

1. There is a green hill

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



Prayer

Upon the green and living surface of a hill, the scent of death is in the air. Lord, help us to understand more fully the sacrifice that you made for us, the overwhelming love that this reveals, and may we be forever grateful. Amen

Opening up

Have you had times when life seemed to be falling apart, and you felt you were losing control? How do you deal with situations like that?



The place of the skull

(Read Mark 15:22)

There is some disagreement over the exact spot where Jesus was executed. Golgotha is referred to in early writings as a hill resembling a skullcap located very near to a gate into Jerusalem, and the passage from John's Gospel would suggest that it was certainly within walking distance of the city.

In AD 325 Helena, mother of Constantine the Great identified what is now considered to be the traditional location of Golgotha, and also claimed to have found the tomb of Jesus and the True Cross. Her son built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre around the site, which was described by the 'Pilgrim of Bordeaux', an anonymous pilgrim on a journey to the Holy Land in AD 333 as follows:

'On the left hand is the little hill of Golgotha where the Lord was crucified. About a stone's throw from thence is a vault [crypta] wherein his body was laid, and rose again on the third day. There, at present, by the command of the Emperor Constantine, has been built a basilica; that is to say, a church of wondrous beauty.'

Though now within Jerusalem's Old City Walls, there are grounds to believe that Herod Agrippa repositioned the walls to the north and west.

An alternative position for Golgotha is a rocky knoll (with two large sunken holes, and generally known as Skull Hill) north of the Damascus Gate. Nearby is an ancient rock-cut tomb dating back to 7th Century BC, which is known as the Garden Tomb,



Key verses

*'They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull")'
- Mark 15:22*

'Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews."

*'Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written."
- John 19:19-22*

*'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'
- Matthew 2:2*

and which Major-General Charles Gordon proposed as the tomb of Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth; King of the Jews

(Read John 19:19-22)

When we read the words 'King of the Jews' at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, we perhaps forget that this was a title used from the very beginning of his life by Magi who travelled to Bethlehem for his birth, and one that led indirectly to the Massacre of the Innocents.

Now at his arrest that same title is held against him as one of the charges, the argument being that anyone claiming such a title places them as a threat to Caesar, and failure to act would count against Pilate. At which point (John 19:12) the people scream, 'Crucify him! ...We have no king but Caesar!'

The Latin inscription which we see as INRI (Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum) reads in English as 'Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews' and after being whipped by the soldiers they placed a purple robe around Jesus (signifying royalty) and that crown of thorns on his head.

In 1492, Cardinal Pedro González de Mendoza claimed to have discovered the actual tablet on which this inscription was written, believed to have been brought to Rome by Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, who we met earlier!



Discussion

- 1 What is the importance of the so-called 'traditional sites' believed to be where Jesus, or indeed any important religious figure, may have been born, lived or died, even if the location is disputed?
- 2 What does Pilate's response in John 19:19-22 say about him, and how might it feed into the more agnostic world in which we now live?
- 3 Can we read anything into Cecil Alexander's use of the word 'green' in describing the hill of execution – what picture does it paint?



The journey to the Cross

As part of their acts of devotion, early Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem retraced the route of Jesus as he carried his cross to his death. This developed over the years until by the sixteenth century this route had stations along its way relating to events in Jesus last days, and was known as the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrow, and the tradition is carried on today within Catholic and some Protestant churches.

There is another tradition, of a service of meditation called Tenebrae, meaning 'darkness' or 'shadows', which has been practiced by the church since medieval times, again following Jesus' journey to the Cross, and the 'stations' we are using are typical of this service of meditation on Christ's suffering, and comes from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship.



1: The Shadow of Betrayal (Mark 14:10-13, 16-21)

Sharing meals with friends and family, particularly at festive times or birthday and wedding celebrations seems a natural thing to do because it draws people together and says something about the people gathered together – who they are, how they feel about one another and how they express those feelings in words or gestures. They become memorable moments together.

Jewish festivals have a similar feel, in that there is a shared remembrance, a feeling of belonging to something special. They are also deeply religious. Passover is one such meal, and this is one that Jesus shares with his disciples, one that they will remember all their lives as Jesus offers the betrayer (not naming him) a chance to think again, and a warning that there will be consequences to his actions if he does not.



Pause for thought...



2: The Shadow of the Agony of the Spirit (Luke 22:39-48, 54)

Jesus had not one, not two dilemmas at this moment in his life. There was his personal struggle with the fate that awaited him if he continued on this journey, a path that would lead to arrest, trial and death. Jesus knew it was his God-given vocation to keep going to the end.

But there was also his responsibility to the disciples, because followers of rebel leaders were routinely rounded up, tortured and killed. It was vital that this did not happen to Peter and the others, because they were the ones who would carry the mission forward and into the world.

Jesus' anguish was genuine and terrible, sweating blood in such extremes of stress is not unknown. So soon after sharing a meal together, he had to face this torment by himself, and pray that his disciples would be spared the same fate. And then came the kiss of betrayal.

Pause for thought...

A prayer

Leader: Jesus, within your solitude at that moment we sense a renewed strength to continue on the path you had to follow for our sake. Help us to be sensitive to the pain and feelings of others, and at times allow them space. Amen



Discussion

- 4 How does Jesus' approach at the Passover meal to the 'Judas problem' relate to us, and our relationship with God?
- 5 Think about a recent shared meal with friends/extended family/colleagues. What were both the positives and negatives of that meeting together?
- 6 The disciples were struggling to understand exactly who Jesus was, but what might have been Judas' reasons for taking the money to betray Jesus?
- 7 We are used to thinking of Jesus as Son of God, part of the Godhead. How does this honest portrayal of Jesus so full of anguish and distress during that night of prayer affect us?
- 8 When Jesus went back to his disciples and found them asleep, what do you read into his words, 'Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.
- 9 Put yourself in the position of one of the disciples. What must have been going through your mind on the Mount of Olives?
- 10 What does this poignant moment in the life of Jesus, bearing in mind the expectations of the disciples and many of the Jews, tell us about him?