

An exploration of the Cross

Sheila Cassidy

The Easter story has been celebrated down the ages in writing, painting, sculpture and music. This meditation for Easter 2003 takes just two poems on the theme

ONE OF my two favourite poems about the Cross is Edith Sitwell's *Still Falls the Rain*. It reminds me of Good Fridays at Ampleforth, of the weather matching the liturgy's mood and the plaintive cry of the unaccompanied chant of *Tenebrae*.

Still falls the Rain –
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss –
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
Upon the Cross.
Still falls the Rain –

The cadence of the poem, written during the Blitz in 1940, is as powerful the imagery.

In the Field of Blood where the small
hopes breed and the human brain
Nurtures its greed.

For me, this sense of the continuing crucifixion of Christ in the sick, the tortured, the starving is integral to theology. My personal Garden of Olives battle was fought in captivity in a Chilean jail as I argued with God over whether my lightly signed covenant to enter religious life could be read as a willingness to die at the hands of the security forces. Luckily for me, I was later released to lick my wounds – and lie awake at night tormented by the demons of post-traumatic stress.

For my dying cancer patients, however, life was very different. I have terrible memories of the Friday afternoon that I told a young social worker and mother of three that her disease had come back and that she was to die of it. I held her while she wept, dialled the number as she rang her husband and sat with her three little boys for an interminable half an hour while she broke the news to her husband. For hospital folk, Lent comes in its own good time, like the thief in the night, the avalanche or the spewing of a volcanic eruption.

This year, for most of us, the saga of Iraq has filled our Lent.

Still falls the Rain. The rain of gunfire, the nightly thunder of the bombs which topple houses and rend limb from limb. Across the world's media has gone the image of one small boy, who has lost not only both his parents but both his arms as well. Despoiled by looters, the hospitals can hardly function, freezing the dead, amputating limbs, removing shrapnel. As the First World War poet Wilfred Owen put it:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

The annual report of Médecins Sans Frontières lies on my table unopened: there goes a life I might have lived. The greatest pain experienced is our impotence, shared with Mary, the Theotokos, the woman at the foot of the Cross.

Still falls the Blood from the Starved Man's
wounded side:
He bears in his Heart all wounds – those of the
light that died,
The last faint spark
In the self-murdered heart, the wounds of the
sad uncomprehending dark.

The next words are the ones which rend my own sentimental heart:
The wounds of the baited bear –
The blind and weeping bear whom the keepers beat
On his helpless flesh – the tears of the hunted hare.

This passage speaks to me not just of animals but of all defenceless creatures – abused children, beaten women and, of course, torture victims everywhere.

Sitwell's poem is a fitting monument, celebration, of the continuing drama of the Crucifixion and the mind-blowing paradox that it is suffering which saves our world.

The second of the two poems I want to share, *The Dream of the Rood*, is much older. (This poem, one of the earliest to be found in Britain – on a stone cross in Scotland – is, perhaps, more than 1,000 years older.) As its title suggests, it is an account of a dream in which the poet, to his utter amazement, sees the Cross, not as a gallows but decked out in gold and jewels.

To me the glorious tree appeared
Decked in solemn vestments, sumptuously shining,
Radiant with a rich gold and royal jewels
Adorning with glory – the Almighty's tree.

Who first, I wonder, decked the Cross with gold and why? Was it an artist's attempt to convey the paradox of the saving power of the Crucifixion? The image recalls to me tabernacles draped in cloths of gold: man's attempt to honour Christ in the host. It reminds me, too, of the stripping of the altars on Holy Thursday night when I was in the

convent and how powerful was my sense of the presence of God in that bare chapel with the vacant tabernacle declaring, like the empty tomb: **he is gone. He is not there.** And yet, transfixed, I knew him there, in that emptiness and desolation, just as I knew him present in prison and in the daily round of pain and death in hospital and warfare.

In *The Dream of the Rood* it is not long before the poet becomes aware of the dark side of the Cross:

And still through all this splendour I could see
Its agonies of long ago, – as it began
To bleed from its right side. At this strange,
lovely sight,
I was downcast with sorrows – and with dread.

He lies there, in his dream, gazing at the Cross, “*sometimes all red with blood*”, “*sometimes with treasure hung*”, until the Cross addresses him and tells the story of the tree which supported Jesus, the Lord of Life.

It is a simple device, yet so powerful. The tree recalls the day it is felled and dragged away from its home in the forest to be used to display criminals in their death agony. It endures this shameful work until, one day, in the far distance it sees the Son of God walking – no, running – towards it:

Then far off I saw the Lord of Man
Hastening, hero-like – to mount me on high.
He made ready, the young hero, – he the Lord of Hosts
Resolute and strong upon his gallows rose aloft,
Valiant for the crowds to see,
For he vouchsafed to set man free.

How different from the familiar, this image of Jesus, “*hastening, hero-like*” to his place of suffering and death. We are so accustomed to the broken Jesus of the Way of the Cross, that we lose sight of his willingness to die, his total obedience to his Father’s will. Once again we are up against the mystery of paradox: there is no way that Jesus the man, broken by torture, frightened and in pain, could have leaped hero-like on to the Cross. His assent was much earlier, when first he “*set his face towards Jerusalem*”.

The brave make decisions in cold blood: they set their face towards Jerusalem, cancer or war, in the ultimate act of acceptance: **Not my will, Lord, but thine be done.** Later, human minds crack, human bodies bleed. The martyrs may or may not have sung in the Colosseum as they faced the lions: their decision to become the wheat of Christ had been made earlier, while there was still a chance of escape.

The tree suffers with Jesus during the long dark hours of his dying:

They stabbed me with their nails of iron black –
My wounds can still be seen,
The gaping marks of malice ...
They mocked us both together.

“*Sorely downcast with sorrows*”, the tree supports Jesus till he dies, and his friends and family come to take him down from the Cross. The body is carried away to the tomb, leaving the tree desolate and in tears. Then comes the ultimate indignity:

Then cruelly men began
To fell us to the earth: that was our fearful fate!
They buried us in a deep pit, – and yet the servants of the Prince,
His friends, discovered where I lay ...
They made me splendid with silver and gold.

So, what really happened to the Cross? How long did it lie in the earth on Golgotha? Did the disciples dig it up and hide it? That seems most likely. History tells us that Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, came in search of the Cross and, having found it, carried the relics off to Rome where she built the Church of Santa Croce in Ierusalemme.

Two poems, some fragments of decaying wood and a church: all in celebration of the Cross. To these I would add the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, the wonderful tale of Christ’s descent into the underworld; what in English has been called the harrowing of Hell.

This Gospel, said to date from around AD600, tells how Christ, after the crucifixion, storms the underworld and, wielding his Cross, batters down the gates of Hell and, having found Satan, rescues Adam and Eve from Hades. This magical story became incorporated into the iconography of the Church and there are many beautiful representations showing the triumphant Christ, the Cross-and those awaiting him in the underworld.

Here we have the celebration of the Cross par excellence, the instrument of death used to vanquish evil and rescue the just. It is the resurrection of the dead, the beginning of life for Everyman: for murdered children, victims of war and all for whom we weep. Herein lies our hope.

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