



Opening Prayer for Good Friday

Gracious and eternal God,
look with mercy on this your family,
for which our Lord Jesus Christ
was content to be betrayed
and given up into the hands of sinners
and to suffer death upon the cross;
who is alive and glorified with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Psalm of the Day – Verses from Psalm 22 (Singing the Faith 804)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,
and are so far from my salvation,
from the words of my distress?
**O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer;
and by night also, but I find no rest.**
Yet you are the Holy One,
enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
**Our forebears trusted in you;
they trusted, and you delivered them.**
They cried out to you and were delivered;
they put their trust in you and were not confounded.

**But as for me, I am a worm and not human,
scorned by all and despised by the people.**

All who see me laugh me to scorn;
they curl their lips and wag their heads, saying,
**'He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him;
let him deliver him, if he delights in him.'**

But it is you that took me out of the womb
and laid me safe upon my mother's breast.

**On you was I cast ever since I was born;
you are my God even from my mother's womb.**

Be not far from me, for trouble is near at hand
and there is none to help.

**Save me from the lion's mouth,
from the horns of wild oxen.**

You have answered me!

I will tell of your name to my people;
in the midst of the congregation will I praise you.

Praise the Lord, you that fear him;

O seed of Jacob, glorify

him; stand in awe of him, O seed of Israel.

For he has not despised nor abhorred
the suffering of the poor;

**neither has he hidden his face from them;
but when they cried to him he heard them.**

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;

I will perform my vows in the presence
of those that fear you.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;

those who seek the Lord

shall praise him; their hearts shall live for ever.

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord,

and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.

**For the kingdom is the Lord's
and he rules over the nations.**

How can those who sleep in the earth
bow down in worship,
or those who go down to the dust kneel before him?

**He has saved my life for himself;
my descendants shall serve him;
this shall be told of the Lord for generations to come.
They shall come and make known his salvation,
to a people yet unborn,
declaring that he, the Lord, has done it.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.

Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,
they needed to deny themselves,
and take up their crosses.

God calls us into that same movement
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.

In this quiet space for reflection,
let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

Silence is kept for a few moments...

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
grant us peace.

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,
you walk with us all of our days,
and nothing in life or death or all creation
can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.

Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,
share with us in our worries and struggles,
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus.

Amen

Reading John 18:1 – 19:42

Sermon

Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and interrogated in turn by Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate. As John reminds us (18:15), the High Priest was the one who had determined, following Lazarus' being raised from the dead, that it was 'better for one man to die for the people of Israel' than for the Temple establishment and all which Caiaphas had worked toward to be put at risk (11:50). Since 63 BCE and the Roman occupation of Palestine, the exercise of the powers of the High Priest had been deeply compromised. It was Rome who chose a member of the local wealthy elites to take up the office, and it was Rome who could depose them. Meanwhile, rebellions against the occupation by groups of religious zealots were commonplace at this time, and they were willing to use violence to achieve their aims. Consequently, Caiaphas and the Temple establishment walked the tight rope every single day, balancing the need to keep Rome sweet with displaying enough distinctiveness to appease rebel bands, who regarded them as collaborators with the enemy. Against this fraught backdrop, it is not surprising that Caiaphas was deeply unsettled by the words and action of Jesus. He was saying and doing things only God was supposed to do, he risked triggering Roman wrath, and he gave hope to violent zealots. Thus, he needed to be stopped.

It is not difficult to think of other examples down the centuries of the kind of calculation Caiaphas made two millennia ago. Human life is cheap, it seems, when the status quo and the authority of the people in power is threatened. It was the politically expedient option to offer up one man on behalf of the whole, to feed the Roman machine and stifle any allegations that a rival to Caesar was gaining real traction. If we were to stand in the place of Caiaphas and look at the situation from his perspective, would we have acted any differently? It is easy to claim so, but when the chips are down, how many of us can really say that we have never thrown someone else under the bus in order to protect our positions or achieve our goals? There was very clearly no love lost between Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate, and it must have grated when the former found himself declaring that he had 'no king' but the Roman Emperor (19:15) to achieve his aim. However, as he repeatedly reminded the latter when he feared Jesus might be freed (19:12), the two men both had good reasons for following this same course, and condemning the man from Nazareth to death – after all, if Jesus is Lord then Caesar is not, and neither leader could be seen to be saying that. Yet, the events of Good Friday show up the power of self-delusion into which both let themselves be suckered.

To stand at the foot of the cross is to embrace a radical vulnerability. In his book *The Wound of Knowledge*, Rowan Williams explores the nature of 'Christian spirituality'. For him, what matters isn't what we each make of the realities of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but *their* interrogation of *us*. The 'intractable strangeness' of the land we inhabit leads away from reducing 'spirituality' to a set of private feelings, and towards the far more demanding assertion that the entirety of our 'complicated and muddled bundle of experiences' forms the arena of God's 'creative work'. Every human story is open to interpretation, therefore, in terms of God's saving actions and the particularly of Jesus of Nazareth. In particular, to stand before Christ on that cruel cross is to confront that which renders one 'questioned,

judged, stripped naked and left speechless.' At the core of Christian faith is this scandalous paradox of God's 'purposes made flesh in a dead and condemned man', the scandal of the 'almightiness' of God laid bare in one nailed to the cross, naked and helpless. No religious language and lusting after power and control can co-opt this Christ, whose silence during his trials and three hours of suffering, until that fatal last moment renders attempts to bend him to our wills void.

For Caiaphas and his temple establishment, the crucifixion of Jesus forces into the unforgiving light of day the self-deception and lust for power at the heart of their decisions. The irony of their efforts is that Jesus makes it clear that none of this could happen, if God were not at the core of events (19:11). The High Priest had sold himself down the river, and committed idolatry in a misplaced attempt to cling onto the status he enjoyed, but in the cold light of day, it amounted to not much at all. What about us today, on this Good Friday? What do we need to let go as we are stripped of our own delusions at the foot of the cross of Christ? We can no sooner co-opt Jesus of Nazareth for our own purposes than Caiaphas could; dare we acknowledge this?

Prayers of Intercession

Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy
but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find it to be the way of life and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**