and puts to our feet. It is a scandal that Christ should take hold of our feet when we have so much more engaging and attractive elements to our personalities with which to impress him. But he offers no more nor less than what we need to be part of Him.

So let's not step too quickly into making this 'cleansing' a glorious idea to polish in our mind's eye - Christ the leader and servant, a remarkable example of humility for us all to emulate on our better days. Let's try to stay instead with Peter's recoiling foot. You, Lord, are in the wrong place. You are confounding my expectations of you. You cannot be useful to me while you kneel before me as a slave would.

This is the sign given to jolt us into negative space.

We are indeed called to wash one another's feet, to follow Christ's example, but what that means in spirit and truth can only be discerned once we give up rehearsing our own virtue and begin instead to follow God into the desolate places where he has left his footprint, and where his echo still resounds.

The cross is where Christ is going, the place where God can never be tied down even though His flesh is nailed there. How can we serve if we have not first learned to have our own feet grasped by Jesus, so that there's no escaping the demands of divine love?

Later you will understand; for now, accept it. Accept that there is nothing that you quite understand or grasp. Accept now that you are understood and grasped by Christ, and that he is going ahead of us on the way to Golgotha.

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
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Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
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REFLECTION 2 | GOOD FRIDAY, MEDITATION 1

Woman anointing | Good Friday, 2nd April 2021

Reading

Mark 14: 1-9, read by Fiona Bell

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

Hymn

Take my life and let it be

Take my life and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee.
Take my moments and my days;
let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands and let them move
at the impulse of thy love.
Take my feet and let them be
swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my voice and let me sing
always, only, for my King.
Take my lips and let them be
filled with messages from thee.

Take my silver and my gold;
not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use
every power as thou shalt choose.

Take my will and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart it is thine own,
it shall be thy royal throne.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee.

Reflection

Bread, R.S Thomas

Hunger was loneliness, betrayed
By the pitiless candour of the stars'
Talk, in an old byre he prayed

Not for food: to pray was to know
Waking from a dark dream to find
The white loaf on the white snow;

Not for warmth, warmth brought the rain's
Blurring of the essential point
Of ice probing his raw pain.

He prayed for love, love that would share
His rags' secret; rising he broke
Like sun crumbling the gold air

The live bread for the starved folk.

We're looking in this time together for where God is to be found. Theology teaches that God is not one thing among others; God is spirit and is to be found in, beyond and above all things. And experience teaches that God must be sought and received. He's not plonked on our plates to consume or inspect. It takes a certain effort and attitude to meet him.

R S Thomas's poem Bread is about what happens when God is sought in the right way, and so found. And perhaps we ought to stress on this Good Friday that not only is God findable, but God wants to be found. God is the one who is seeking us out, going to extremes to bring us home, as we discovered yesterday as we found him beneath us, washing our feet.

God seeks us out in the depths of our need. And how directly we see it here, a man praying in a byre - a 'lowly cattleshed' - knowing that deep hunger which lies at the root of our misery. In centrally heated homes, filled with artificial light and electronic devices to extend our power and diffuse our attention, we forget the chill of the stars, the razor clarity with which they communicate to each other across the expanse of the cosmos. We forget that piercing sense of multitudinous-ness that makes us feel so piteously small.

We forget the bone-numbing cold of being outdoors for long stretches, which makes us know our abject weakness and feel the struggle even to breathe.

But without that uncomfortable, gnawing sense of our emptiness, how can we ever feel the hunger of the soul to be joined to what is Other, to make us more than our solitary, isolated selves.

That is why, after his baptism, the Holy Spirit hurls Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. He needed to be alone and empty, for his following ministry to have depth. St Mark tells us that he was with the wild beasts, a detail which, like the stars in the poem, emphasises Jesus' loneliness and exposure to the wilderness around him. And Luke and Matthew give an account of the particular temptations Jesus faced: both begin with the temptation to meet his hunger by turning stone into bread.

It's a temptation faced by the man in the byre too: 'Man does not live by bread alone, but from every word that comes from the mouth of God'. So he prays ...

Not for food: to pray was to know
Waking from a dark dream to find
The white loaf on the white snow;

Could there be a more beautiful description of the consolation of prayer, which another poet describes as 'exalted manna'? 'The white loaf on the white snow' holds the sense that in prayer there's a satisfaction of the spirit which is, at the same time, a sanctification of the heart, a release from the churn of a fearful unconscious.

The man will not pray for warmth, either. The byre, stars and snow offer an almost Christmas-card quality, but this is still a Welsh winter, with ice - ice that makes the raw pain of being human all the more immediate and testing.

The icy pain of being human and hungry must not be blurred; something more fundamental must be sought to meet and match our usually half-hidden poverty.

He prayed for love, love that would share
His rags' secret;

This praying man finds what he is seeking; and becomes what he's seeking – living bread - granted not for himself alone but to feed the ravenous others:

rising he broke
Like sun crumbling the gold air

The live bread for the starved folk.

The connection with the bible reading is not too hard to find. It's also about love – this time the love of an otherwise anonymous woman. Only in the 4th century was she identified as Mary Magdalene.

Mark the dramatist enjoys the sudden intrusion of the woman at dinner and the sheer extravagance of her offering – it's an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, pure nard. The jar is broken, and the ointment poured out on Jesus' head.

The disciples, as ever, don't get it. They just see a waste of good ointment, which could have been sold for a good cause; but they see neither her own sacrifice, nor what she's doing for Jesus, nor how what she is doing fits with God's plans. This woman does for him now what the two Marys and Salome will later fail to do as they find his body missing from the tomb.

We're not told anything about the woman's inner world in this story; we only see her actions, which were bold, and her lavish generosity towards Jesus. It's for him to interpret what she's done and to underline its significance, just as he does when the widow puts her two small copper coins – which, he says, were 'all that he had' – into the Temple treasury.

But we may assume that what she did, she did out of a devotion to Jesus, and that with other characters in the gospel she represents those following the way of God: 'Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake and for the gospel will save it.'

The woman is an agent of God's purposes, a stepping-stone for Jesus on the way to his Passion. And therefore, Jesus accords her the highest possible dignity: 'what she has done will be told in remembrance of her', as part of the universal proclamation of the gospel.

God is present in, through and before this woman as she anoints Jesus with her precious nard; and, despite this, we have no idea what she felt or experienced in the moment, other than hearing the debate that blew up around her, with which she might not have felt entirely comfortable.

And this reminds us of the cross, on which Jesus himself felt godforsaken. Jesus did not find God on the cross, though he earnestly sought him there. Yet we believe that on the cross Jesus was revealed most fully as Son of God - and those with eyes to see, like the centurion at the foot of the cross, noticed this.

Jesus on the cross, the man in the byre rising from his prayer, the woman breaking the costly contents of her flask over Jesus' head have one thing in common: they are devoting themselves wholly to Love, and they are meeting God in the extremity of that loving.

If we seek God in a sense of satisfaction and warmth, in a sense that something special and extra needs adding to our lives, we are barking up the wrong tree. The way we know God, at present reflected darkly, is in a sense of being stretched and emptied. It's not comfortable path, but it is the way of the cross.

As St Paul reminds us of this breaking of the bread of life and pouring out of the wine of salvation:

Though he was in the form of God,
Christ did not count equality with God
As something to be grasped,
But emptied himself
Taking the form of a slave,
Becoming as human beings are.
And being found in human form,
He humbled himself,
And became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.

What comes of this emptying is finally in God's hands, but those who love like this already share in the glory of the angels, as R S Thomas reminds us by his man in the byre, who prays for love alone and rises into the gold air to feed a famished world.

REFLECTION 3 | GOOD FRIDAY, MEDITATION 2

Dishonest Steward | Good Friday, 2nd April 2021

Reading

Luke 16.1-8, read by Louise Salmond Smith

Then Jesus said to the disciples, 'There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty." Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty." And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.'

Hymn

Ah holy Jesu, how hast thou offended?

Ah, holy Jesu, how hast thou offended,
that we to judge thee have in hate pretended?
By foes derided, by thine own rejected,
O most afflicted!

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesu, hath undone thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesu, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee.

Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered;
the slave hath sinned, and the Son hath suffered.
For our atonement, while we nothing heeded,
God interceded.

For me, kind Jesu, was thy incarnation,
thy mortal sorrow, and thy life's oblation;
thy death of anguish and thy bitter passion,
for my salvation.

Therefore, kind Jesu, since I cannot pay thee,
I do adore thee, and will ever pray thee,

think on thy pity and thy love unswerving,
not my deserving.

Reflection

They, R.S. Thomas

I take their hands,
Hard hands. There is no love
For such, only a willed
Gentleness. Negligible men
From the village, from the small
Holdings, they bring their grief
Sullenly to my back door,
And are speechless. Seeing them
In the wind with the light's
Halo, watching their eyes,
Blur, I know the reason
They cry, their worsting
By one whom they will fight.

Daily the sky mirrors
The water, the water the
Sky. Daily I take their side
In their quarrel, calling their faults
Mine. How do I serve so
This being they have shut out
Of their houses, their thoughts, their lives?

Let's be honest. There's only so many people we can love, and the people we find easiest to love are the ones most similar to us, with whom we have a natural kinship. Something in common binds us in sympathy with them, whether shared character, values, interests or beliefs.

Unfortunately, this sort of love cannot save the world because it is partial and therefore divisive. From each individual perspective, it divides the population into a small circle, in which we invest our care, and the rest, the multitude, the 'them'.

R S Thomas's poem 'They' makes no bones about the 'them'. The villagers who come to him as their priest with their petty griefs are not in the least appealing to him. They fail to rouse his compassion. He musters gentleness as he takes their hard hands, not as a friend or lover, but as a doctor would. When he looks at their eyes, watching them blur with tears, he feels nothing for them, but sees through to cause of their distress – their alienation from God, the God whom he serves and they fight.

Why, then, does he bother with them, the sullen and speechless? They are, after all, negligible men from small holdings. And Thomas is not at all like them, and honestly, he doesn't like them much at all.

There's a break before the replying verse of the poem, and a change in tone. It begins:

Daily the sky mirrors

The water, the water the
Sky.

The water and the sky belong to completely different spheres, and in some ways are polar opposites; yet they're brought together in the natural landscape by mirroring. Opposites can stand in the place of the other. And so it is that the gap between 'us' and 'them' can be crossed, even the largest gap of all, between God and Man; and it's this thought that makes Thomas cross the ground between him and them - those insignificant, sullen specimens for whom God in Christ was made Man.

... Daily I take their side
In their quarrel, calling their faults
Mine. How do I serve so
This being they have shut out
Of their houses, their thoughts, their lives?

It's a remarkable crossing over that Thomas makes. He doesn't say that he cares for these others by telling them what to believe or how to hope. You might expect a clergyman to put up a fair fight for God in these circumstances, to take advantage of those weak from disbelief.

Instead, Thomas says something completely surprising: as unfailingly as the sky mirrors the water – daily – so he takes the other's side in their quarrel against God – daily. He bears their griefs and carries their sorrows. How else is there to be compassion, and how else is there to be healing of the rift between common and hard-handed humanity and their God, the one who takes their hand, as he does ours, with a willed gentleness born of patient, compassionate love?

Crossing the ground between I and they is fundamental to the reconciliation God wills for all creation. The imperative to love like this is set before us in the second great commandment: 'Love your neighbour as yourself', which is to say, love whomsoever lies in proximity to you as you love yourself.

The parable of the dishonest steward is a provocation to love like this. In Luke's Gospel it's bundled up with a lot of other teaching about the use of money, but there's a core lesson at the heart of the story.

A wealthy landowner has discovered that his trusted steward has been squandering his resources. He's going to fire him, but to make succession planning easier he commands him to write up the state of the current accounts, to provide a list of his assets and his debtors.

The steward, knowing exactly what the future holds for him, acts smartly. He uses the time he has left to feather his own nest by gaining favour with debtors. He calls them in and writes off large swathes of their debt, as much as half for some goods. While [some] interpreters think he was again acting dishonestly to do this, others believe he was simply writing off his own commission, which in those days was not reckoned separately but added to the IOU.

And the master commends the steward for his prudence.

The traditions following this parable turn it into a lesson about good stewardship and the right use of money. Luke likes to turn parables into example stories – the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, ends with Jesus saying, Go and do likewise – but here he can hardly commend unrighteousness.

Instead, it's the astuteness of the steward that is commended. The children of light need to be smart about how they handle money, to gain their master's approval come the day of reckoning.

But this story is about more than astuteness. It's a shining example of how even the dishonest, when push comes to shove, can realise the value of loving their neighbour as themselves. In this emergency, the dishonest steward is forced to put himself in the shoes of the debtors to win their favour; and so the steward crosses the ground between himself and the clients who he had formerly used solely for profit, and he treats them as he would like to have been treated himself.

What would it be like if the children of light learned the prudence and astuteness of treating others like this? Would God's name be hallowed? Would his kingdom come? And the truth is, it's hard to know for sure.

The genius of R S Thomas's poem is that it leaves him and us to wonder whether empathy of this magnitude works:

[Even though ...] Daily I take their side
In their quarrel, calling their faults
Mine. How do I serve so
This being they have shut out
Of their houses, their thoughts, their lives?

How does a child of light serve God by showing solidarity with those who have deliberately shut this light out? That is the question of redemption. And it's one Luke answers later as Jesus is set between two thieves on the cross:

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

Jesus, the Child of Light, is being watched by many, jeered by some. They want to know what he will do to save himself. But that is not his plan. His plan is to serve God alone. So he doesn't waste words to justify himself. His body, though, is eloquent. It is obvious, because of where his body is, that he's sharing in the condemnation of the wicked, and out of the two thieves, the neighbours of Jesus sharing that moment of crisis, one recognises the injustice of his position.

Christ says nothing in his defence to either of the thieves, even when challenged directly by one to justify himself. He hangs between them, sharing their pain and their punishment. But the fact that Christ has crossed to the side of the unrighteous prompts the other criminal to repent and ask for his mercy.

There are many ways to interpret Christ's silence on the way to the cross. It's certainly a way in which he avoids self-justification and self-glorification. But mostly, I believe, it's the way in which he stands in solidarity with us, as we stand dumb and sullen before our Maker, resenting his absence, yearning for deliverance. When rough hands are used on him, he offers back only the open palms of blessing, and his wrists for nailing.

Thus he serves
This being we have shut out

Of our houses, our thoughts, our lives.

And thus death's waves are remirrored,
To mirror again the sky.

REFLECTION 4 | GOOD FRIDAY, MEDITATION 3

Cursing of Fig Tree | Good Friday, 2nd April 2021

Reading

Matthew 21: 18-22 16.1-8, read by Lizzie Waine

In the morning, when Jesus returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?' Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea", it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.'

Hymn

God the all-terrible

God the all-terrible! King, who ordainest
great winds thy clarions, lightnings thy sword,
show forth thy pity on high where thou reignest;
give to us peace in our time, O Lord.

God the omnipotent! Mighty avenger,
watching invisible, judging unheard,
save us in mercy, O save us from danger;
give to us peace in our time, O Lord.

God the all-merciful! Earth hath forsaken
thy ways of blessedness, slighted thy Word;
bid not thy wrath in its terrors awaken;
give to us peace in our time, O Lord.

God the all-righteous One! Man hath defied thee;
yet to eternity standeth thy Word;
falsehood and wrong shall not tarry beside thee;
give to us peace in our time, O Lord.

God the all-wise! By the fire of thy chast'ning,
earth shall to freedom and truth be restored;
through the thick darkness thy kingdom is hast'ning;
thou wilt give peace in thy time, O Lord.

Reflection

Judgement Day, R.S. Thomas

Yes, that's how I was,
I know that face,
That bony figure
Without grace
Of flesh or limb:
In health happy,
Careless of the claim
Of the world's sick
Or the world's poor;
In pain craven –
Lord, breathe once more
On that sad mirror,
Let me be lost
In mist for ever
Rather than own
Such bleak reflections,
Let me go back
On my two knees
Slowly to undo
The knot of life
That was tied there.

R S Thomas's poem *Judgement Day* is actually one of his most hopeful. It's not a poem about a distant future when God will call us to account for crimes of which we had no sense at all. It returns us instead to the failures to love which, if we give them a moment's thought, burden our past. The poem begins with a confession: yes, that's how it was – with the clarity of hindsight.

And in the rear-view mirror Thomas sees himself younger and carefree – 'in health happy'. Yet it's a shallow happiness, a complacency even. The things associated with youth, fullness of flesh and fleetness of limb, he now deems graceless. He sees a bony figure, emaciated of true life.

In that youthful frame so much is shut out of the picture. Thomas is not simply care-free but care-less – careless of the claim of the world's sick, of the world's poor. In the terminology of our age, he is self-isolated. And the stark reason for this is his desire to avoid the boundless suffering of the world. His former self is 'in pain craven', craven - a rare word which jumps from the page: contemptibly cowardly.

But to be 'craven in pain' is part of our evolutionary heritage. We're wired to avoid pain to preserve life. A baby will cry at the first sign of discomfort but smile and chortle when in pleasure. It's a great survival strategy. As we grow up, however, we discover the life that we have so deliberately established is for giving away, that gracefulness involves sacrifice, and that there is a way of living in human fulness which is a way of dying.

To live in fullness of life, our natural defences need refining, and this is not something that we can do for ourselves. We need to reach out for the Creator's power. So in the centre of this poem stands the prayer, 'Lord, breathe once more ...'

God's breath first made Adam a living being, and this breath will bring life again, though only through destruction and death.

This is the Judgement Day: when God's breath mists the glass of our false and reprehensible self; the Day when we see the sadness of our true isolation; the Day when we would rather wish ourselves lost than to be left in such a pitiable state. This judgement is an act of mercy, because it makes an end to the false self and marks a new, if painful, beginning:

On Judgement Day Thomas prays to God:

Let me go back
On my two knees
Slowly to undo
The knot of life
That was tied there.

Going back into the past to remake, though God's judgement and mercy, a new and living self – that is the journey before us. Our remaking happens slowly and painfully. To grow we cannot avoid pain, the pain of whatever is unfruitful withering, and the pain of the word's suffering, which the new self is called to bear. It's only through pain and the destruction of the false that the knot of life can be unpicked and fully untied.

This opens a door into understanding the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree. Our ecological sensibilities make the cursing problematic: why blame a tree for being fruitless? And of Christ himself we wonder, if you were hungry, why did you – you who refused in the wilderness to turn stones into bread - misuse your powers to destroy what could not feed you?

But this event is an acted parable. Jesus is coming into Jerusalem, and to the Temple, God's own dwelling place. So much fruitfulness was expected of this city, because of its unique calling. It was to become a source of light and blessing for all the nations and creation. As Isaiah prophesied:

for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory ...

You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married;
for the Lord delights in you,
and your land shall be married.

By rejecting Jesus, the City was to exchange the promise of blessing for a curse. No light could shine from Jerusalem until darkness had descended over whole land, no fruitfulness until The Temple and all its false glory had shrivelled.

Jesus put a fig tree at the heart of his prophetic message. The ritual splendour of the Temple had done nothing to bring righteousness to Israel. A show of greenery was not nearly enough; real fruit was required. When righteousness came to visit God's people in the person of Jesus and was rejected, what else was Jerusalem but a withered fig tree?

In its shrivelling, this tree was given a noble purpose: to stand as a sign of the coming judgement on the City, to show that it had brought nothing but curse upon the land. Where there should have been Delight, there was only Desolation.

In our post-Covid world we see all too clearly the moral connection between human action and the fruitfulness of creation. The withered fig tree stands as a sad reflection of our lost opportunity to live righteously.

But judgement by God is never the end. It clears the way for something new. R S Thomas's poem is, significantly, one continuous sentence, starting with judgement but ending with a reversal beginning: the knot of life, so tightly bound, being loosened by grace, prayer and courage. Judgement needs facing for it to bear fruit.

There was only one who could face the judgment signified by the tree's withering and that was the one who cursed it. He had to do exactly what Thomas imagined in his poem: to own a history of disobedience, which had left the sick and poor beyond redemption.

Jesus had been doing this for his ministry, showing the crowd what righteousness meant, using the power that he had to be with the sick and poor, to heal them and offer them life-giving teaching about a kingdom in which they would inherit the earth and see God.

Many did not understand, and the authorities came to see him as a threat to the balance of power they'd established to protect their interests under Roman rule.

Christ stepped into this sorry history to reverse it, to untie the knot of life, tangled over centuries of faithless, fearful compromise. And on the cross, he stepped into the curse caused by the nation's neglect of compassion, neglect of mercy and neglect of courage. He gathered this tangled web of sin and death and remade it in righteousness, peace and resurrection.

On the tree of death Christ shared fully in the withering and fruitlessness of his people, but through his continuing trust in God's breath to remake the world, his body became the first new fruit of God's kingdom, a fruit able to flourish in even the most barren of lands.

That's why Matthew attaches a positive lesson of prayer and faith to this cursing: 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and be thrown into the sea", it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith you will receive.'

Christ promises that those who follow him will not only be able to perform prophetic signs, as he did, but also able to uproot those systems, like the Temple on Mount Zion, which stand in the way of others receiving the lasting fruit of God's kingdom.

And it won't matter if around the faithful the world seems barren; their prayer will give them unimaginable power to put things right: even if their bodies are crushed, from them new wine will flow, because with Jesus they are the first fruits of a harvest which, at one and the same moment, brings judgement to the proud but consolation to the sick, poor and shrivelled.

REFLECTION 5 | GOOD FRIDAY, HOMILY

Good Friday, 2nd April 2021

Reading

John 18—19: 37, read by Cathy Clark

After they had eaten the supper, Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, 'I am he,' they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.' This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken, 'I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.' Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?'

So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. The woman said to Peter, 'You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?' He said, 'I am not.' Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.' When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?' Jesus answered, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?' Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now 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.

Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be

able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' (This was to fulfil what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

After he had said this, he went out to the Jewish leaders again and told them, 'I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' They shouted in reply, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.' The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.'

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?' Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.' From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, 'If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.'

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.' Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' Many of the Jews read

this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews," but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."' Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.' When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.' This was to fulfil what the scripture says, 'They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.' And that is what the soldiers did. Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.' And again another passage of scripture says, 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced.'

Hymn

It was alone the Saviour prayed

It was alone the Saviour prayed
In dark Gethsemane;
Alone He drained the bitter cup
And suffered there for me.

It was alone the Saviour stood
In Pilate's judgment hall;
Alone the crown of thorns He wore,
Forsaken thus by all.

Alone upon the cross He hung
That others He might save;
Forsaken then by God and man,
Alone, His life He gave.

Can you reject such matchless love?
Can you His claim disown?

Come, give your all in gratitude,
Nor leave Him thus alone.

Reflection

The Kingdom, R.S. Thomas

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed: mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and loves looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only, and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

It's a long way off, God's kingdom, and at the time of Jesus' trail it must have seemed a long way off indeed.

We've just heard nearly two chapters of John's Gospel, and time only allows us to consider two characters in the Passion narrative, Simon Peter and Pontius Pilate, because they help us understand the difference between desire and need, so crucial in Thomas's poem.

According to him, to enter God's kingdom, we must purge ourselves of desire and present ourselves with our need only.

Peter is portrayed in all the gospels as a bundle of desire. In John he's the one who refuses to have his feet washed at the last supper, and when Jesus insists on it, says, 'Not my feet only, but my hands and my head as well!' Always the impetuous one. He's the one in the Garden, according to St John alone, who tries to protect Jesus by using a sword, lopping off the earlobe of the high priest's servant in the process.

He is full of desire, but when the time comes to stand by Jesus in his trial, he holds back from entering the high priest's palace. When he's fetched in, the maid on the door, asks casually enough, 'Aren't you another of that man's disciples?' Peter protects himself by denying it and then goes to warm himself by the fire. St John takes this warming as a symbol of Peter's desire to preserve himself – he is by the fire as he denies Jesus twice more before cockcrow.

The contrast between Peter's defence of himself by denying his discipleship and Jesus' defence of his teaching by confessing the truth couldn't be greater, and John highlights the drama by making it abundantly clear that these two types of defence we going on simultaneously.

Peter's desire to save himself sets him a long way from God's kingdom.

Desire for self-preservation also leads Pilate astray. Once Pilate's established that Jesus is not a political threat – that his kingdom is not from this world - he sets about trying to free Jesus. He isn't interested in truth. 'What is truth?', he retorts ironically, even when the truth is staring him in the face. But he's very interested in keeping the peace and, as a Roman, he doesn't like the unruly Jews.

Offering the crowd a choice between releasing their 'king' and a bandit seems like a clever way of resolving the situation, but the people want Christ's blood. And though Pilate twice declares Christ innocent, they will not have it. They would rather have Caesar as their king than this 'Son of God'.

Pilate's desire to protect the balance of power, to manage the situation, makes his own conscience immaterial. John is clear: Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified out of fear.

So if desire – the animal instinct for survival – doesn't take us into the kingdom of heaven, what about need?

The kingdom of God is a kingdom where wrongs are righted – where the poor man is made king – a kingdom of justice and festival. It's a kingdom of healing for the consumptive and the blind and where the healing is not only physical but emotional, where those who enter know themselves to be held and loved.

Justice, healing, acceptance, joy – these are the fundamental human needs, if only we would know it.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, says, Jesus, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who know their basic need:

to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only, and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

There's no quick way into the kingdom for people like Pilate. He's a shell of a man – his principles lost in pragmatics, his conscience contingent on events. 'Behold the man', he says, pointing from himself to one wearing a purple robe and crown of thorns. And how right he is.

But there is a way back for Peter. Peter needs to know that despite his gusting desires, there is room for someone loved and loving, trusted and trusting, acceptable and accepted, in God's kingdom. What he really needs is someone to pierce his heart, to forgive his failure and to crown his life with a mission where danger is no object, where he, Simon Peter, can finally prove himself faithful.

That moment will come for the one who denied him thrice:

Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?
Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.
Feed my lambs.

Simon son of John, do you love me?
Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.
Tend my sheep.

Simon son of John, do you love me?
Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.
Feed my sheep.

On the third stroke, Peter hears himself finally, fully, vehemently confessing his love for his Lord - his desire reconciled to his need. He desires, he needs, to follow in the way of the Good Shepherd, to tend the sheep, 'mending the bent bones and the minds fractured by life'.

This faith will bud, green as a leaf, on the far-distant, kingdom side of this sombre Passion story.

REFLECTION 6 | EASTER VIGIL

Easter Eve, 3rd April 2021

Reading

Matthew 28.1-10, read by Vivien Ruddock

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Hymn

Safe in the shadow of the Lord

Safe in the shadow of the Lord,
beneath his hand and power,
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
my fortress and my tower.

My hope is set on God alone,
though Satan spreads his snare,
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
to keep me in his care.

From fears and phantoms of the night,
from foes about my way,
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
by darkness as by day.

His holy angels keep my feet
secure from every stone;
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
and unafraid go on.

Strong in the everlasting Name,
and in my Father's care,
I trust in him,

I trust in him,
who hears and answers prayer.

Safe in the shadow of the Lord,
possessed by love divine,
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
and meet his love with mine.

Reflection

The Empty Church, R.S. Thomas

They laid this stone trap
for him, enticing him with candles,
as though he would come like some huge moth
out of the darkness to beat there.
Ah, he had burned himself
before in the human flame
and escaped, leaving the reason
torn. He will not come any more

to our lure. Why then, do I kneel still
striking my prayers on a stone
heart? Is it in hope one
of them will ignite yet and throw
on its illuminated walls the shadow
of someone greater than I can understand?

Easter is a time of joy as we greet Christ risen from the tomb, and in the normal run of things our churches would be full of people and full of rejoicing.

So why a poem about an empty church to celebrate the feast?

One reason is that we can't treat gathering, certainly gathering indoors, as we did before the lockdowns; but the major reason has to do with God, specifically God's freedom.

R S Thomas challenges us to embrace the resurrection freedom we're celebrating, and to abandon our attempts to use religion to domesticate it. The living God can't be much enticed by candles, however much we may be enthralled by them. He's not like some huge moth pressing through our stained glass to beat about our buildings.

'He will not come any more to our lure'. Our fleshly devices and desires do not impress him.

The Church can be like the tomb in which Christ was laid. Both tomb and church, despite being attempts by the faithful to give Christ dignity and honour, are traps - not places where God could ever be trapped, but where our own imaginations are trapped into thinking that after Christ's crucifixion we somehow continue to have God nailed down.

Matthew's account of the resurrection, however, shows how the two Marys had their imaginations shaken up by the angel of the Lord. His appearance terrifies the guards at the grave, and he rolls back

the stone, so that the Marys can see for themselves and come to understand that Christ is no longer there but risen.

The angel tells them that Christ has gone ahead of them to Galilee, where he will meet them. But in fact, they don't get that far: we hear that Christ meets them 'suddenly'.

And however unexpected their encounter with Jesus may have been, by then they understand that this Jesus is not the one they buried; they take hold of his feet and worship him as God. Their imaginations have been set free to see him as He is.

To set us free, God needs to free himself from the traps that humanity sets for Him, not just the obvious trap of the crucifixion set by his enemies, but from the traps inadvertently laid by his friends, limits we set for ourselves about what is reasonable to expect God to demand of us, and for us to demand of God.

What is the Easter contract or *quid pro quo*, we wonder, which can set us on a safe footing with God? Is it a question of making ourselves as alluring as possible to Him with our candles and rich religious rituals? Or perhaps there are other devices or desires with which we could tempt him to us?

But Christ will not be tempted. Holy Week is the story of Christ being held to the human flame from all sides, by enemies and friends alike, by the guardians of Temple worship, by the law keepers, by the crowd baying for blood, by the truth-denying disciples – the world aflame with human desire.

And he allowed himself to be plunged into the heart of that flame on the cross.

Ah, he had burned himself
before in the human flame
and escaped, leaving the reason
torn. He will not come any more

to our lure.

If we seek God after Christ's escape from this flame in resurrection, then let's be clear: we can never trap him, by any means, ever again. In resurrection God reveals his freedom from sin and death, his freedom to love and save, his freedom to be who he will be. Traps are now out of the question.

So if we can't lure him, what may draw him close to us?

One answer is prayer. We are gathered for Easter Vigil - a time when we watch and wait for resurrection light to dawn upon us. And we bring to this Vigil a desire to persevere in seeking God, a patience for God to come in good time, a trust that he wishes to come, and a belief that that the boundless freedom which God enjoys is a freedom he freely devotes out of love to healing, reconciling, and liberating his people and all creation.

All we have to offer to God is summarised in a single word – faith. Faith is the opening we give to God to act – a persistence, a trust, a belief:

Why then, do I kneel still
striking my prayers on a stone
heart? Is it in hope one
of them will ignite yet and throw

on its illuminated walls the shadow
of someone greater than I can understand?

'Striking my prayers on a stone heart' is a wonderful image, which gives our stone hearts a positive purpose in prayer. They are what prayer strikes to spark a different sort of flame which does attract God, a flame of humble and holy desire. If our hearts were not hard, this desire could not be ignited by prayer. Stone hearts are a good foundation for a life of prayer, rather than a reason to abandon praying.

And when we pray, the hidden presence of Christ, risen among us, will be illuminated, on the walls of what seemed to be a dark and empty church, on the walls of what seemed to be a dark and empty world, on the walls of what seemed to be my own dark and empty life; and we shall see the shadow of 'someone greater than I can understand'.

Of course, the resurrection stories have Christ standing plainly amidst his disciples. The women who meet Christ on their way to Galilee hold onto his feet and worship him – ghosts do not have feet – and Thomas will even put his fingers into the wounds of Christ, so that he too can be brought from disbelief to worship.

These appearances ended, though, and now we seek the Christ who is risen and ascended, whose humanity has been raised from the earth and enthroned at the right hand of God, the Christ whose freedom now entirely matches God's. All this makes Jesus Christ today exalted, elusive, as well as intimate, company. If we see only his shadow, it's because he's always going on ahead of us, beckoning us further and deeper, with and in Him.

And would we have it any other way? Would we want to worship a God who was there on tap, who fitted into the narrow limits of reason and imagination? If we're honest, the prospect of meeting 'someone greater than we can understand' is what draws us deeper into God, what makes us return to the Easter mystery year after year asking ourselves, where next?

Faith is perseverance, trust and belief, but it's also quest and journey. We seek God not only on our knees praying, but also when we are in the world on our feet, exploring what it means to belong to Him, living in His kingdom.

And journeying with 'someone greater than I can understand' also means that I can enter into situations that I cannot understand and without solutions – crises as big as the pandemic and global warming - with the confidence that God is working within them – working with us, if we are open to his wisdom, and despite us if we are not - bringing justice and peace to birth.

Remember we started this Maundy Thursday with the Way of Negation, with the insight that God works in the spaces between what we can readily comprehend or locate:

He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.

God is working in deeper, wider and higher ways than we can ever imagine, and labouring for his kingdom in all these ways, all at once. No wonder we cannot see and know God as he is. We must rather be content with reflections, shadows, intimations of his goodness and greatness; but is that not enough? For he is not here, or there, but he is risen and everywhere, working from micron to cosmos for our salvation.

The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!