

Holy Week meditation Tuesday 19 April 2011
led by Geoffrey Barnett

The psalmist says, 'Be still and know that I am God'.
What do we know of God ?

Holy Week is the time above all others when we know the humanity of God, because it is the time when Jesus is most really and painfully human. The wonder of our Christian faith is that we know the gift of God incarnate. Of course that expression, God incarnate, encapsulates the mystery of the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Jesus. But it is the human Jesus whose last road on earth we follow this week, the via dolorosa, that we shall literally be following here tomorrow evening and of which Richard spoke last night. Then we were looking at a stirring depiction of Simon of Cyrene, locked with Jesus, as together they bore the physical load of the cross to Golgotha – two human beings.

But this Holy Week experience, culminating, as it does, in the ultimate paradox of the victory of the cross, leaves us also deeply aware of the limitations of our human perceptions. So I invite you this evening to enter into two short periods of silence, in which you let go and recognise that God is beyond our understanding and that all we really know is what God isn't. There is a whole spiritual tradition within Christianity built upon this foundation. For us in England it begins with a mystical work of the 14th century called The Cloud of Unknowing. And it had two pre-eminent exponents in the 20th century, R.S.Thomas and T.S.Eliot. By drawing our attention to what God isn't, both of these poets help to empty us of our humanity so that the ineffable God can enter the space we make within ourselves.

Each of our periods of silence – lasting just 3 or 4 minutes – will be preceded by my reading some lines of poetry. The first poem is by R.S.Thomas and is entitled Via Negativa.

‘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.'

Moving to T.S.Eliot I'm going to read a passage from one of the Four Quartets, East Coker. In one line I shall insert the words, 'that is Christ', in order to point up the relevance of the passage to this particular week.

'I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.
Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.
The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth.

The wounded surgeon (*that is Christ*) plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer's art
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.

Our only health is the disease
If we obey the dying nurse
Whose constant care is not to please
But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,
And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.

The whole earth is our hospital
Endowed by the ruined millionaire,
Wherein, if we do well, we shall
Die of the absolute paternal care
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.

The chill ascends from feet to knees,
The fever sings in mental wires.
If to be warmed, then I must freeze
And quake in frigid purgatorial fires
Of which the flame is roses, and the smoke is briars.

The dripping blood our only drink,
The bloody flesh our only food:
In spite of which we like to think
That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.’

East Coker lines 123-133 and 147-171