Joe was a 19 year old young farmer when he went to fight in Vietnam. One day, on patrol in the jungle he came upon a Vietnamese man asleep in a hammock. The man woke up as Joe entered the clearing. For what seemed like an eternity he and the man stared at each other, then the man reached down into his hammock. Thinking he was reaching for a gun, Joe shot him. When he went up to the dead body he found the man had not been reaching for a gun, but for photos of his family to show Joe, to make the human connection. In the fear and tension of the moment, heightened by the backdrop of violent conflict, Joe had misread the signs, drawn the wrong conclusion and, in killing the man, committed an act the legacy of which still haunts him today. The human connection had been made, but not in the way the dead man desired.

In the story of Palm Sunday, living as they do under the occupation and oppression of the Romans it’s perhaps not surprising that those who cheer and cry out, “Hosanna!” as Jesus comes into Jerusalem, misread the signs, draw the wrong conclusion and go on, as the drama unfolds, to play their part in the killing of this man who only a week earlier they’d hailed as the Messiah. The human connection is made, but not in the way the dead man desired…though I imagine Jesus knew what was coming. He is, after all, deeply connected to our humanity, and our capacity for inhumanity.

I can understand the mistaken expectations of the palm-waving people in the crowd. They long for liberation. They are desperate and afraid. Perhaps they feel unable to effect change themselves, to bear the cost of it. They can’t bring release to their people, but this man, Jesus, surely will. In their helplessness they remind me of the subject of Stevie Smith’s popular poem, ‘Not Waving but Drowning’.

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he’s dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

The crowds on Palm Sunday - perhaps not waving, but drowning - remind me of me. I can speak only for myself here but, as I do so, you may find my words express something of your own experience as well. There have been a number of times in my life when I, too, have been out of my depth, drowning in the complexity and messiness of human existence, needing to be rescued by someone, anyone, who understands things better than me, and who can set me on my feet again. I, too, needed a Messiah, but the One who saves rarely comes as I expect, rarely fits my definitions or demands.

That’s where I still go wrong today, just like the crowds on Palm Sunday, misreading the signs, and trying to pin down the Love that cannot be pinned down to make it fit my needs. As the hymn, ‘Great God your love has called us here’ puts it, ‘We strain to glimpse your mercy seat and find you kneeling at our feet’. I look heavenward, but Jesus constantly draws my vision back down to earth, to living with profound humanity in the here and now, whatever the cost.

Like the people who celebrate Jesus’ arrival into Jerusalem, and walk with him through his last days, until they fall away when he is captured and crucified, I’ve often been blinded by misplaced expectations, limitation of vision, ignorance and fear. For that reason it’s much easier to seek and accept a Messiah who has done the work for me, rather than to heed the One who calls me, as he calls his disciples in Mark 8.34 to “take up their cross and follow me”. This is not a call to suffer for the sake of suffering. It is an invitation to live out the costly, often counter-cultural compassionate Love which our capacity for inhumanity, indifference, blindness and greed consistently denies. Perhaps that’s why we, like those who welcome Jesus and then fall away as the cost of Love becomes clear through his final days, prefer to take the Calvary Bypass.

I sometimes think that’s why Christian communities through the centuries, trying to make sense of Jesus, come to focus more on Jesus having died, “once for all, upon the cross,” - so we don’t have to - rather than on the invitation to, “take up your cross and follow me.” The early Church seems to have moved quickly from right action in the way of Jesus (orthopraxis) to right belief about Jesus (orthodoxy). It’s a short step from that for Christians to become more concerned with believing in the Gospel rather than living it out; to believing in a supernatural God ‘out there’ who will rescue us, rather than embodying Love ourselves, as the body of Christ.

I have always believed and preached that God is Love, but last year, at my sickest point, when I almost died while being treated for a rare and aggressive cancer, the words, “God is Love” meant absolutely nothing…..except where they were fleshed out through the care of the doctors and nurses who brought me back from the shadow of death.

In my wiser moments I know that a Saviour who lets me off the hook of walking the way of the cross is no Saviour, but an idol of my own making. Yet I know too, that I am as capable as the characters in the stories of this Holy Week of abdicating personal responsibility; using fear, frailty and failings as
an excuse for holding back, even running away, when I am called upon to step forward; betraying people and values I hold dear; denying my strengths alongside highlighting my weaknesses; misusing power, such as I have; and falling asleep to what’s happening around me when I need to be awake and alert. That’s why in this sermon I’ve talked about the story of Palm Sunday and alluded to the coming events of Holy Week in the present tense: I could have spent this time exploring the historicity or otherwise of these texts. There’s real value in doing that, but they are so much more than history. They are your story and my story, capturing the human dynamics that remain true in all times and places, even while contexts and cultures change.

At the beginning of this address I told Jo’s story. After he’d killed the Vietnamese man he noticed how the man had cultivated this patch of jungle into a garden oasis. Joe felt that in another time and place he and the man might have been kindred spirits. He returned from Vietnam feeling he had betrayed the values he held dear. He had failed to walk the Way of Love. He could not accept what the padres in Vietnam had told him – that in fighting for his country he was doing God’s work. He’d seen, even been involved with terrible things done in the name of this God, and he wanted no truck with such a deity. Instead he returned to his farm and turned it into a place where those suffering from PTSD could come and work the land, finding peace and healing as they created gardens and harvested food. He helps those who come to re-make the human connection which enables new life to rise out of death-dealing experiences.

Holy Week is a rigorous week for Christians because it calls us to account, challenges our expectations, invites us to grapple with the tensions of being human, and reminds us of the cost of trying to live out the Love of Christ in the messiness and complexity of daily life.

Each evening, this coming week, during Compline, through the imagined voices of different characters from the gospels I’m going to reflect on human dynamics common to us all. Ignatian spirituality encourages us to enter imaginatively into the lives of gospel characters, to allow their stories to interact with our own, and to see what emerges from the conversation between the two. Following in this tradition I’ve written four ‘voices from the cross’ which prompt questions for reflection as we travel through Holy Week. I hope they will help you through some of the struggles that crucify our humanity, and bring you through them to new life and the acclamation on Easter Day – Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed – in my life and yours. Amen.
For most of my life I have attempted to grow into an ever deeper humanity. I frequently fail in that
discipline, but I have learnt that when I work with my faults and failings they become the source of
my most important gifts. Understanding those frailties has helped me to love more compassionately,
but it is hard to relinquish the patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour which paralyse my capacity
to be a force for good in the world. Which brings me to a man in the gospels I’ll call Ben. His story is
told in the gospel of John 5.2-14. For 38 years Ben has been lying paralysed by the Pool of Bethesda.
An underwater spring bubbles up through the Pool from time to time and the belief is common that
whoever is first into the pool after such stirring of the water, will be healed. As a result this has
become a place where the sick congregate. It’s where Jesus comes across Ben, whom he heals. You’d
think this is good news, but let’s hear what Ben has to say about it as he watches the crucifixion of
Jesus and reflects on their past encounter. Please remember as you listen that this story is about much
more than physical healing. Following in Ignatian tradition, the words you now hear are the result of
me allowing my own experience to enter into, and engage imaginatively with the gospel story.

Ben

I stand here looking up at you nailed to a cross and I wonder what’s going on. No, I’m not
stupid. Slow perhaps, but not stupid. I can see you’re being crucified, but there’s more to it
than that…..How can I explain?

It’s like the time you came to me at the Pool of Bethesda. I’d been there for nigh on 40 years,
paralysed, hoping for a cure. If only I could be first in the water when it bubbled up, as it did
from time to time, then I’d be healed. Of course, I never was. I was a cripple after all. I couldn’t
move. And then you came. Completely straight-faced, you said to me,

“Do you want to be healed?”

Everyone laughed.

“Course he doesn’t,” they called out. “He loves being a cripple.”

They didn’t understand. But I did. I was scared stiff of getting better. I mean, how would I get
by if I could stand on my own two feet? I’ve never had to work. What would I do? You don’t
get charity when you’re fit and well. You’re expected to be charitable, though I sometimes
wonder if charity is a conscience-salve, a way of avoiding the change that’s really needed
without feeling bad about that.

And what of my friends around the pool? They were like family to me. If I got on my feet again,
I wouldn’t belong there anymore. Of course, they’d all be glad for me, but it wouldn’t be the
same.

I was right. It wasn’t.

Your question put me on the spot. In a moment of madness I took the plunge, not into the pool,
but into a different way of life. “Yes,” I said, in answer to your question. “Take up your bed,
and walk,” you said, and I did. My friends went crazy, but after the elation, what could they
say? I was better, and they weren’t. I should have been happy, but walking away from the pool
was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. To cap it all, I’d hardly gone any distance before I had
people questioning me about why I was carrying my bed around on the Sabbath, when that was
forbidden. I’d been up and about for no time at all, and already I was in trouble. Well, I
blurted out what had happened, and they wanted to know who’d healed me. I said I didn’t know. Back then you were a stranger to me. I thought they’d be pleased for me, but somehow my changed state seemed to unsettle them. Suddenly, it all felt too much. I couldn’t hack it. I ran away and hid in the Temple. Away from prying eyes and probing questions. I was glad of the sanctuary. And then, all of a sudden, there you were, standing before me. But you didn’t offer any words of comfort, well none of the ‘Poor You’ kind that I’d have liked.

“See, you are well,” you said. “Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you.”

I was a bit peeved, to tell the truth. Who d’you think you are, I thought. You’ve turned my life upside down, and now you’ve come to give me more grief. In that moment of irritation, something clicked. It was as though your comment had sparked me back in to life: I wasn’t going be walked over by anyone, even you. Up until then I’d been the victim: Poor me, look what’s happened. I’m well, and I don’t want to be. Crazy! And here I was in the Temple using religion not to help me live my life, but to hide away from it. It was the kiss of death. That’s the sin you revealed to me. Your sharpness was so unexpected it caught me unawares - kick-started me into a different state of being. I wasn’t going to be a victim any more. I stalked out of that place like a man possessed, and I haven’t looked back since. It hasn’t been easy, far from it, but becoming whole never is. That’s what I’ve learnt. Being healed can hurt like hell.

And that’s what makes me wonder as I stand here looking up at you on the cross, is your hell part of some kind of healing? I know it sounds mad, and I’m not saying you’re a sort of sacrifice that lets us off the hook. As I discovered in the Temple that’s not your way. It’s just that I know from my own experience things aren’t always as they seem. Like all those months ago when you asked me, “Do you want to be healed?”

Ben’s story is much more than a story about physical healing. He’s the part of each one of us that is afraid to take our place in the world; to be responsible not only for our own well-being but for the well-being of others who are disadvantaged; to be the one who gives rather than constantly being on the receiving end; who finds life easier living the role of passive spectator or commentator, even of victim, traumatic as that is, than coming fully into ourselves, standing tall and stepping out in faith to play our part in the wider healing of humankind. In her book, Return to Love, Marianne Williamson writes, ‘Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.’ It frightens us because it may demand more of us than we feel able to give. It may take us into a way of being that from where we are now, limited by fear and uncertainty, looks overwhelming and impossible. Over the years, a number of people have said to me, “Ruth, I couldn’t do what you do. I’m not good like you.” I always challenge such remarks. Firstly, because they are blatantly not the truth - I am as complicated and messed up as the next person, and secondly, because they are usually an excuse for the person saying them to not do what needs to be done. To hang on to our inadequacy as a reason for inactivity in the face of human suffering is one reason why there is so much suffering. The Christ whose compassion takes him to the cross, challenges our complacency and lack of courage.

In a short time of quiet you may like to reflect on one of the following three questions. I’ll read them out twice.

1. In response to the question of Jesus, “Do you want to be healed?” what would be your own reply, and why?
2. What are the self-perceptions, prejudices and fears that hold you back from playing your part fully in the life of the world?

3. Does your faith help you step out to live love courageously in the world, or does it protect you from the world?

SILENCEN

Christ our Life,
You call us to healing and wholeness of spirit,
Grant us courage to confront our fears and walk the way of transforming love.
May faith be to us an inspiration and encouragement, sending us out,
To live as your body, broken and restored, in our world today.
Amen.
Tuesday of Holy Week 2018

Last night in Compline we reflected on the self-perceptions and fears that paralyse us psychologically and spiritually, and prevent us from standing tall and taking our place in the world, with all the freedoms and responsibilities that go with that. Tonight I want you to listen to the imagined voice of the Syrophoenician woman standing at the cross. Her story is told in Mark 7.24-30. As he so often does, Jesus has taken his disciples outside their comfort zone, away from the familiar to foreign parts, across the liminal space of mountains to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Here they are intruded upon by the Syrophoenician woman. Let’s hear her account of what happened, as I’ve imagined it. She is standing near the cross now, observing Jesus and his mother, and reflecting back to the time her own child was ill and the encounter she had with Jesus.

The Syrophoenician woman.

You poor, poor woman. To watch your own child dying, there is no greater pain. I think we are an army, we who can only stand by, hearts breaking, as those we love are taken from us. It is the way of the world. Except, your son, he changed all that for me. My daughter was dying. My beautiful Sapphra! One day she was fine. The next, she was struck down, screaming in pain. No one knew what it was. Only the strongest of medicines would still her writhing limbs. Night after night I sat cradling her, watching her life force - ah such a vibrant energy - slipping away, guttering like the oil lamp by her bed. There was nothing I could do, except hold her, and caress her, and weep for her. Then one day, my neighbour came to me. She spoke of you, Jesus, “the man from Galilee”. You were staying in the house of her friend. No one was to know you were there. You had the reputation of being a great healer, said my neighbour. Everywhere you went people came to you. There was rarely a moment’s peace. You were, she said, exhausted, but she would tell me where to find you, for she felt in her heart that you could help me. “You must be careful though,” she warned me. “He is not one of us.”

I did not care who you were, or where you came from. If you could heal my daughter, that was all that mattered. Nothing else.

I don’t know what I expected, but it was not your silence. I could see you were very tired. In fact, I think I woke you out of sleep, bursting in upon you as I did. But I was a desperate woman. I pleaded with you to heal my daughter. Do you remember? I cried for you to have mercy upon me. I made so much noise your friends begged for you to send away ‘this wretched woman’. People do not like to be disturbed by the distress of others. And, it seems they would prefer it to go where they cannot hear it, rather than do something to heal it.

When you spoke, I did not understand you at first. “Let the children first be fed for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’ What had dogs and bread to do with me and my daughter? Then I realised. The children were your people, and I was one of the dogs, a foreigner. Your friends clearly thought your words a dismissal, but there was something in your eyes as you looked intently upon me. An invitation, perhaps? Women are not normally invited into the debates of men. We aren’t considered up to it. Yet you were inviting a response from me, so I said,

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Your friends were outraged. Who was I, a mere woman, to answer back? But you were smiling. Any confusion of sleep that had been around you was gone. It was like some light had been lit in your eyes. You took both my hands, and gazed intently upon me.
“Woman,” you said. “Great is your faith. What you desire is done.” And it was. When I returned home, I found my daughter lying at peace, breathing easily. I will never forget that moment. The joy, and the tears and the laughter, all coming at once!

As Sapphra slowly regained her former vigour, I resolved that as soon as was possible we would shut up the house, and seek you out. I am a woman of some means. I was determined that you should be well cared for as you went about your work. You had treated me as an equal, and healed not only my daughter but also myself. Should we not cherish those who give us life? Yet, it is strange how often we do not. As I travelled with you, my friend and teacher, I learned that human goodness disturbs us. When you brought healing to those in need and spent time with sinners, fine, upstanding members of the community condemned your actions. Perhaps real goodness is like a light that throws into sharp relief our own meanness of spirit, the injustices we all too easily accept. Even your friends were unsettled by your response to me. And now you hang upon a cross, deserted by those friends, supported only by supposedly unimportant women. Why, I wonder, do we always pin down and destroy those who offer the fullness of life to all people, regardless of their differences?

On reflection I think it is more than desperation that makes the Syrophoenician woman bold. Unlike Ben, whose story you heard last night, this woman inhabits her own space. She values herself and her daughter, while the men around her, including the disciples, want her to know her place and keep in it – subservient, called to do the bidding of men. While the disciples in other gospel stories argue about their places in heaven and who will have the greatest power, this woman is motivated to seek out Jesus purely for the love of her sick daughter, and she doesn’t care who she upsets along the way to finding healing. There’s a part of me that flinches at her ‘in your face’ feistiness, perhaps because I wish I had rather more of that myself: I know my own tendency to be the polite and inhibited English woman who doesn’t want to cause any trouble, and the little girl in me who struggles to ‘behave’ when what I really need to do is break out and challenge more often the dehumanising perceptions and practices in our communities and more widely in our world! This Syrophoenician woman disturbs and inspires me in equal measure because she refuses to fit the boxes, accept the identities that others want her to occupy. She is her own woman, and Jesus recognises that God-spark within her. He affirms who she is, and her love finds fulfilment in the healing of her daughter. Her story invites reflection on one of the following questions which I’ll read out twice:

1. What identities have you inhabited over the years? Which were forced upon you? Which did you accept, even though they didn’t feel a good fit?

2. Who do you want to be today, and how might you effect that transformation?

3. Do your expectations of others confine or liberate them?

4. How might you live out love more inclusively, particularly in relation to those you might more easily reject and avoid?

SILENCE
Christ our Life,
You challenge us to break free, to be bold, and to challenge those who prefer our silence and acquiescence.
May your Love stir us to daring acts as we seek to answer your call to address injustice and ease suffering.
Amen.
This Holy Week I’ve been reflecting on the perceptions and prejudices that cause us to fall short of Christ’s invitation for us to ‘take up our cross,’ and follow him. I’ve touched on the impact of having the wrong expectations, and on our fear of ‘being well’ with the responsibilities that come with that. I’ve highlighted both the attractive and disturbing nature of women and men who refuse to conform to the expectations of others, and who make a stand for love, with all the courage that takes. Tonight I want us to listen to the story of the centurion responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. In my imagination he is also the centurion whose slave is healed by Jesus as is told in the gospel of Luke 7.1-10.

The Centurion

I am a man of honour. I demand respect, and I think I’m worthy of it. I play fair. I don’t ask my men to do anything I’m not prepared to do myself. That’s why they’re loyal to me…and probably why I shall never be promoted higher than the Centurion I am now. No matter. I have no time for all the sycophantic fawning of men fighting for position and power, playing one person off against another, using their soldiers like pawns. I care for those in my charge. That’s why you and I met in the first place. Do you remember? You healed a slave of mine. He was dear to me, and he was dying. I have friends among the people here - I’d played a small part in building them a synagogue. In their turn they offered to speak to you on my behalf, and to bring you to my home. I was grateful. It would not do for a Centurion to be seen seeking out one who is regarded by his superiors as a threat to security.

In my job, one learns to judge a man quickly: It can mean the difference between life and death. Even as you approached my house I had the measure of you. I could see by your stature and demeanour that you were your own man. One of honour, like myself. You weren’t there to impress. Your quiet manner inspired confidence – a point of stillness in the seething mass of humanity that followed in your wake.

I remember suddenly feeling awkward, as one does when one recognises the presence of a greater man, yet has treated him as lesser. I sent my servants to halt you in your course, asking only that you say the word necessary to heal my servant. I compared the authority I sensed in you from a distance, to that with which I command my own men and draw their obedience. You were impressed and praised me for my faith. You healed my slave. And I? I thought it a job well done, was grateful, and went on with my work. No further fuss - just how I, as a soldier, expect others to respond to me. I go in, do the job, pull out, and get on with the next one…At least that’s the theory. In practice I struggle with the tension of being called in one moment to kill, and in another to behave as a civilised human being. It’s a fragmented life to live. Though every soldier I know tries hard to conceal it, there’s a cost. I feel it now as I’ve never felt it before. I never dreamt I would be responsible for taking your life – you who had saved my slave from death. My men are uneasy too. Oh, they swagger and jeer like the rest who do not know of our connection, but it’s all a front. It’s hard enough to kill when you believe in the cause for which you fight, but to murder a man who has helped not harmed you is another matter.

In private I protested about our orders to my senior officers. They were sympathetic but unyielding. Sometimes individuals have to be sacrificed for the greater good, they said. These are dangerous times for us. Insurrection is in the air. We cannot afford to be seen as weak. We must not let sentiment cloud our judgement. – All things I have said to my own men at one time
or another. I know a soldier cannot pick and choose which orders he will or will not obey. Men going into battle need to be sure they can count on the soldier at their side; that we’re all in this together and will see it through. Cast doubt on that belief and you breech trust and create uncertainty. I can’t have my men experiencing that. Neither could I absent myself from the task on the pretext of more important work. Others in my position might have done so, but I am a man of honour, and I won’t betray the trust of those in my command…So…here we all are, getting on with the job. For Emperor and Empire! Yet what kind of empire are we building where honourable men are called to dishonourable actions? Certainly not one that will last. I have this strange premonition. There is something about your stature in all this that I suspect will be talked about long after our mighty empire has turned to dust. How is it that I see strength and power in what is the epitome of agony and failure? Where does honour truly lie?

I don’t want to make excuses for our failure to be the people of God, the body of Christ, we are called to be, but in my experience life is rarely simple and often our responsibilities pull us in different directions. As people of honour and integrity, committed to the cause of empathetic love - and also as people who fall short of that calling - our commitment may sometimes face us with a choice, not between good and evil, but with trying to discern the lesser of two evils. The centurion struggles to act honourably when his private beliefs clash with the demands of his public role and his commitment to be a good leader to his men. As you think about your own life in the time of quiet now, or perhaps at some later point, you may like to reflect on one of the following questions:

1. Are there any aspects of your life where you feel your values and faith as a Christian, or your values simply as someone trying to be a half decent human being, are compromised?

2. What might help you to address more constructively the tensions which you seek to hold between work and home life, between yourself and others, between the inner conflicts that disturb your sense of peace?

3. What is demanded of a Christian who takes seriously the complexities of daily life, and tries to do more than respond with simple or trite answers that fail to address the struggles that are part of being human?

SILENCE

Christ our Life,
Grant us strength to hold the tensions when we feel torn in different directions.
Teach us wisdom to discern your way through complex demands.
And forgive us when we add to the pain of the world despite our best efforts to act with integrity.
Amen.
Over the last three evenings, using different imagined ‘voices at the cross’, I’ve explored a little why we find it so hard to take up our cross and follow Christ. On Monday evening, through the voice of the man who is healed by Jesus after 38 years of paralysis, I noted how becoming whole, psychologically and spiritually, sometimes hurts like hell, and how it may feel more comfortable to remain in a state of dependence than to stand on our two feet, because with healing comes responsibility that we may fear we cannot fulfil. On Tuesday evening we heard from the Syrophoenician woman who bursts in on Jesus begging him to heal her daughter, which he does, but not until she shows she will not be constrained by the degrading perceptions of the disciples. At the cross she wonders at the inhumane capacity that tries to pin down Love, and exclude some from the experience of it. Last night, we heard the voice of the centurion, trying to act with integrity but torn between different loyalties that leave him with the task of trying to choose, not between good and evil, but the lesser of two evils. So what of tonight?

In the Passion narrative, tonight is a night of intimacy and betrayal – the intimacy of foot-washing and a shared meal with close friends, and betrayal by those self-same friends. Judas Iscariot and Simon Peter are singled out for particular attention. It’s easy to make Judas the villain of the piece. To do so means I can distance myself from him - *I’m not like him because he was bad and I’m not!* But betrayal is a complex human dynamic. Let’s hear a little of that complexity from a friend of Judas standing some distance from the cross, and aware that Judas has hanged himself.

**The Friend of Judas**

I’ve got a lot of time for Judas. He and I are old mates. We know...knew... each other well. I don’t care what anyone says, Judas was a good man trying to do the right thing. A better man than me. He wouldn’t have hanged himself if he’d been bad. If he’d been bad he wouldn’t have cared what happened to you, Jesus. No, Judas was devoted to you, or at least to his idea of you. That’s where all the trouble lay. Judas was a deeply religious man, unlike me. He believed in love and justice, only, under occupation, there hasn’t been too much of that around. Once, when he and I were talking alone, he told me how, when he was 11 years old he watched the Romans beat up his father. The man never recovered. In the space of those few violent minutes Judas’ life was changed forever, and he felt powerless to prevent it. That memory haunted him. The hopelessness and helplessness he felt! He knew things had to change, but he was equally convinced it wasn’t him who could make that happen. You were the peg on which he hung all his hopes and expectations. He couldn’t save the world, his world, but you would. He never saw the real you. None of us did...except perhaps the women.

Judas was in love with what he thought you could be. I can understand that. I was the same,... and the times I’ve loved other people for what I’ve wanted them to be, or thought they should be. I’ve loved them for what I’ve needed them to be. And I’ve felt betrayed and punished them when they didn’t live up to my expectations.

That’s what Judas did to you.

When you came to Jerusalem and chose to be a servant not a king, Judas felt betrayed. Only you’d never been who Judas thought you were. I see that now. You were his Messiah, the one who would come to save our people. A mighty warrior! Someone he could look up to. Except Judas suddenly found that he had to look down to see you, to watch you washing his, Judas’, feet. He was appalled. We all were. We still didn’t get it. When I think how we, I, protested...so sure we were right and you were wrong! I think it was in that moment Judas determined to take action. He felt he had to save you from yourself. That’s why he tried to manipulate you into a position where you’d be forced to show your cards, to own your true identity. When he
kissed you in the garden it was a signal not only to the soldiers, but also to you: ‘Now’s the moment, Lord, and I, Judas, am here with you. You can do it.’

When you didn’t resist arrest, and when you took all the abuse thrown at you without retaliation, Judas suddenly saw you for the first time. In your silence he found himself standing accused. He couldn’t live with that… I’m not sure I can either. How could we have got it so badly wrong? Misreading the past, blind in the present, preoccupied by a future of our own imagining! Seduced by thoughts of power and position. Focussing everywhere, except on you and on what you were really saying and doing.

It seems the hardest love of all is to love someone for who they really are, instead of what you think they ought to be. How long do we punish our parents, our kids, our friends for not being what we expect them to be? How long do we punish ourselves for failing to be all that we might be?

Forgive me, Lord, for standing so far off, failing you yet again. It seems to be my role in life. I long to draw close, but I am afraid. At least Judas had the courage of his convictions. I didn’t even have that. I, your hot-headed Simon Peter, who claimed you could always count on him, yet denied you three times, just when you needed me most…. Just as you knew I would… And yet you never cast me aside. You were always constant. What does that mean? What does any of this mean? Is this a breakdown or a breakthrough… or both?

Betrayals, it seems, come in all shapes and sizes and I suspect more of them arise from the inappropriate expectations, or fear and ignorance, of decent people trying to do the right thing, than from malice and an intentional desire to harm another person. Sometimes it is the one who feels betrayed who is short-sighted, just like Judas in the reflections of Peter you’ve heard, but I could equally cite the sense of betrayal some of us today feel when colleagues or family members don’t fulfil our expectations, inappropriate as those sometimes may be. And what about self-betrayals, the times we fail to be the people, beloved of Christ, we have it in us to be; who settle for less of a life because it’s easier, less costly. As human beings we are so hard on the betrayals of others, and on our self-betrayals. Perhaps that’s understandable. To be betrayed can feel crucifying, but Christ, the crucified One, is our example. He does not condemn Simon Peter. He forgives him.

A few years ago I met an Israeli woman whose son had been shot, along with eight other people, by a Palestinian sniper at a check-point. She asked me, as she asked everyone she met, for a definition of forgiveness. It was six years before I gave her my response, having listened to many people whose lives had been shattered by the cataclysmic betrayal that is violent conflict. Finally, I said that for me, forgiveness is not allowing the inhumanity of another human being to diminish or destroy my own humanity. I see that dynamic in the response of Jesus to Simon Peter’s betrayal. He loves him constantly. He teaches by example and, later he will commission this broken, flawed, spiritually blind man to lead the broken, flawed, spiritually blind men and women throughout the centuries who hear and respond to the call to take up their… our… cross and follow him. The body of Christ - constantly broken and restored. But I am getting ahead of where we are in the story. Tonight, we are confronted not only by the constant inclusive welcome for all at the Table, which so often shames our own meanness of spirit; but also by our own betrayals, of others, of ourselves and of Christ. This confrontation is not about indulging in meaningless self-flagellation, but is an invitation into a deeper understanding of who we are and why we behave as we do, and to give us hope that these crucifying experiences of betrayal may yet be transformed by the power of profound and mysterious love as we go forward in faith. Tonight and tomorrow in the liturgies of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and in the silence of Holy Saturday we will walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and stand...
on the threshold awaiting resurrected life. RS Thomas captures the sense of loneliness and abandonment, of these ‘My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me’ moments that are part of daily life and marked in these last days of Holy Week, in his poem ‘Threshold’.

Threshold

I emerge from the mind’s
cave into the worse darkness
outside, where things pass and
the Lord is in none of them.

I have heard the still, small voice
and it was that of the bacteria
demolishing my cosmos. I
have lingered too long on

this threshold, but where can I go?
To look back is to lose the soul
I was leading upwards towards
the light. To look forward? Ah,

what balance is needed at
the edges of such an abyss.
I am alone on the surface
of a turning planet. What
to do but, like Michelangelo’s
Adam, put my hand
out into unknown space,
hoping for the reciprocating touch?

May we come at last through the valley of the shadow of death, to the mystery of the ‘reciprocating touch’ of Easter Day. AMEN.