

Good Friday Reflections, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

**Reflection 1**

And so we are here.  
Good Friday, and all the waiting and the hoping have come to nothing.  
Palm Sunday  
and the adulation of the crowds,  
Maundy Thursday, and those intimate hours around the dinner table,  
and then the long dark hours of the night.  
Long hours,  
as Jesus agonized in prayer  
in the garden,  
ending only  
when he was arrested  
and taken for trial  
and condemned  
to die.

But it is those long hours of prayer  
that came to mind  
as I read the Old Testament reading  
set for today.  
The Akedah  
is its Hebrew name,  
the binding.  
God asking  
the unimaginable.  
Take your son,  
your longed for, precious, only  
son,  
take him  
up this mountain,  
and there, at the top, build an altar,  
and then,  
then bind your son,  
and place him on the altar,  
a sacrifice.

It took three days

for Abraham and his son Isaac  
to reach the mountain,  
the longest three days  
that Abraham  
had ever known.  
I imagine his son  
wondered what was wrong,  
his father  
locked in stony silence

And all the time Abraham  
thinking, praying, muttering to himself.  
How God, could you ask this? What have I done to you?  
Why, God, why?

It was not such an unusual request of a god;  
the people living around him  
were said to frequently sacrifice their children  
to their gods,  
but his God,  
the God who had called him from his land and people  
and promised to give him descendants,  
who at last had given him  
this beautiful son  
late in life,  
how could God  
betray him like this?

Over and over and over again.  
Echoing through his mind  
as they walked,  
beating in his brain  
as he tried to sleep.  
Until finally they come to the mountain  
called Moriah.

And leaving behind the servants and the donkey,  
carrying wood for the fire and a knife and kindling,  
slowly, reluctantly,  
Abraham and his son  
began to climb.

And they reached the top,

and Abraham  
built an altar  
from the stones lying around,  
and placed the wood  
ready to light it.  
And then bound his son,  
and laid him on the altar,  
and lifted his knife.

And then God called,  
after three days  
of silence  
God called.  
Abraham!  
Abraham!

And Abraham,  
broken,  
“Yes?”

And God saved Isaac  
from Abraham’s obedience,  
and here began a tradition  
that no human sacrifice  
was required  
by this God,  
unlike the gods  
of the surrounding nations  
this God  
did not require you to sacrifice your firstborn son,  
this God  
only asked  
for you  
to follow him.

And the mountain, Mount Moriah,  
become known as “Jehovah Jireh”  
the mountain  
where God would provide,  
and there the city was founded,  
Jerusalem,  
the place where God was known  
to meet with God’s people.

Jerusalem  
the place that Jesus came to  
the last week of his life,  
spending his days  
teaching in the temple  
until that final day  
when he was tried,  
and convicted  
and sentenced  
to die.

Not a father's sacrifice  
to appease an angry God,  
but the offering of himself  
for the sake of all people,  
the Lord providing  
for the life of the world.

## **Reflection 2**

Our reading from Isaiah  
was the first of four passages in Isaiah  
that have traditionally been known  
as the servant songs,  
songs that talk  
about a servant  
of God.

Who that servant is  
has always been  
a matter of conjecture.  
Some Jewish teachers  
have understood it to be the people of God,  
chosen and called to God's service from Abraham onwards;  
others have taught  
that it is the messiah,  
the promised anointed one  
who would rule the people  
and bring in a time of peace.

But as Christians,  
when we read these songs  
we recognize in them

the very nature  
of our Savior,  
Jesus Christ.

And here, in the first song  
we hear the God speaking,  
God proudly introducing  
his own  
Son,  
his chosen,  
in whom his soul delights.  
Echoes  
of those words spoken  
at Jesus' baptism,  
"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And here in this first song,  
we hear of the nature of this Messiah, this son of GOD,  
one who will be a gentle agent of God's will,  
not shouting in the streets  
or bringing military success,  
but moving quietly and humbly among the people,  
never breaking even a "bruised reed"  
because God's Spirit sent him to heal and strengthen the weak, to mend and restore the hearts of  
all who are losing hope,  
to raise up those who have been cast aside.

He himself  
will not wane or weaken;  
he will faithfully accomplish the will of God  
and bring justice  
in the land.

As we look at Christ  
hanging helpless on the cross,  
he invites us who may be feeling  
bruised or broken,  
may have grown weak or dim,  
Christ invites us  
to hear God's promise  
to receive the Servant's healing touch.  
to know our Savior's healing and reconciling love.

### Reflection 3

This time  
 we hear the servant speaking.  
 He was called before he was born, he says,  
 and we can't help but remember  
 his mother Mary,  
 faced with the angel Gabriel,  
 "You will bear a son,  
 and his name will be  
 Emmanuel, God with us."

And his mouth a sharp sword,  
 and we remember  
 the prophecy spoken  
 by the elderly Simeon  
 when Mary brought  
 her precious baby boy  
 to Jerusalem, to the temple,  
 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be  
 opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own  
 soul too.'

"He will be  
 a light to the nations," says Isaiah,  
 and Simeon's words echo again,  
 "a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
 and for glory to your people Israel.'

But this time  
 it all takes place  
 far from the temple, outside the city,  
 a criminal's death  
 in a place that would not taint, desecrate  
 the holy place,  
 except that the holy place  
 is not, this day, in the temple  
 but here, outside the walls, on the hill  
 call Golgotha,  
 where the holy body of Christ  
 hangs on a cross.

### Reflection 4

Again the servant speaks.

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”  
asks the apostle Paul  
in his letter to the Romans.

The obvious answer  
when we look at our Savior  
hanging on the cross  
is  
“everyone”.  
It’s the soldiers  
who are the worst.  
They dress him up  
in a parody of a king,  
purple robe,  
crown of thorns,  
they struck him across the face,  
they whipped him.  
And at the end  
they lounge on stone pavements  
playing dice  
for his clothes.  
But they are not alone.  
The crowds jeer and spit.  
His disciples flee.  
Only the women  
stand vigil.

Christ hangs alone,  
the subject of scorn  
and mocking.  
The one who has spent his life  
reaching out  
to those in need  
finds that almost everyone, everyone  
turns their back on him.

If God is for us,  
who can be against us?

Everyone,

and no one.  
Because in the end,  
in the end,  
the taunts, the mocking, the scorn,  
in the end  
all that is nothing.  
Because God has not deserted him.

And when we travel  
those dark places of suffering  
we look at the cross  
and know that in Christ  
we will never be alone.  
God will always  
be on our side.

### **Reflection 5**

The fourth song,  
the one that is perhaps most familiar to us,  
thanks to the musical gifts  
of Handel.

Lifted high on the cross  
the one who was  
despised,  
rejected,  
a man of sorrow  
and acquainted with grief.

We often think of Christ  
as someone with immense charisma,  
who you couldn't help but follow.  
But here the servant  
is unremarkable,  
here he has no majestic bearing to attract,  
no beauty to please the eye.  
He was shunned and avoided,  
and he said nothing  
in his defense.

We would have understood  
if he had complained

or been angry,  
 or resentful,  
 if he had put the blame  
 anywhere.

But he hung  
 in silence,  
 in dignity,  
 in acceptance.  
 For our sake.

He has borne our infirmities  
 and carried our diseases;  
 he was wounded for our transgressions,  
 crushed for our iniquities;  
 upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
 and by his bruises we are healed.

It is the good shepherd who hangs here,  
 always, always, even to death  
 caring for us, his sheep.

And all we can do  
 is echo with the centurion, and those keeping watch with him,  
 “Surely this man  
 is God’s Son.”

### **Reflection 6**

It all began so well, that day,  
 began with an evening meal  
 where they could sit and enjoy good food and good friends  
 long hours of conversation,  
 spiced still by the adrenalin rush  
 of that triumphant procession into the city  
 just four days ago.  
 But just a few short hours, and everything had changed.  
 From the high of the festival meal  
 to the helplessness of watching their leader, taken away  
 with swords and knives.  
 And the disciples left, afraid, helpless, empty.

There had been hints along the way that something might be going on:

throwing the tables over in the temple,  
odd parables,  
men skulking in the background wherever they went, armed sometimes with weapons of war,  
other times weapons of righteousness, but weapons all the same.  
And even that evening, his strange talk of betrayal,  
and then the bread and the wine,  
talk about flesh and blood  
at a time that should have been all celebration.

And then the utter hopeless darkness of his trial, his crucifixion, his death,  
and all they were left with was a body  
and hope crushed  
beyond recognition.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

His words  
from the cross,  
their desolation.

All their hopes  
rest on him. It goes against all logic  
to follow someone  
who was so easily  
overcome.

Arrested, tried, executed,  
all in a matter of hours.

And he did nothing, absolutely nothing  
to save himself.

Not even  
hanging in agony on the cross,  
when one of the others crucified beside him  
taunted him,

“Save yourself, if you’re who you say you are, save yourself  
and us along with you.”

It’s hardly what you’d expect  
of a great leader, the one we call our Lord.

And the truth is that most of us would be happy  
just to skip straight over this scene  
to the celebration of Easter.

The vast majority of people do.

We want our God  
to be triumphant, all-powerful, a success in every way.  
We want to find in Jesus

the great charismatic leader, strong, attractive, effective. Because of course, we hope that those characteristics will rub off on us.

But the joy of Easter would mean nothing without this death. Without this death, Jesus risen might bring new life, but it wouldn't do us any good. Because we'd still be stuck with the curse of Eden, forever barred from the presence of God because we've screwed up, we individually and as a human race, and we have no rights to the presence of a holy God. No point in eternal life if you're banned from the presence of God.

Jesus had to die. Not because of anything he had done but because of what we have done, we human beings. We have gone astray, we have wandered far away from the life God intended for us. And only the shepherd can rescue us. The shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus our savior.

The shepherd got in the way, so that what was intended for us landed on him. The full weight of our sin. No wonder people considered him cursed. No one deserves to die in the place of another, no one deserves to take on the death penalty.

But he did it. Without asking our permission, without demanding anything of us. Jesus carried the full burden, the weight, of our sin, so that we don't need to carry it ourselves.

And so Good Friday is a bittersweet time. Sweet because this day of all days

we know that we are forgiven, totally forgiven.  
There is no condemnation for us, no retribution, not punishment  
from an angry God. We don't have to shoulder the burden of sin.  
We are free, free to live our lives without fear; we are healed;  
we are made whole. And at any other time  
we would be full of celebration.

But this sweet day.  
it is also bitter. Bitter  
because our freedom, our forgiveness, our healing,  
came at so great a cost.  
The burden that we no longer have to carry  
is carried by another, Jesus our Savior.  
He hangs on a tree, he lies in a grave.  
He died the death of a traitor, the object of pity, horror, even disgust.

And today, this bittersweet day  
we call good,  
we remember him.  
He could have saved himself, but instead  
he chose to save us .  
We cannot save him.

But we can remember him, we can thank him, we can honor him.  
Not just today  
but in the whole of our lives,  
offering ourselves as living sacrifices  
to the glory of God. Amen.