

Human Suffering and the suffering of Jesus Christ

This eyes-open reflection is based principally on the Isenheim (Issenheim) Altarpiece in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar in north-east France.

This can be seen at: www.musee-unterlinden.com or by googling 'Isenheim altarpiece' and selecting the images.

We begin by focusing on God as we sing:

God is Love: let heav'n adore him;
God is Love: let earth rejoice;
Let creation sing before him,
And exalt him with one voice.
He who laid the earth's foundation,
He who spread the heav'ns above,
He who breathes through all creation,
He is Love, eternal Love.

God is Love: and he enfoldeth
All the world in one embrace;
With unfailing grasp he holdeth
Every child of every race.
And when human hearts are breaking
Under sorrow's iron rod,
Then they find that selfsame aching
Deep within the heart of God.

God is Love: and though with blindness
Sin afflicts the souls of men,
God's eternal loving-kindness
Holds and guides them even then.
Sin and death and hell shall never
O'er us final triumph gain;
God is Love, so Love for ever
O'er the universe must reign.¹

Matthew 27

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

The artist known as the Master of Stauffenberg depicts that crucifixion scene in an altarpiece painted in the 16th century and now in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, north-east France. Jesus hardly marked by the 'hate dents' of the scourging, the nails, the crown of thorns, the spear hangs serenely –
for us all to admire?
for us all to revere?

¹ Timothy Rees (1874-1909) © Geoffrey Chapman

Here I am – look at me.
This is how to die!?

In that same museum is the Isenheim altarpiece also painted in the 16th century by an artist known as Matthias Grunewald -
the crucifixion depicted so differently.

The whole of Jesus' body is wounded.

His face is contorted –
we can almost feel the agony and hear the cry “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
echoed by so many others facing suffering and death.

Verses from Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent.

**Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the praise of Israel.
In you our fathers put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.
They cried to you and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not disappointed.**

But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:
“He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him.
Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”

**Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you
even at my mother's breast.
From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.
Do not be far from me, for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.**

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.
Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my
bones;

people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.

**But you, O Lord, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me.**

This Jesus says - here I am - but please look away - but we can't

Jesus Christ has suffered
Jesus Christ has died.

We are drawn into those facts, those truths.

Grunewald knew for whom he was painting
This altarpiece had been commissioned for a hospital for those suffering from ergotism - with its
life-threatening convulsive or gangrenous symptoms.

This altarpiece carried the message –
you are suffering -
Jesus, son of man, son of God, suffered.

God incarnate in Christ knows about suffering
This God is alongside you -
in your uncertainty, rejection, isolation, humiliation, pain, agony,
physical, mental, spiritual.
God in Christ is alongside you in death.

The writer Susan Howatch puts words into the mouth of one of her Starbridge characters:
Isn't it wonderful! ... that's the point of the Incarnation, I can see that so clearly now. God came
into the world and screamed alongside us.²

In Isaiah's words: Jesus was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with
grief.

So we pray:
Lord, we thank you that, as we sang earlier,
when human hearts are breaking under sorrow's iron rod,
that we find that self-same aching deep within the heart of God
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The artist places figures at the cross -
Jesus' mother, Mary, John, the beloved disciple and Mary Magdalene - recorded as being there in
the Gospel
accounts – and John the Baptist who wasn't.

They can help us as we now pray for others.

² Susan Howatch: Absolute Truths part 3/V. HarperCollins 1995

As we pray might have in mind words of Paul Claudel who wrote: Jesus did not come to explain suffering nor to take it away; he came to fill it with his presence.³

If you wish please use the response ‘be present to them’ during these prayers

Mary, Jesus’ mother is in white, a fragile, pale figure in a state beyond grief – like many who watch and wait for a loved one to die, resigned to the inevitable, totally helpless.

She wrings her hands – as they might well do - in prayer.

Lord, we pray for those who are watching and waiting and helpless

Lord, man of sorrows and acquainted with grief **be present to them**

John, the beloved disciple, grieving himself, supports Mary in her grief. He is totally focused on her.

Somehow, he has an enormous right arm and huge strong hands to support her.

Lord we pray for those who support those whose loved ones are dying or have died.

We pray for those who, as they also grieve, have to find those unexpected resources in order to support others.

Lord, man of sorrows and acquainted with grief **be present to them**

Mary Magdalene is a strange figure - her hair loose, she is ‘shrunk and liquefied by distress’ – like so many who watch those they love die. A pathetic figure, with no one to support her in her grief. Here is desperation.

Lord we pray for those who, dissolved in and by their grief, feel unsupported even with others around them, for no one can meet their needs

Lord, man of sorrows and acquainted with grief **be present to them**

John the Baptist points to Jesus and says: I must decrease that he might increase.

Look at Jesus; look to Jesus.

Lord we pray for all who seek to point those who are in agony to Jesus.

Lord, man of sorrows and acquainted with grief **be present to them**

Lord, for those who feel defeated by pain, sorrow, despair or loneliness we pray. May they feel your presence with them that they may know that they are loved and find hope and glimpses of your glory.

We ask these prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Isenheim altarpiece has 7 panels - the crucifixion forms the two that are seen when it is closed. Inside, in contrast, is Grunewalds’ panel depicting Jesus’ resurrection - his triumph over that suffering and death - a painting full of light, energy, release and new life - new life which Jesus, who shared our pain and death, invites us to share with him, now and for ever.

³ Cited by Angela Ashwin: From Prayer to Pain – Introduction. HarperCollins 1997

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.⁴

We sing:

How deep the father's love for us,
how vast beyond all measure
that he should give his only son
to make a wretch his treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss:
the Father turns his face away,
as wounds which mark the chosen one
bring sinners unto glory.

Behold a man upon a cross,
my sin upon his shoulders;
ashamed I hear my mocking voice
call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held him there
until it was accomplished;
his dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything,
no gifts, no power, no wisdom;
but I will boast in Jesus Christ,
his death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from his reward?
I cannot give an answer,
But this I know with all my heart,
his wounds have paid my ransom.⁵

We pray: 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 the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁶

Let us bless the Lord
Thanks be to God

⁴ 1 Peter 1: 3 NIV

⁵ Stuart Townend © 1995 Kingsway's Thankyou Music

⁶ Collect: The Third Sunday of Lent © The Central Board of Finance of the Church of England 1997