

THE VIEWS: AN INTRODUCTION

The cross is the image by which our faith has been known since a few short years after Jesus' death. It was madness to the Jewish world expecting a powerful leader to be the Messiah, one to redeem the Roman world from the occupied – a sort of second Moses – that this person should suffer and die on a humiliating cross.

Over the intervening 2,000 years, the shock of seeing Christ's cross has evaporated.

And so in these series of reflections, I will explore what the cross looked like to those who first saw it. I will offer some thoughts on how the cross looks from heaven first, and finally from the earth on that first Good Friday. And I will also reflect on the cross from the side, for each of those crucified with Jesus, who see very different things when they look at it.

Please use this time in your own way, to meditate on Christ in his passion, and draw close to him.

These reflections will finish shortly before 2pm, when we will celebrate the Liturgy of Good Friday, and receive Communion, which was consecrated last night and the commemoration of the Last Supper.

THE FIRST VIEW: FROM HEAVEN

One of the most amazingly striking depictions of the crucifixion has to be Salvador Dali's interpretation *Christ of St John of the Cross*. Let me describe it to you, in case you are not familiar with it.

In this painting, completed in 1951, the view of Christ hanging on the cross is from above and slightly in front. There is a strong sun-like light from the right-hand side of the painting, casting a long shadow of Christ's left arm as he hangs forward from the cross's wood. Behind this vividly-lit cross is blackness, but beneath is the sky, with clouds parting as they do after a summer's thunderstorm. Beneath that again is the horizon, with a vivid blue, a mountain range, a lake with a boat and a fisherman, in the middle, coming to shore. The cross with Jesus takes up around the top two-thirds of the image, with the sky, horizon, hills, lake, boat the bottom third.

This work is inspired, in turn, by a surviving sketch by St John of the Cross, rendered around 500 years earlier. His depiction is a similar angle of elevation, but from the side, like where the light enters Dali's work.

As today we look at the cross from different perspectives, we begin with the view from above. We will finish with the perspective of gazing up at the cross from the earth, and we will also examine Christ, hanging on the cross from both left and right in turn.

One of the oldest theological questions that is asked in this week is around when Christ knew his fate. Last night in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus grieves, and prays that the cup would pass from him, if that were the Father's will. Would it therefore be reasonable that he only realises then? Or is this bargaining part of the decision-

making process? Who determines when – or even whether – Jesus has to die? Does he have to? When is the point of no return?

In our reading from Colossians, God's unity in Christ is clear. There is no separating the mind of God from that of Jesus. The New Testament points us to understand that Jesus was before the beginning of time, and in this passage, the author goes further. Jesus is the manifestation of God, revealed to the world to show who God is. He is also identified clearly with the Word of God – the second person of the Trinity.

There is, we can see, no separation between the will of God – think 'God spoke' from Genesis – and the words of Christ.

All this sounds rather theological and quite far away from gazing down at the cross, but it is not. God's plan is not for death. It never was. God saw that the world that was created by his Word was good. The person of Jesus is the source of that word: 'all things have been created in him and for him'. Death enters the world through the sin of humanity, and it is by sin that Christ, then, dies. Jesus' death is no more the will of God than it is for there be sin in the world.

But it is the sin of the world that puts Christ on the cross. As the shocking words from the hymn 'Ah, Holy Jesus' "herzliebster Jesu" puts it 'I crucified thee'.

'I crucified thee': words that resonate whatever our theology and however we approach this day. In passion plays, of course, for many centuries, the crowd – everyone gathered – has been expected to shout this demand at Pilate, even as he finds no fault.

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And yet, here we are, the mind of God in union, in consort, with the mind of Christ, even to his cross. So Christ always and never knew; it was not destined to be true that Christ suffered and died. The imperfection of the world is not of God, but neither does God stop it.

Except in Christ. For in Christ, at his cross, God works 'death backwards' to quote CS Lewis. 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things...making peace through the blood of his cross'. This is the view of God in heaven. Not that Christ should be there, nor that Christ wants to be there.

But that God can and does by his love and mercy redeem and reconcile. The light shining across Dali's picture is prophetic in its redemptive depiction. Where I have clumsily used words, Dali uses the stroke of a brush, breathed by divine inspiration.

Light cuts across the darkness of this day, because in front of the bleak nothingness of death, a new dawn has been won. This is the glory of God, perfected in Christ, who has in turn bought the perfecting of the world. There are in Dali's image no nails nor blood, no thorn, nor spear. Here, Christ is made good, just as the dawn his death heralds will make the world good again.

This glory is a painful one, and it is bought at the cost of the death of the Son of God. But for God, just as in creation God 'saw what he had made and it was good', he is 'pleased' in what his new creation has now made. The 'second Adam' is 'sent not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.'

John Newman's words in the hymn we have just sung, *Praise to the Holiest in the Height* (particularly sung to John Bachus Dykes' fantastically clever tune) paints this image in a different way.

'Praise to the holiest in the heights, and on the earth'. In this hymn, there is a sense of the glory of God coming to earth, because by that glory coming into reach, humanity can be lifted up to where God is. Praise echoes in the courts of heaven, of course, in the songs of the angels, but it echoes too on earth.

In Christ, the fullness of God is pleased to dwell, making visible the will, the mind of God. And God is present for praise and worship and adoration, both raised in heaven and raised from earth.

Christ on his cross is both raised higher and descended lower than ever creation has been before or since.

But here, he has perfected creation, inviting us into the holy and redeeming mind of the creator.

Christ on the cross makes visible the depth and the height from which God will meet us.

THE SECOND VIEW: FROM THE LEFT

*The individual who is not a combatant, and has thus become a tiny cog within the vast war machine, feels confused in his bearings and inhibited in his activities. In my opinion he will welcome any hint, however small, that might make it easier for him at least to locate his bearings within himself.*

These are words written by Sigmund Freud on the analysis of the effect of war and mass death on the individual. In this case, he is constructing an analysis of a person who has – for one reason or another – not seen active service, but instead has remained at home. There are profound effects on that person, not least in their sense of who they are fundamentally, when the external actions of the world appear so totally to be caught up in the mechanisms of violence and death that are not theirs.

To the left of Christ, is a criminal. We do not know what he did. He may have been a thief, a pirate, a murder, or merely slandered the Roman authorities or been a disobedient slave; the crimes punishable in this manner were many and varied. The punishment itself was extraordinary in its cruelty; the pain, the humiliation, sometimes the length of time taken to die, and then the animals permitted to eat the body over days all added to its impact as a most horrific manner of execution. The crimes that earned someone a place on the cross ranged hugely in severity.

Over the centuries there has been much speculation about the crime of the unrepentant criminal beside Jesus. His taunts portray him as a pretty vile character – even in the position he was in to find cause to add further injury and suffering to a fellow condemned man is an extremely brutal image.

But, in truth, he could have been anyone. All that we know is that his fate was as Jesus' was. (Although, showing signs of life, the two criminals with Christ had their legs broken to hasten their deaths.)

What we do know, however, is of the extraordinary barbarism of Roman society. There was no such thing, as Freud puts it, of not being a combatant. Everyone was – in one way or another – brushing up alongside death and violence. From gladiators to execution; from slavery to wars of conquest, no one was free from the omnipresent, pervasive, power of state violence.

For those living in that world locating a sense of 'his bearings', as Freud describes, would be a huge challenge. Humanity is enculturated by our surroundings, for sure. But – as the likes of Cicero and Josephus observed – the violence of early Roman society was quite unbearable, even for those who were used to it.

Locating the humanity, the 'personal bearings', in the middle of this is the challenge of the criminal to Jesus' left. Whatever has driven this man to his cross, whether it is a heinous offense, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time, he is bargaining with it. His reaction is to look at this man, who is – to him – his peer in death and see a target. His taunting of Christ, that he should save himself and then is him issuing tests of his own.

The parallels between this demand and the tempting by Satan in the desert is not accidental. Even in his dying moments, Jesus refuses to be tempted to test who God is, even in midst of the tests on his body and soul.

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Jesus might have struggled against the weight of his body pulling down on the nails in his hands, with the burden placed on his chest and shoulders, to turn to face this man. In that bloodied and dying face, the criminal acts with selfishness looking to be saved. But his saving is not the salvific balm he might have sought. Instead, in this moment, as he tried to reclaim what he can of who he is in the world, he loses his grip on who he is at all.

Jesus, even in his final moments is despised, rejected. He is not recognised for whom he is, and in this lack of recognition, the criminal beside him dies to the possibility of knowing, of finding himself.

Humanity will never be who we are meant to be in the midst of brutality and violence. While the troubles and pains and ills of the world have sway and hold over our actions, we cannot hope to gain for us our souls.

The situation for the criminal, trying to negotiate even his own inevitable death points to a greater truth of the condition of humanity. Coming back to Freud: 'no one believes in his own death'.

However we picture our death, we cannot believe in it. We might wonder or guess, but we cannot really inhabit the image of our own final moment. Perhaps that's why in dreams we wake just as we are about to come face to face with our end.

We cannot believe our own death, however hard we try, however well we are reconciled to its inevitability.

This criminal beside Jesus is at such variance with the reality of his world that it seems to him his negotiating, desperately grasping to find something of himself while testing Jesus, might get him somewhere. But it gets him nowhere.

He sees in Jesus another victim of the cruelties of the world. He sees another target for his own lack of personhood.

But seeing this, he fails to see Jesus. He is the embodiment of the world that turns away, the world gone astray. He is the inevitable result of a world occupied by itself, its brutality and selfishness. He is the sin of the world, believing that it can be redeemed by its own power.

Does the criminal view Jesus at all? And if he does dare to look, he fails to see.

THE THIRD VIEW: FROM THE RIGHT

George Herbert in his poetry encapsulates perfectly the holy conversation between God and man. One such example is his poem *Mortification*, which tracks a person aging. He recounts how as an infant, a boy, a youth, a man, and in old age we are all tending towards death. But in the final verse, we hear the purpose of this aging, and of taking the time to recount it.

*Man, ere he is aware  
Hath put together a solemnity,  
And drest his herse, while he has breath  
As yet to spare :  
Yet Lord, instruct us so to die,  
That all these dyings may be life in death.*

What Herbert so beautifully expresses here is what it is to prepare for death, using the imagery of the hearse being dressed, ready for the final journey. But here, the hearse, the thing being made ready for the journey, is the human soul.

The dying is the daily deaths to which we as Christians are each called from baptism. As that service puts it 'dying to sin that we might live his risen life'. This constant reformation of the baptised soul towards Christ's perfection is the task of our living. For – as Herbert puts it – 'in all these dyings may be life in death'.

The second criminal crucified with Jesus turns to see him, with fear in his eyes, blood on his face, remorse in his heart. His crime might even be greater than that of the first. But in contrition and sorrow, he looks at his saviour, and begs of him the simple prayer, 'Jesus, remember me'.

This plea embodies not fear, but hope. It is the death to the inner self of pride and vanity. It is the turning from the world's oppression, to the freedom and liberation of heaven.

As this man looks on at Jesus, he sees the reality of sins forgiven, of hope restored. 'Today you will be with me in paradise'.

Many people who have had near death encounters talk of the tunnel, the light, the sensation; and there is another common theme: a voice. The voice invariably for those people is a voice summoning them back to earth. Often the voice of someone recently died; sometimes the voice of someone soon to die. And it calls them back from the precipice of eternity.

But here, this man hears the voice, thoroughly this side of death, but with the certainty of crossing the great divide that day. The cry is not 'save me, now', but rather 'save me, then'.

And Jesus permits the crossing to a place where sins are forgiven, where tears are wiped away, and God's closer presence is secured. Paradise is the place where full reconciliation has happened, where death has been prepared for, by death to the things that hold back our appreciation of God's closeness.

When each of us is carried by a corporal hearse, our inner preparation will count for our experience of the divine.

Today, we pray with the penitent, crucified with Jesus, 'remember me, when you come into your Kingdom'. Perhaps the hymn that we have just sung might help us prepare our hearts for that day, echoing the words of this man's trust, 'think on me'. The hymn

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prays that we would be cleansed and prepared by God for God's presence in eternity, in his kingdom.

The hallmarks of this Kingdom - justice, mercy, peace – are so far away from the kingdoms of this world: power, privilege, wealth. And they are so very far away from the cross of Jesus' death.

In his final torment on that bloody instrument of sickening torture, even Jesus senses not the location of that place, echoing the cry of the Psalmist: 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?'. The kingdoms of corruption and death cannot bear the Kingdom of Heaven. They are incompatible, and make little sense.

In that moment of deepest darkness on the cross, Christ's cry echoes with the cries of broken humanity. Humanity without humanity.

As the sun on a foggy day continues to shine, but is unperceived. So is the love of God when clouded by sin and death.

Our prayer joins with that of the penitent, looking to glimpse the face of Jesus, before the fog sets in.

The prayer of absolution, of forgiveness, in the Book of Common Prayer, not only pronounces God's forgiveness of sin, but also begs that the penitent is granted 'time for amendment of life'.

Good Friday's cross grants us that time.

In baptism, we received new life in Christ, dying to sin. And now, each day, we are received with joy by God into the possibility with full life in him. Time and again when we walk or drift away into the fog of life, he tenderly waits, ready for our prayer, 'remember me'.

And in turn, he looks for us, from his cross, 'today, you will be with me in Paradise'.

THE FOURTH VIEW: FROM THE EARTH

In Gaza this week, as in so many other unnamed places, fathers and mothers; brothers and sisters; children stand weeping. In front of them is a collection of rocks and stone, mortar and steel. And under that is their son or daughter, sibling, parent.

There is no moving these boulders by hand; their weight makes it undoable. The steel, contorted and bent, will not shift.

Shuveling a small handful of dirt will not help. But they do it anyway. Because what else is there to do? But to move it involves standing on the rubble. Standing on top of the place where the bodies might be lying.

The screaming has stopped now; only silence remains. The dust no longer fills the nostrils; worse still is the stench of rot.

As the friends of Jesus looked up in the agony of his crucifixion they too could not help. The might of the authorities weighed more than the boulders; their weapons more forceful than steel girders. They too stood on holy ground, where death and desolation were entrenched.

Jesus' cross might have lifted him high off the ground or it might have been simply a few feet from the earth. His weight might have been borne by his wrists, or his feet, or even another part of his body. His death was slow strangulation, or blood loss, or dehydration. Shock would set in, and those who loved him most stand below. They would be splattered by blood, by urine. Their pain would be the greatest torture of all.

As they gazed up at their beloved being murdered in this most violent way, they would see everything in such excoriating detail that their helplessness would be even more pronounced. Not only can they not help stop this cruelty, but there is nothing they can do to help. Perhaps the best thing for them to do is to walk away. At least then they can get on with rebuilding their lives without the reality of this torment as his last memory.

But they do not. Jesus gives the care of his mother to the disciple and he gives his care to her. Even in this terminal crisis, care and hope are given voice.

The view of Christ from the ground is in fact the view of Christ as a human, in all its frailty. In this moment, he adopts humanity into his family. receive a foundation of hope as a child of God in this moment.

This moment, the one the Apostle Paul describes as foolishness. Proclaiming that this moment is the power of God at work in the world is foolishness. Not walking away is foolishness. This foolishness is, however, a sign and a wisdom. The Apostle is clear that this moment with all its pain and torture is the power of God.

Knowing that there will be another morning is not a luxury that grieving mothers and friends have. Knowing that the dawn will come again was not theirs on that Friday. But we know, from our vantage point on the ground alongside them that from this day will come a triumph through death. from this we will understand the context of Paul's words. 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.'



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On that day, this all was devastating foolishness. With the words of the crowd echoing in their ears, 'crucify, crucify', the beloved of Jesus stood, helpless, without the certainty of tomorrow.

And yet, his words are of comfort, of kindness. Even in his dying breaths we learn more of the mind of our God. Jesus' words to his friend, to his mother, break through the rubble of the day's torment. To them – to us – he promised life in him.

'Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be' must be one of the most remarkable couplets in all hymnody. And this love to the loveless, from the ground to the cross and the cross to ground has never been stronger.

Jesus' words of love and mercy, of comfort and of peace, from the gibbet of the violent criminal to the bloodstained ground of the mourning, breathe of a love creating the lovely.

There is nothing lovely about the death of Christ; the perversion of his death and of those who spectate is vile and twisted beyond words. And yet, the loveless becomes lovely in these words.

And we are bought into that fellowship with Jesus by his familial invitation. We are the children of his body the church. We are the people to whom he offers care and affection. We are the loveless, because in comparison with the love of God we are blinded. But we are offered that love; we are brought into that beloved life.

'Here might I stay and sing' are the foolishness of the cross epitomised. On this site of the worst of humanity staying is unbearable. Leaving in helpless fear the better option. But here, if

we wait long enough, we will see the truth of the story: so divine. Divinity held in love, grief, and finally in familiar friendship.

The foolishness of the cross, the stumbling block is all ours now. We have been bought into it by the offer of Christ to be his family. We now can stay and sing, standing on this sacred scaffold, erected to be the theatre of hell.

But here we will be adopted into the family of God, by faith in the blood with which we are now marked. Loved, even as we gaze up, helpless, lost.

THE FINAL VIEW

Things gradually fall away. Strength, walking, stability, speech, sight, memory. None last forever. In final minutes and hours, the pace of this loss increases. As the ebb of life slows and stalls, the crescendo of infirmity intensifies. By now, there is almost nothing left.

A few weeks ago songs remained, even when names of family and friends were distant. The Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, even came to mind. But now, dumbness has struck for the final time this side of eternity. There is almost nothing left. Only touch is left to fail, before breath and heat.

The clammy hand has gripped the bedsheets in terror and fear; it has sought comfort from a nearby relative, but found only uncertainty. And now, clasped limply is a piece of polished wood. Olive. From Jerusalem. Fashioned into a cross. Tactile, uneven, but smooth.

This tacet talisman; this inert companion might hold the last memory, before it fades into the grey between life and death.

We have viewed the cross of Christ over the last few hours from heaven, from the criminals on either side of our Lord, from the earth, where Mary and John watch on helpless. Now, we view of the cross with our own eyes. We no longer rely on the sight, on the words, on the recollections of another.

We each have seen Christ's cross. We have seen it in wood and stone; we have seen it in glass and metal; we have seen it etched and scrawled. We can see it when we close our eyes.

The cross is not one cross. The cross is every cross. It is the cross we wear around our necks, or on our walls; it is the cross we drew as a child, empty with a smudgy sun in the sky; it is the cross that exists only in our imagination when we hear *that* story.

His cross is our cross. Our cross is his cross.

In this case, the cross is hope; it is hope just as holding on to the safety barrier of a sinking ship brings hope. This wooden emblem of our faith is the last thing left to reach for when the bed tips and the hand slackens. There is only one way to go, and that way is through the veil, to tread the path that has yet to be trodden.

And there, the one certainty is that all the crosses of life: the ones in wood, in stone, in metal, in glass; the ones of our imagining and mind; the ones of burden and sacrifice. They will all be met in that place.

The tangible, earthly, crosses; the faint crosses of dreams and fears – all these await. All these, that is except for the one true cross.

In the Middle Ages the cult of the true cross was prevalent across Europe. St Helen, according to tradition, discovered the true cross of Christ in the fourth century. And so relics of that cross – and many others – sprung up. Many of them are still extant today in churches and cathedral, and monasteries, and homes, and museums. Whether any of them touched the body of Our Lord in his last moments is unclear – and perhaps even unlikely.

But it matters very little. These fragments of wood are fragments of hope. They connect the bearer of them with the cross of Christ, by a

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line maintained by the confidence of faith. They speak to a great human truth: that we seek the authenticity of connection to Jesus, before we interrogate how that can empirically be the case.

And it is in this belief that the line between faith and doubt is breached. In this, we have a more profound understanding than simply 'knowing' ever could give us.

For us, the crosses we know in life – the ones we see, the ones we feel, the ones we own. These *all* are the cross of Jesus.

This is the boundary of Jerusalem. This is the Hill of Golgotha. This is the cross on which the Saviour of the World was hung.

On Good Friday, today, it is our turn to grasp onto that cross. The cross where our last hopes and dreams, and where our fears and failures are laid.

Here, Christ's life is the one who has ebbed. Here, it is Jesus' breath that has expired, and his heart that has stopped.  
We are here for this moment.

Because in this place, as we view the totality of the cross, its physicality is no longer important. Whether the nails, or the spear, or the thorns, or the wood delivers the final blow does not matter.

Jesus hangs alone, and we look on, this time reaching out to grasp it, but failing to reach. He has borne the weight of the world's sins and sorrows here. He has borne them for us, that we would know our crosses to be his cross, and his cross ours.

Today, darkness and earthquake offer little hope. The ship is still sinking into the darkness of the world's despair and grief.

Things have now fallen away, and they can fall no further.

We now have eyes to see Christ, hanging here, fully. For us.

All our crosses are Christ's, and his cross is for us.