

1 Jesus Christ the Apple Tree

There is a lot to be said, when it all gets too much, for going outside and sitting quietly under a tree - any tree will do - and breathing deeply and unhurriedly. That is what an Indian prince once did. He sat under a Bo tree - until at last it all made sense. They called him the Buddha, the enlightened one. There is much to be said for lying under a tree and looking up through its leaves - or even hugging a tree. If that's what the next King of England does, then monarchs can still be role models!

We sometimes speak of the cross, on which Jesus died, as a tree. "Calvary's tree," we call it. It is a powerful image. We fell by the fruit of a tree, so says the strange old story. In the Garden of Eden we reached out and helped ourselves to the forbidden fruit, the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And it stuck in our throat. "Adam's apple" - bigger in men than in women, apparently. Make of that what you will!

We fell by a tree. But we are also saved by a tree - the tree on Golgotha, from whose dead branches Jesus Christ hung. And then, at the last, so we are told, we shall be made whole by a tree. The Bible closes with the tremendous vision of the garden-city of God where, by the banks of a bright river, there grows a tree - the tree, says St John, "whose leaves are for the healing of the nations". The tree in the garden, the dead tree in the Roman killing field, and the tree in the holy city, the New Jerusalem.

According to tradition, the cross was made with wood from that first tree from which the apple was taken. A medieval mystic writes, "Out of that very tree that made us suffer, began our salvation after it had carried him who was both God and man." So the tree that was our scaffold, our gallows, becomes our only hope. Another early poet hears the cross speak: "I beheld the healer's tree till I heard how it broke silence, best of wood, and began to speak. 'Lo, the Prince of Glory, heaven's Lord, hath glorified me above all forest trees' ". In Jerusalem today you are shown where the tree that was in that first garden once stood. It is inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, underneath - immediately beneath - the site of the cross. "We think that Paradise and Calvary, Christ's cross and Adam's tree stood in one place." So said the poet and so say the guide books.

We fell by a tree. We are saved by a tree. We are made whole by a tree.

"He himself," we read in the New Testament, "bore our sins in his body on the tree." But not only our sins. Behind that text are words older still, "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows". All we bear, and all we must go on bearing - all the baggage we bring with us into this church today - he made his.

The story is told of the great Christian scholar, Peter Abelard. He was a charismatic teacher and all the church had hung on his words. But because of his love for Heloise and what that led to, he was a broken man. He was surviving in the forest with one servant Thibault. One day in the forest Abelard and Thibault hear a terrible screaming. At first they think that it is a child. They rush to where these screams are coming from and find that it is a rabbit caught in a trap. They release the rabbit - and it dies in Abelard's arms. Somehow it is all too much for Abelard. "I have deserved all I have suffered," he says. "But what did this one do? Is there a God at all?"

His companion Thibault struggles to find something to say. Then he notices a felled tree nearby. The trunk of the tree has been sawn through. “Look,” says Thibault, “that dark ring there. It goes up and down the whole length of the tree. But you only see it where it is cut across. Calvary is that dark ring. The bit of God we see, but it goes on.” There is a cross in the heart of God. What we see of God on Good Friday is true of him every day. Someone who often spoke from this pulpit wrote these lines:

*Father, if he the Christ, were thy revealer
Truly the first begotten of the Lord
Then must thou be a sufferer and a healer
Pierced to the heart by the sorrow of the sword*

*Then must it mean, not only that thy sorrow
Smote thee that once upon the lonely tree
But that today, tonight and on the morrow
Still will it come O Gallant God to thee.*

The lines are by the First World War Army Chaplain and poet Studdert Kennedy. It goes on, the dark ring that runs the length of the tree. It goes on, the cross in the heart of God. As Pascal wrote, “Christ is in agony until the end of time”. The tree is an image of the cross. It is the image too of Christ himself, who bears whatever sadness and shame bid to break our heart and which perhaps brings us to church this Good Friday.

*For happiness I long have sought,
And pleasure dearly I have bought
I missed of all; but now I see
'Tis found in Christ the apple tree.*

*I'm weary of my former toil
Here will I sit and rest awhile
Under the shadow I will be
Of Jesus Christ the apple tree.*

*This fruit doth make my soul to thrive
It keeps my dying faith alive;
Which makes my soul in haste to be
With Jesus Christ the apple tree.*

Does any of this weird “tree-talk” have anything to do with the world outside the funny places where they hold three-hour services? I hope so. We have learned a little lately – and we can only pray that it is not too late - about how necessary trees are for our survival on our planet earth. We are – literally - saved by trees. Christians add, by one especially. And under that tree we shelter, “a mighty tree, standing for ever, whereon before the face of mankind hangeth a man, stretched and nailed, rejected, dying and alone”.

2 Into Great Silence

The film opened “to rapturous acclaim across the western world”. “It has been a phenomenal box office smash-hit.” So says the slip-case that the DVD comes in. This is not the latest Hollywood blockbuster, nor is it the latest James Bond or Harry Potter. No. This film, which has had such astonishing universal appeal, is a documentary, nearly three hours long, recording life inside the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse high in the French Alps. Here the monks spend their days, indeed their whole lives, almost entirely in silence. The film is silent too, apart from the chants we hear from the great abbey church. In its English version, the film is entitled *Into Great Silence*.

How do we account for the success of this film? I think that it appeals to us as much as it does because, deep within us, there is a thirst for silence – a thirst of which we are not always aware. We are told that those who are dehydrated do not always feel thirsty. So it is with our need for silence. We talk and talk, whether or not we have anything to say. Yesterday we exchanged a billion emails. Today we exchange a billion more. Tomorrow, we shall exchange a billion more. By the laws of natural selection the mobile phone will soon be part of the human anatomy. I think – and shudder at the thought – of all the sermons that have been preached since Christianity was born. Seeing the film *Into Great Silence* awakens us to our thirst, makes us realise our need to stop all this talking and be still.

When we come to the cross we enter, with Jesus, “into great silence”.

Jesus is silent before those who accuse him and who torture him. He is silent before the orchestrated demands for his death coming from the crowds. He is silent before Herod. He is silent before Pilate. To be sure, St John in his gospel, reflecting later on what it all means, does have Jesus conversing with Pilate but, once sentence is passed on him, in John’s account too, Jesus falls silent.

Jesus crucified enters “into great silence”. According to Matthew and Mark’s gospels that silence is broken just the once, by that single terrible utterance, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” – and more of that word a little later. Luke in his gospel has his three “sayings from the cross”. Jesus prays for our forgiveness, because we didn’t know what we were doing. He promises paradise to the penitent thief. (And, incidentally, I do not believe it is withheld from the impenitent thief.) And as he dies, he commends his spirit to his father. John too records three sayings. Jesus commends his mother to his beloved disciple. He cries “I thirst” and, at the last, triumphantly, “It is finished”.

Often on Good Fridays we meditate on these words and it is much to our profit that we do so. But having spoken those seven words, Jesus speaks no more. His great silence is now unbroken. And into that silence we must now enter.

“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he did not open his mouth.” The silence of the lamb.

What does this silence say to us, not just to us individually, but to us all as a church?

There are two sorts of Christianity - the talkative and the reticent. There is the Christianity which goes on - and on, and on. Then there is the Christianity which shuts up. What is happening now, as I speak, is an example of the first kind of Christianity.

Talkative Christianity delights in argument. Talkative Christianity proves the existence of God. Talkative Christianity gives you reasons, reasons for believing in the virgin birth, the resurrection, in life after death. Talkative Christianity tries to explain things. It even tries to explain how a loving and powerful God can permit the innocent to suffer.

What about reticent Christianity? Reticent Christianity respects the fundamental mystery of things. Mystery isn't just what we haven't yet found out. Because the more we know, the more our sense of all-encompassing mystery deepens. Reticent Christianity does not always try to explain, but simply watches and waits beneath the cross, echoing in its own heart the anguished "Why?" of the one who hangs there. Reticent Christianity reaches into the great silence of the crucified Jesus. That is the vocation of the monk and nun committed to the silent quest for God, knowing that only where words cease is God to be found. Outside monasteries, there is little silence left in our world, but to save our souls alive we must seek it.

The BBC's "Sunday Worship", the Sunday before last, came from the Sahara, from the monastery of St Anthony, deep in the Egyptian desert. We heard one of the monks tell us of our need for silence, for our need in our frantic noisy lives, to find some desert place - if not in the Sahara, then in the solitude and silence of our own hearts.

On the cross Jesus came finally to a place where there is nothing more to say. The silence of the crucified Jesus is a summons to the church to dare sometimes to shut up. We are often told that the church should "speak out". Not, I think, today.

At 9.15am on Friday, October 21st 1966, a waste tip slid down a mountain into the mining village of Aberfan in South Wales. In its path was Pantglas Junior School. The children had just returned to their classes after assembly when the tide of waste engulfed their school. One hundred and sixteen children died and five of their teachers. The hymn they had sung in assembly was "All Things Bright and Beautiful." I was a curate at the time, attached to a church in Cornwall. That appalling tragedy happened on the Friday. I remember my sense of relief that I wasn't preaching on Sunday. Two other clergy were down to do preach, one at the morning service, the other in the evening. More than forty years later, I remember their sermons. Both my colleagues talked about what had happened in Aberfan. But their two sermons were very different. The preacher in the morning took as his text the words "Unless you repent, you too will all perish!" He preached at length. He claimed that what had happened to the children of Aberfan was God's warning to us and that much the same terrible punishment will fall on all the unrepentant.

The sermon in the evening was delivered much less confidently. I cannot recall much of what the preacher said simply because he could not find much to say. There were long pauses. He struggled for words, but words failed him, and finally he fell silent - as at this hour our Saviour did - as today, and perhaps on other days as well, we must too.

3 Outside a City Wall

If we want to understand why Jesus died we have to notice when he died and how he died and where he died.

When did he die? He died on the very day and at the very hour, says St John, when the Passover lamb was sacrificed in the Temple. He was, as John the Baptist had announced, “*The Lamb of God*”, the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world. Passover celebrates the deliverance of an enslaved people. Good Friday is nothing, nothing, if it is not a festival of freedom. Perhaps the character in the story who knew best what this day means is Barabbas. Barabbas who on this day went free.

How did he die? He was crucified. He was not, for example, stoned. It was a cruel death, a fact that neither the Gospels nor the New Testament dwell on – unlike Mel Gibson in his film *The Passion of the Christ*. What is significant is not the cruelty of his death – others have died just as painfully, including all the countless others whom the Romans crucified. What we must notice – and we have touched on this already – is that he died “hanging on a tree”. Those who witnessed today’s events knew their Bibles. They remembered one terrible text. “Cursed is he who hangs on a tree”. It was, in the imagery of the Bible, the ultimate abandonment. One who died this way was utterly abandoned, abandoned by men, abandoned by God. No wonder he cries, “My God, Why have you forsaken me?”

Where did he die? He died *outside*. He suffered, says the New Testament, “outside the city”. Jesus died outside, just as he was born outside, and just as he lived outside. The gates of the city closed on the one about to die, just as the door of the inn closed on the one about to be born. Jesus is never found “inside”, where it’s safe and comfortable. He is neither Pharisee nor Sadducee, neither Essene nor Zealot. There is no party to protect him or to promote his cause. Jesus is one with “the outsiders” he moves among, those suffering from disfiguring diseases, the hated tax-collectors, those whom the pious wrote off as “sinners”. He is one with those far from the centres of power and influence, not least the women and the little children. The Son of Man, with nowhere to lay his head, is always “outside”.

The contrast between inside and outside has been very stark in the days leading to this hour. “Christ outside” stands over against the scheming inner-circles around Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod. And now he perishes – outside. And it is to that waste land, outside a city wall, that, abandoning all our transitory securities, we are summoned to follow him

“Jesus also suffered outside the city gate,” says the great text, “Let us then go to him outside the city gate and bear the abuse he endured”.

A much acclaimed production of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, starring Ian McKellen, concluded earlier this year. *King Lear*, the greatest work of literature in the English language, is the story of a vain and foolish king who is stripped of the all the fanfares and flummery and fine clothes and fawning adulation that he has depended on and who is driven outside. And outside, outside on a barren heath, outside in an appalling storm, outside in the driving rain, outside in the dark, he comes to his senses, he comes to himself, in one Christian word, there, outside, he is saved.

King Lear goes out into the night, into the storm, into the wilderness. But he is not alone. Others join him “outside”. There is his heart-broken court jester. There is Edgar playing the part of a

mad beggar. There is his loyal Kent, whom Lear had banished, but who - now in disguise - is still attending his master. So we have this little company, none altogether himself or what he seems. Together “outside”, they endure the worst the wilderness can do to them and what they suffer there turns out to be a kind of redemption. They are tender and generous to one another. King Lear himself notices at long last that most people don’t live in luxury. His only thoughts are for his poor Fool and for all the other “poor naked wretches” with no roof over their heads. What are we watching when we see this weird quartet out there in the storm on the heath? Who are they, this broken king and his companions? They are – though it’s not the word Shakespeare uses - a kind of church.

The call to be the church is always a summons to step outside. It means letting go the last shreds of privilege and power that we cling to. It means regrouping outside the gates, in that wilderness where the only shelter is beneath the bare branches of a lonely cross.

It is of course all quite mad. To go “outside” into the rain is folly. It is emphatically not “good practice”. But the ethic of Jesus and the example of Jesus consistently advocate just such ill-advised behaviour. “Turn the other cheek.” “Go the extra mile.” “Lend without expecting repayment”, and so on. Such tomfoolery is impossible “inside”. But for the community outside under the cross, love has its own new rules. We belong outside. I think of the French philosopher Simone Weil who was committed to Christ crucified outside and who identified herself, throughout her brief blazing life, with the outsiders of the earth. Simone Weil who died of malnutrition because she refused to eat any more than the poorest of her people in occupied France during the second world war. So committed was she to the Christ who lived and died and rose again outside, that she refused ever to become an insider, refusing even Christian baptism. (“Totally barking”, as an Archdeacon said to me recently. Perhaps. Perhaps not.)

No doubt the church as an institution, if just for a little longer it is to survive, will need the wisdom of the world to manage its dwindling resources efficiently. But for those who follow Christ “outside the camp” such wisdom will not have the last word.

We find our gentle Lord outside. When I was on the staff here at St Martin’s we had a flat overlooking the courtyard. At Christmas there was the crib in Trafalgar Square, but also, some years, a crib in the courtyard too. I remember, one Christmas morning, looking out of our flat window at that crib in the courtyard. Something strange had happened overnight. Baby Jesus had been turfed out of the crib, and curled up in the straw, was one of the homeless people who are drawn to this church.

As at his birth, so at his death, our Lord is outside. “There is a green hill far away, outside a city wall.” Well it wasn’t a hill and, even though it was spring, Golgotha certainly wasn’t green. But it certainly happened outside. That is where we belong. So it is very fitting that at the end of this service that is where we shall go.

4 **Darkness at Noon**

When I was a school chaplain, as I was for many years, I used to try to explain to my confirmation classes what the cross means. Lord have mercy on me, I used to try to explain. These days I'm less confident in explanations. Better not to explain, but to stay as long as we can beneath the cross – and then to stay there a little longer.

But, for what it's worth, this is what I said.

First, I must tell you about where we met. I had a little upper room. And in the centre of it was big round low table with a white surface. We'd all sit on the floor round this table. And I'd give everyone a felt-tip pen, a "magic marker". Then I'd invite these young people to write all over the table – needless to say these were water-based pens! I'd invite them to write down anything and everything that made them sad or ashamed about their world or, if they wanted to, about their own lives. Then I invited them to think of that round table as being as big as the round world, indeed so big that it embraced all of history.

Then I'd invite them to think of all that they had written on the table as funnelling in, coming together and focussing and bearing down on one point at the centre of the table. And we thought of one place, one person, one moment in history. So we'd picture that lonely crucified figure, central to our human story, absorbing the shame, the pain, the weight of it all.

The gospels prefer pictures to explanations. One picture they give us is of darkness descending. As at this hour, there was, we read, "darkness over the whole land". These were not sudden storm clouds. The gospels show little interest in the weather. Darkness in the Gospels, as throughout our Bible, signifies all that defies the purpose of God, all that spurns the love of God, all that contradicts the creator's command "Let there be light".

So now all the wretchedness and misery of our long story, all our pain and folly, all evil things of flesh, of speech, of spirit, all that was surely never meant to be, bear down on this broken man.

Out of the darkness, there is a single terrible cry, a cry so anguished that the very Aramaic in which the words were uttered is remembered and set down. "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachtani" My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? It is night at noon. The one with whom Jesus had walked, whom he had dared call "Abba, Father", is no longer there. This is the cup Jesus prayed he would never have to drink. This is the inner crucifixion of the Son of God.

So what is going on?

We dare say this. What evil does is to divide and separate. Evil pulls apart what belongs together. That is true on the level of our petty little jealousies, the resentments and acrimonies that divide individuals one from another, and it is true of the conflicts between races and nations. Evil separates. And so we have our family rows and the Iraq war which began five years ago this Holy Week.

We believe that Jesus, in some way beyond our comprehension, made our sins and sorrows his. Evil divides, separates. The worst separation Jesus could suffer was to lose the sense of his father with him. And this he suffers, this final alienation he makes his own. Jesus takes into himself all

our grief, including that ultimate loneliness when even God himself seems to go. He makes that darkness his.

We must say something else, however confusing, paradoxical, and contradictory it sounds. We dare to say that on his cross, as at every step of his way, “God was in Christ” – this is how St Paul put it – “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself”. We dare to say God had not gone. God knows what it is to be abandoned by God – and our words fall apart as we try to speak of these things. “God goes where God is not, so that what is not God may be drawn into the eternal love.”

Perhaps only the saints understand. I think of someone I met just once. When those who knew her well spoke of her they tended to use images of light. They spoke of her radiance. They spoke of her as “a shining light”. It was as if she reflected a light too great for the most of us to bear. You could see it in her eyes, they said. From my one brief meeting with her, I’ll vouch for that.

And yet, and yet, Mother Teresa of Calcutta spent the last thirty years of her life, feeling her way as best she could, through a deep inner darkness. We know this from her letters now published. She writes to her Archbishop, “Please pray for me – the longing for God is terribly painful and yet the darkness is becoming greater. What contradiction there is in my soul – the pain within is so great...Please ask Our Lady to be my Mother in this darkness.”

What of our own darkness? There will be many here, it’s safe to say, who don’t want to be bracketed with Mother Teresa but who nevertheless know something of the darkness when God seems to go. It is not so much the darkness before dawn. It is the darkness we feel at dawn, when just getting up to face a new day feels very hard. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote glorious joyful poetry – “Glory be to God for dappled things” - and all that. But, as for Mother Teresa, inwardly, there was deep darkness. “I wake,” he writes, “and feel the fell of dark not day.”

I find it helpful to keep on saying just six words from the Psalms. “He made darkness his secret place.” He made darkness his secret place. “There is in God,” says the poet, “a deep, but dazzling darkness.”

And it’s sensible to wait. So we pray for “Patience to watch, and wait, and weep, though mercy long delay”.

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.

5 The Child on the Cross

There was a toddler at my feet. He was treating me like a tree. I was someone fun to climb. Eventually he reached my arms where he settled comfortably and in total trust. Only then did I notice that he was blind. This was in Calcutta, in Shishu Bhavan, the home for abandoned children founded by Mother Teresa, Mother Teresa, the shining light who for years walked in darkness.

Why was that little boy blind? He had lost his sight because of a disease. He had caught that disease because he had not had enough food, or the right food. Of course this little boy was relatively lucky, lucky to have survived, lucky to have found a safe and loving home, a home where he would be helped to overcome his disability, a home which would give him the prospect of leading a useful happy life.

Not all children are so lucky.

Each year the United Nations Children's Fund publishes a report "The State of the World's Children". Here are a few sentences from UNICEF's 2008 report, recently published. "What is a life worth? Most of us would sacrifice a great deal to save a single child. Yet somehow on a global scale our priorities have become blurred. Every day, on average more than 26,000 children under the age of 5 die around the world, mostly from preventable diseases."

Here are a few more dry statistics. Since 1990 over two million children have been killed and six million seriously injured in wars. Some one hundred and eighty million children round the world are used as cheap labour. Fourteen million children under fifteen have lost one or both parents children to AIDS.

But these big numbers, with there many noughts, hardly touch us. It is the single image that moves us. That of the new-born baby-girl dumped in a Delhi station toilet, flung away simply because she's female. Pintu works in a tannery where they make the leather that goes to making cricket balls. There he squats all day, surrounded by piles of stinking cattle flesh. And he is not paid a penny. In Dostoevsky's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha gives up his belief in God when he hears of the hunter who, just for the hell of it, turns his hounds on a small child.

Today I think of each of each of these children as "the child on the cross". On our service sheet there is a picture of a child on a cross. The picture was taken in a war-zone, it doesn't matter which. He is a hungry boy and he has been strung up there because he has stolen some food. That's his punishment. That image, that picture of one hungry boy, can stand for all those other "children on the cross" – there on a cross, because that is where, by our neglect or by our cruelty, we have put them. "Lord give to men who are old and tougher, the things that little children suffer".

We think of the cross as the means of salvation. "He died that we might be forgiven," and all that. That is true. That belongs to the bedrock of our faith. Christ died to save us; to set us free from our sin and guilt and to bring us home to God. True.

True – but not the whole truth. The cross is not only a path to heaven. The cross is rooted in our world and it is about our world. Which bring us back to Pintu and to each of these suffering children. Jesus said, "Whoever receives one such child receives me" Whoever receives Pintu

receives me. "Receive" in the New Testament is a rich word. It suggests hospitality, but it means opening your heart as well your home to someone. Who was that little blind boy, I mentioned, who climbed me like a tree? For Mother Teresa he was the child Jesus. What is Pintu's other and better-known name?

So when we see the image of a child hurting so badly we must superimpose upon it another image, that of Christ on his cross. We bring the two images together so they become one. The image, the picture on our service-sheet perhaps, helps us to do that. Today we hear from the cross that dreadful cry, "I thirst". But as we hear that cry, we hear too the thirsty child, the dehydrated child, the child wasting away for lack of clean water – while a grieving mother watches.

While a grieving mother watches. Again the two images become one.

The first image is of the African mother cradling her child who is dying of diarrhoea. The second image is of Mary, at the foot of the cross, watching her child die. Tradition tells us that she too will cradle his body, when it is brought down from the cross. The two images become one. In a dry dusty village, south of the Sahara, far from the nearest water, now as we speak, Jesus bar Joseph, who some say is "God with us", is wasting away while his mother watches. In a waste place outside Jerusalem, beneath a sky turned black, an African child dies slowly painfully expires, in the way you do when you are crucified.

And for both mothers, for the mother somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, at this very moment watching her little boy or girl slip away - and for Mary at the foot of the cross – for both mothers the words of Simeon come true: "Sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your heart."

We stay with Mary a moment more. She is so alone – yet she is not altogether alone. Jesus commends his mother and his beloved disciple to each other. "Woman, behold your Son" – and to the disciple he loves – "Behold your mother." So they support each other. But it is not a case of their propping each other up in a world where there is nothing left to live for. There is work to be done. John will bear witness to what he has seen. He will tell us how it really was. "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us" He will recall his dear friend's words. "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

And Mary? She fades from the scene, but she does not fade in significance. She is still mother to the family of Jesus. We often speak of Pentecost as the birthday of the church. But in truth it began long before that. The family of God there beneath the cross. Mary and John – you and I – brought together at Calvary, brought together by Calvary. The death-throes of "the child on the cross" are the birth-pangs of the church.

6 Touching the Rock

Calvary stands in many places. Wherever sin and suffering have carved deep wounds, those wounds are in the shape of a cross. I think of the former Soviet Union and the Gulag Archipelago, the chain of labour camps across the frozen wastes of Siberia to which the Soviet government consigned its perceived enemies, and where millions perished. Calvary stood in the Gulag Archipelago.

The writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn lived and nearly died in those camps. In his great book *The Gulag Archipelago* he writes of his time there. He tells how those camps robbed him of everything that makes life meaningful. He is robbed of his name - he is known only by a number. He is robbed of books. He is robbed of means by which to write. He is robbed of work he can do with dignity. Instead he must labour as a slave. He is deprived of sufficient food and sufficient sleep. He gets no letters. He hears no news of his family or of the outside world. He is stripped of his own clothes and dressed in verminous rags. He is robbed of his health - he succumbs to cancer.

Solzhenitsyn, robbed of everything, sinks as it were to the bottom, to very base of being. And then he writes, "I felt it firm under my feet." "I felt it firm under my feet." I cannot think of any words in modern literature that have moved me more than these.

So at the last, as on this day, Jesus is brought to the bottom of the abyss – and he finds it firm under his feet. For his final word from the cross is not of dereliction or despair but of trust. "Father – Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

St Paul writes of Christ's descent into the abyss. "Let that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross."

"He became obedient to death." And even that perhaps was not the limit of his descent. The inner crucifixion of the Son of God takes him lower yet. As the Apostles' Creed has it, "he descended into hell". We cannot follow Jesus there. But this we can say. Wherever his cross took him, at the end, at the end he finds his father there.

"Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee."

"If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there." Is that true? If it is, there is hope for all those who - by their own fault, or someone else's fault, or no one else's fault - make their bed in hell.

Jesus descends into hell and finds his Father there. "He finds his father there." And I hear a voice saying, "Watch your language!" Now's not the time to discuss the rights and wrongs of calling God "Father" – many would say that there are more wrongs than rights in a word that makes God

sound male. But if we stay with that word today, we do so not because of what it tells us about God's gender. We stay with that word because of what it says about God's trustworthiness. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Jesus, in the depths of the abyss he entered at Calvary, came to a place where trust was possible. Some say that the word Jesus actually used must have been "Abba", the personal form of address that a child would use in talking to his or her father. That is how Jesus had prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Abba, Father, if it be your will let this cup pass from me." The cup did not pass from him. He drained it to its bitter dregs. But still he finds it possible to pray, Abba, Father. He touches the rock.

Touching the Rock is the title of a book by a very great man, the educationalist John Hull. Over twenty years ago John Hull became blind. His book is a record of his experience of what he lost, but also of what he found through the experience of losing his sight. He gave his book that title *Touching the Rock* because he too came to a place where trust was possible – and not only trust, but also of wonder. John Hull writes of stepping out of his house into his front garden as the rain begins to fall. "This is an experience of great beauty. I feel as if the world, which is veiled until I touch it, has suddenly disclosed itself to me. I feel that the rain is gracious, that it has granted a gift to me, the gift of the world."

"Touching the rock." Take the little phrase "rock-bottom". It's an interesting phrase, one worth unpacking. When we are brought very low, so low that we can sink no lower, we touch rock. That at least is what this day says can be true. It is what Solzhenitsyn found to be true. It is what John Hull found to be true. It is what a sad character, a homeless poet who hung about this church, found to be true.

"When so sad thou canst not sadder,
Cry, and upon thy so sore loss,
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder,
Pitched betwixt heaven and Charing Cross."

In a few moments we shall move outside this church on to the portico where a great rock stands, a rock bearing the form of a tiny child. We think of that helpless child held in his mother's arms. We have come full circle. Today, as helpless as he was at birth, he is held in the arms of the cross.

We shall gather around that great rock. I'd like to suggest that we each reach out and to touch it, the rock beneath the crib, the rock beneath the cross. Perhaps we shall catch a sense of something that our stupid words cannot begin to explain, a sense of what lies beneath all the confusions and contradictions of our mixed-up lives, that same rock that Christ touched in the dark place he went to for us. So may we find, as today our Saviour did, that "the eternal God is our refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms".