

Take up your cross – Talk 1

**There is a green hill far away, outside a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all.**

**There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin,
He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.**

**Oh, dearly, dearly has He loved! And we must love Him too
And trust in His redeeming blood and try His works to do.**

When you go to the Holy Land, one of the places to which guides take pilgrims is that identified as a possible location of Jesus' crucifixion. A mile or so beyond the walls of Jerusalem (for surely no execution would have taken place within the holy city,) if that site was in fact Golgotha, "the place of the skull" reported expressly in the Gospels, it is aptly named.

There, no green hill, no brow on which three crosses might once have stood, silhouetted on the skyline. It is a brooding place, a flat valley at the foot of a bare, dark, rocky cliff which, with a little imagination, does indeed resemble an enormous skull.

Try in your mind to picture Jesus that morning. Hours before, late the previous evening, when many people would already have retired to their beds, he had been arrested by Roman soldiers in front of his helpless little band of disciples. Marched off at the behest of the imperial authorities working in collusion with Jewish religious leaders and thrown into a prison cell to await whatever they had in store for him.

The meal he had shared with his disciples gathered round a table in the upper room must have been a distant memory. Maybe he was offered some meagre prison slops, but more likely had eaten nothing since that last supper. For many hours he could not have slept, probably not even have been allowed to sit down to rest.

Relentlessly questioned, passed backwards and forwards between Herod and Pilate, branded with groundless accusations and false testimonies, the man who had healed the sick, fed the hungry, calmed great waves and storms on

the sea was paraded in front of the jeering crowds, to be mercilessly humiliated.

John 19.14-18

Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.' Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.

Mark 15.16 - 21

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

Picture Jesus, God in human flesh; dishevelled and dirty, vulnerable, condemned by all sides to be crucified as a common criminal. Clad in the clothes he had been wearing for two days, now streaked with blood seeping from the wounds inflicted by the crown of vicious thorns rammed on his head.

Imagine him now compelled to drag the great beam on which his body will be hung. Not the conventional cross pictured here, but actually a cross-beam which will be securely bolted onto a tree trunk growing in the appointed place.

A heavy, rough sleeper, perhaps already bearing bolt holes from previous crucifixions and stained with the blood of previous occupants.

So Jesus set out, alone among the throngs lining his way, already exhausted, hungry, bloodied and weakened, carrying the great weight thrust upon his shoulders.

In the Catholic church (both Roman and Anglican) a series of incidents on this journey are commemorated in meditations, known as the Stations of the Cross. Unsurprisingly, among the events marked as stations, three times Jesus fell to the ground. Anxious that the condemned man should not die before the sentence could be carried out, after his second fall the soldiers unceremoniously hauled a bystander out of the crowd to carry the burden part of the way for him.

We can't know whether or not Simon of Cyrene had ever encountered Jesus, or even knew anything about him. Maybe it was just co-incidence that Simon happened to be there at that moment, and perhaps we can imagine his terror at being pulled out from the crowd; yet what an honour, to be known for all time as the one who carried the Cross some way for the Saviour of the World.

Then the moment Jesus came face-to-face with His beloved mother. How awful that must have been, each heart breaking for the other, each unable to comfort the other; just a meeting of the eyes, a silent recognition of all that had occurred in his 33 years, an acknowledgement that this was the price to be exacted from each of them for having accepted the will of the Father.

Although not recorded anywhere in the Gospels, a later station depicts another who, according to Tradition, dared to reach out to relieve Jesus' suffering. A woman named Veronica is reputed to have wiped the sweat and blood from his face using her soft head covering. One small act of kindness, one tender demonstration of humanity amongst the brutality.

These are the opening lines of a poem called "**Crucifixion**" written by the Revd Peter English.

**Biting whip on bleeding back; rough wood on raw shoulders,
Exhausted body on tired legs – why is death so distant?**

Skull hill, prostrate body, eager, baying crowd...

Why is death so public?

Mother, friends. Helpless, suffering.

Why is death so lonely?

So many heaping condemnation on top of the already great weight of the cross Jesus dragged along the way, so few to voice love or praise or encouragement.

“Why did Jesus have to die?” I’ve been asked more than once. Or, at least we might well wonder, “Why did Jesus have to die in such a dreadful, way?”

For we Christians, it’s not so hard to set aside the horrendous details of Crucifixion, because we know the glory of Christ’s Easter resurrection. But for those who were there, all who witnessed as Jesus passed by on his slow, torturous way that day, there was a finality, a sense of inescapable defeat.

Jesus wasn’t, isn’t, half human and half God. Jesus is fully divine... AND at the same time fully human. At that time more than any other, as the realization of Crucifixion came ever nearer, I think perhaps the full horror of his humanity, the pain and degradation and vulnerability was overwhelming. Yet, without that reality, that seeming finality, how could the Resurrection have come?

We have ??? minutes before the next talk. I invite you now to find some space, here inside or else take a little walk outside and use that time to focus on Jesus as he walked that Way of Sorrow, that Way of Suffering. Or perhaps to explore your own reactions to anything I’ve said. I won’t be asking for any feedback, although I will be interested to hear later of anything anyone wants to share.

Take up your cross – Talk 2

Let me introduce my children. (Not that they look much like these photos any more!)

This is Vivienne, (2xv 2xi 2xe, and 2xn) born in April 1977, just in time for the celebrations of the Queen's silver Jubilee. Like me, she began her working life as a Computer Programmer, later moving into designing and developing commercial Internet web sites.

Viv loves being out in nature and is hugely passionate about both the preservation of this Planet and working for the good of all the World's inhabitants. At various times she has back-packed around South America, taught dalit ('untouchable') children in India and cycled through a great chunk of the African continent. She lives now in Halifax and, among many other things, runs workshops across the country promoting non-violent Conflict Resolution.

Brother Phillip arrived in June 1982, three days before Prince William was born. He studied engineering at the University of the West of England, and had his graduation in 2005 in the magnificent settings of Bristol Cathedral. He now works at the National Composite Centre, helping develop innovative products such as ultra-light-weight aeroplane wings and blades for the next generation of giant wind-turbines.

Phil lives in Great Somerford with his wife and two young children and one of the great delights for us since we came to Swindon is being near enough to spend time with our young grandson and granddaughter almost every week.

Our middle child is Melanie. Melanie came into the world (with some medical prompting) one bright Friday morning, the 19th of October 1979. Doctors had been closely monitoring my pregnancy for the previous two or three months, concerned that the baby didn't seem to be developing as expected and that her placenta might be failing. Although born exactly on her due date, Mel-mel weighed only four pounds (and half-an-ounce) and was immediately whisked away to the Special Care Baby Unit.

Two days later we learned she had a cleft palate which made it very difficult for her to suckle, the first of a number of complications which would be discovered while she remained in the hospital.

Although a bit worrying, those six weeks were an interesting time for us as we became familiar with the previously unknown world of SCBU. And what a fabulous blessing it felt when we brought her home to join her big sister four days before Christmas.

Melanie was born with Smith-Lemli-Opitz syndrome, an exceedingly rare genetic defect, referred to nowadays, appropriately, by its initials SLO. Looking at the photo you can see she had an odd little face, a typical 'SLO face' we were told. To us she was beautiful, a contented baby with a wonderful, sunny disposition and her own little personality. She rarely cried, seemed to take a great deal of interest in whoever and whatever was going on around her and thrived on attention, no matter who from. Each day brought new discoveries, new experience as we learned strategies for helping her development.

In those pre-Internet days we had little knowledge, few expectations beyond the prognosis we were given by our paediatricians. They told us she would always need someone around, "to remind her about changing her socks," I remember one saying. No one told us that the syndrome carries with it very low life expectancy. And I am glad that we had no idea how precious each day was. Until the morning when an unseen angel came to take Melanie home, two days less than sixteen months old.

Take up your cross, the Saviour said, if you would my disciple be;

a hymn says,

Deny yourself, the world forsake, and humbly follow after me.

Take up your cross, let not its weight fill your weak spirit with alarm;

His strength shall bear your spirit up, and brace your heart and nerve your arm.

Jesus did not choose to take up the Cross. As I pointed out earlier, Jesus was not partly God and partly human; Jesus was and will ever be fully divine, AND fully human. Frequently the Gospel accounts point to the Divine – the Nativity, the miracles, the sayings and the teachings... but in Christ's passion we see starkly and most clearly his humanity and vulnerability.

Mark 13.32-40

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me... Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

As Jesus bore his physical Cross that day, how many others, I wonder, were weighed down alongside of him; mentally and spiritually, compelled to carry their own burdens – of grief, of guilt, of disappointment, of helplessness. His mother, Mary, remembering the chilling words spoken to her by the old man, Simeon, on the day she had carried her infant son into the Temple for his Presentation; "*and a spear will pierce your soul too.*"

Simon Peter, choking with remorse, having three times very publicly denied that he had ever known Jesus. Mary Magdalene and the other women who had followed and supported Jesus and his little band for the three years they had travelled around the region. The ten who cowered in the shadows, terrified of being discovered and identified with the accused.

Others besides Veronica who also yearned to show their compassion but could not reach through. Perhaps some of those whom Jesus had healed and restored, or who had sat on the hillsides listening to His teaching.

And, it occurred to me for the first time only a few days ago, somewhere nearby, perhaps less ceremoniously, two unnamed criminals were also making their own agonizing final journey, taking them also to Golgotha.

"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." How well we all know that feeling.

Experience tells me that many (perhaps most) people carry some form of cross through life. Sickness or disability, grief, regret; unrealized, missed or stolen opportunities; guilt, fear, addiction... of themselves or on the part of someone they love.

Metaphorical Crosses, for the most part unseen, of which no-one else may be aware, yet whose weight is ever present. Crosses none of which we choose to take up but crosses which get thrust upon us.

Not that Melanie was ever a cross, a weight to be borne, I hasten to say; Indeed it was our great privilege to love and care for her, and see her begin to blossom; but the grief of losing her, though it has lessened through the intervening years, will never go away.

***Then if evil on us press, flesh or spirit to assail,
Victor in the wilderness, help us not to swerve nor fail!***

***So shall peace divine be ours; holy gladness ours shall be;
Round us, too, shall angels shine, such as ministered to thee.***

Take up your cross – Talk 3

**When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.**

Once an instrument of torture, of shame and of death, The Cross has become a powerful symbol. I've brought some different decorative crosses today which we have collected over the years and which hang usually around the walls of our home. More accurately, some are crosses and some crucifixes. I learned only a few years ago how controversial the difference can be; that for some the contorted, broken, bleeding figure hanging there is central, whilst others point out that the Cross must be empty, since Christ came down and returned to Heaven. Personally each of these images has a part in the telling.

{This the oldest, which I asked for as a Sunday School prize when I was eleven... etc]

Early Christians, living soon after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, had to meet together in secret, for fear of discovery and retribution. "Do this in remembrance of me," the Saviour had urged and as sharing in the Breaking of Bread quickly became the identifying feature of Christian community, secret symbols were used to surreptitiously indicate the places where members met. Some of these can still be seen painted on the walls of the ancient catacombs in Rome.

The ichthus (simple fish shape,) chi rho ("Christ") or a descending dove (*this is my beloved son.*) Symbols we still use today, but The Cross has become the universal sign of Christianity recognized world wide.

I was interested to notice when Bishop Neil was talking at the Q&A session following his visit to Christ Church last Sunday, how often he ran his fingers over the bright, shiny silver Pectoral Cross he wore, as if the feel of it sub-consciously gave him affirmation and assuredness when he spoke.

Many of us wear some form of cross around our necks, as a sign of Christian commitment. But mostly a rather less flashy cross than that of the Bishop and quite often hidden under our clothing. You might recall the case of an airline stewardess a few years ago who was told NOT to wear a visible cross when on duty, lest it should offend any passenger. It was eventually acknowledged that as symbols of other religious commitments, such as Muslim headscarves or the

Jewish Star of David were allowed, it was discriminatory to ban a Christian cross. But none-the-less the matter continues to be a bit of a grey area.

How sad, that this sign of love, of peace, of redemption could now be viewed with suspicion. That we keep our commitment hidden away, rather than proudly displaying it for all the world to see.

Lift high the Cross, the love of Christ proclaim, another hymn urges,
'Til all the world adore His sacred name.

As I have already said, Jesus did not *choose* to take up the Cross, though he was ready to fulfil the purpose for which he had come to Earth. I doubt anyone ever *chooses* to take up that weight. Like Christ, the burden of carrying whatever Cross is foisted on us, and the weight of it can be overpowering. But it can also be empowering. Because it is at points of weakness that we often find our greatest strength,

An Ordinand studying on the Northern Ordination Course a year ahead of me was diagnosed with an extremely aggressive cancer six months before she was due to be Ordained. It shook us all. How could God allow such a cruel blow? So we prayed, and the diocese prayed, and so many others, far and wide, prayed for healing. Chris was Ordained both Deacon and Priest at the same service – an occurrence almost unheard of, but offered by Bishop Nigel McCulloch because by then the prognosis was that she would not survive another twelve months.

In fact Chris served fifteen months of her Curacy before she died. Through all the pain and her increasing decline, she continued to send regular e-mail messages – what today might be called a 'podcast,' frequently praising God that she could use the hours she spent sat in a chair, receiving chemotherapy, as an opportunity to share her faith with other patients.

On a similar theme a couple of weeks ago the broadcast of Songs of Praise included an interview with a woman whose husband had drowned trying to rescue their pet dog which had got into difficulty after running into the sea while they walked along the beach. While still grieving and trying to process the apparent senselessness of that loss, she had decided to use the tragedy for positive action, and had begun going into schools to teach children of the dangers and how to stay safe in the water.

In her book, *Bridging the Gap*, Margaret Williams wrote of her Godson, William, also born with Smith-Lemli-Opitz and quoted a letter written to him by his mother, after he died. With Margaret's agreement I would like to read part of that letter to you.

One day someone asked me whether I didn't think I had been chosen to care for you. Things started to make sense. You were no longer 'a disabled child'; you were our beautiful son. I was truly grateful to be given the opportunity to care for you and your brother. Grateful to be the one chosen to receive your love and your beautiful smile.

The reason for your existence, I believe was to care for me and all those who had the privilege of knowing you. You helped so many from the moment you were born, and to this very day you are still teaching. You taught me many things, but most of all that it's OK to be afraid.

In her short life Melanie taught me important lessons which have helped (and continue to help) me, in life and in Ministry. With no concept of "the past" or of "the future," Melanie lived in each present moment. Although not entirely abandoning other commitments, if it were a nice day we'd take a picnic and go out to explore the park; on other days, on a whim we'd ring a friend, or go and knock on their door to ask if they'd time to play. And if the housework didn't get done – well, it could wait for another day.

Later I realized that when the worst has happened there is nothing anyone can say that will make it better. But equally there's little that can be said which could make it any worse. What is important is being there, not shying away. That has been an invaluable lesson to me in many situations.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel we read of what is called the Great Commission, as Jesus speaks His final words to the Disciples before His Ascension. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." "And you will be my witnesses to the end of the earth," adds Luke.

A friend with whom I trained for three years gave me a card when we were ordained. At first sight the picture on the front simply showed a pair of cupped hands. But looking closer, a tiny figure could be seen nestling in the palm of the hands. "Jesus promises we never have to face anything alone," was the message written inside. But it's not as easy (or comfortable) as it sounds.

How do you and I bear witness? How can we each use whatever cross we have been given to further the Kingdom of God? For those experiences help form us into the people we are and can arm our ability to empathize. I hope today may have triggered some inspiration.

The Cross on which Jesus's broken body hung, the Cross on which He died reminds us of the price Jesus paid to ransom his people. It is to many, a sign of defeat. But I have one further Cross to show you. This cross, the Cross of Glory, seen rather less often than others, has become a throne, a throne for Christ the King.

The Cross he bore is life and health, though shame and death to Him;

His people's hope, His people's wealth, their everlasting theme. AMEN