

Good Friday

It was early spring in the Middle East, and daytime temperatures were rapidly beginning to rise while the nights remained cool to cold.

Jesus, in His divine wisdom, had shared a Last Supper with His disciples, a significant event in which He instituted Holy Communion. Now, together, they made their way out of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives, to a garden called Gethsemane. This journey, this sacrifice, was not just a physical one, but a spiritual one of immense significance.

He instructed them to watch and pray as He drew apart from them. Instead, they promptly fell asleep.

They probably didn't. After all, how could they have known what Jesus prayed, as there was no opportunity for Him to tell them later?

No, Luke is trying to highlight Jesus' complete isolation, which no one could share with Him. This profound sense of isolation is a universal experience, as every dying person, despite the presence of others, stands apart on their journey. It is a moment of personal reckoning and acceptance of one's fate.

In one Lukan manuscript, we are told that Jesus' sweat became like great drops of blood, which signifies profound fear.

The Dominican biblical scholar Pierre Benoit recounted that during the war, he was called to the cell of a condemned resistance fighter who was to be executed the next day. He noted that the man was sweating blood, a phenomenon that occurs in the presence of extreme fear. Jesus, faithful to the end in doing the will of His Father, also fully embraced His humanity.

Then Judas arrived with the Temple guards. Judas' tragedy is not that he betrayed Jesus, as all the disciples did this in one way or another—just as we do.

His tragedy was not just his betrayal, a mistake all the disciples made in their own ways, but his failure to grasp Jesus' message of forgiveness. This message still holds true today: in a spirit of repentance, through Jesus, we can all find forgiveness and new life. This call to repentance is not a suggestion, but a necessity for our spiritual growth and transformation.

But here in Gethsemane, this hour is shrouded in darkness that we all must sometimes experience. May we, like Jesus, pray, 'Not my will, but yours, Father, be done'.

I now want to jump forward in time from that Thursday night, known as Maundy Thursday, to the following day, Good Friday, after Jesus has been sentenced and led away to be executed.

They reach Golgotha, the place of the skull. The crowd of onlookers, present for the entertainment, gathers around. The Roman soldiers hold them back.

At the centre of all this activity are three men: Jesus of Nazareth and two criminals. Having been tortured throughout the night, Jesus is too weak to carry His cross, and a bystander, Simon of Cyrene, has been compelled by a soldier.

The heavy pieces of wood fall to the ground. The soldiers are quick and efficient. They have done this many times before; they know what to do and get on with it.

The three are offered wine mixed with gall. They accept it. Jesus sips and realises it's a drug, so He refuses any more. The person offering the drink is surprised. No one facing execution by crucifixion, a ruthless and barbaric method of dying, refuses this drugged wine. It alleviates pain and clouds the mind. Still, that's His choice. If He doesn't want it...

They lie on the crosses, their arms outstretched, as the soldiers begin to nail them—the cries of pain echo. The soldiers are accustomed to this and continue working, unaffected by it.

Jesus looks around Him. Although He knew this would happen, He felt a sense of shock. There is a moment of disbelief. He looks down at the soldiers gathered at the foot of the Cross. Just a few yards away, He sees the crowd watching – a crude, rough crowd that revels in this kind of violence.

He sees some friends. He notices the small group of women who offered Him the drugged wine and who strive to attend every execution to do what they can to support the condemned prisoners.

Jesus looks away, back to those perpetrating this terrible violence – back to the soldiers, back to the crowds enjoying the spectacle, back to the Scribes and Pharisees and their uninhibited delight that they have triumphed!

Then He speaks in a voice filled with pain, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'.

The chatter momentarily ceases. One can imagine the silence as those words sink in, and then one Pharisee turns to another and says, 'Did I hear that right? Is He forgiving us? Is He saying we don't know what we're doing?' They laugh. 'Jesus, we know exactly what we're doing; we're getting rid of You once and for all!'

The crowd laughs at this exchange, and the soldiers smile. 'Still, it's odd that someone on a cross would forgive us. Why should they forgive us? We're soldiers, just obeying orders and doing our jobs.'

'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' How difficult those words must have been to express. 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' To say them and indeed mean it without any bitterness.

Someone I knew didn't attend church on Good Friday because it was too unpleasant. But Good Friday is not meant to be pleasant! It's the day humans crucified God. There's nothing pleasant about that!

The good news, however, is that it had to happen. God intended it as part of His plan of salvation for humanity. In Jesus' death, we find forgiveness for our sins and the promise of a new life, a life free from the burden of sin and filled with the grace of God!

So, as we observe Good Friday today, please take a moment to reflect on what occurred, recognise its significance, and consider its personal meaning for you. This personal reflection on our sins is not a one-time event but a continuous process of self-awareness and growth in our faith.

Allow His death to inspire your life; turn to Him for forgiveness for your sins, whether it's the anger you've held onto, the lies you've told, or the people you've hurt. The marvellous thing is

that you will discover forgiveness for yourself! That is what Good Friday represents. Remember, Jesus didn't just die for the world; He died for you, for your sins, for your salvation.

But we must not take it lightly; God allowed His Son to die for us so that we might be saved. You and I have been bought at a price.