

# THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS



**SOUTHERN HILLS**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

**THE  
STATIONS  
OF THE  
CROSS**

## Resources

<https://hallow.com/blog/how-to-pray-stations-of-the-cross/>

<https://prodigalcatholic.com/2017/04/14/good-friday-meditation-matthew-2636-46/>

<https://depre.org>

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*A Lenten resource*

# HOW TO PRAY THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS

The Stations of the Cross, also known as the Way of the Cross and the Way of Sorrow (*Via Crucis* in Latin), detail fourteen different moments on the day Jesus died. This prayer pilgrimage is a powerful way to grow closer to Jesus at any time of the year, though it is most popular during the Lenten season.

Following Jesus as he makes the way to his death is disturbing; this is not a comfortable prayer. But by remembering the Stations of the Cross, walking with Jesus, and taking up our own crosses as Jesus calls us to do, we are pulled out of our selfishness. We become more willing to be patient, love, and sacrifice. We become more like the people God created us to be when we remember Christ's sacrifice.

Before you begin, prepare yourself for prayer, ask yourself how to make this time in meditation peaceful. For example, you might want to close your eyes or take a few deep breaths before you begin. Next, walk to, look at, or lead your thoughts to the scene of the first station.

Prayer: "God, may your sacrifice guide me and lead me into my own. Remind me of my dependence on You for all the blessings I enjoy. Amen."

# STATION 1

## JESUS IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE



*“When he arrived, he said to them, “Pray that you won’t give in to temptation. (Lk. 22:40)”*

We struggle to remain “awake” and alert at the time of Jesus’ agony. In that agony we discover our ability, because of God’s gift, to minister to the disciples and to Jesus. We then become empowered to minister to others in our lives.

I accompany Jesus as now he enters his time of sorrow, of burden, the time of the cross... I ask him to show me, through his cross, the meaning of my own sorrows and burdens...

I join Jesus and the Eleven as they walk alongside the city walls toward the Garden of Gethsemane... It is night... I hear the quiet

sounds of the night, I feel the heaviness in the hearts of the disciples. My heart too knows times of heaviness and foreboding...

“My soul is sorrowful even to death...” With great reverence, I ponder the sorrow of Jesus, a deep sorrow that nearly overwhelms his life itself... What stirs in his heart? In my heart? I speak to him of my own sorrow...

Now I see Jesus go a little farther into the Garden... and he is alone. The three near him sleep. Humanly, he is utterly alone, in his time of need. My heart too knows what it means to feel alone... I speak to him...

His energy fails him... He falls on his face upon the earth, and a cry rises with anguish from his heart, to the Father: “If it is possible, let this cup pass from me...” There is in Jesus a deep, deep desire to be freed of the burden he carries, the burden that lies ahead: “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me...” How often I too have prayed that prayer: let this cup pass... the cup of physical weakness and pain, of responsibility, of struggles in relationships... I am there with Jesus, prostrate on the earth...

“Yet, not as I will, but as you will.” Two wills: “as I will,” “as you will.” And, though it costs his humanity so much, Jesus bows his will to that of the Father... I pray with him, I ask the courage to accept, like Jesus, the Father’s will in my life... He comes, seeking the companionship and support of those close to him... and they sleep... But now I do not sleep... I speak to him...

I watch as, a second time, Jesus repeats his acceptance of the Father’s will: “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” And again, a third time... and still he is alone...

“Get up, let us go. Look, my betrayer is at hand.” His prayer has strengthened him, he is ready to face the cross... I pray for the same strength...



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 2

## JESUS IS BETRAYED BY JUDAS AND ARRESTED



*“While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, “Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?” (Lk. 22:47-48)*

We don't know exactly why Judas did this. Perhaps he was disappointed in Jesus, whom he had expected to usher in the victorious kingdom of God through a glorious victory over Rome. Some scholars wonder if Judas was actually trying to force Jesus's hand, believing that Jesus would defend himself against those who sought to arrest him and begin acting as the powerful messiah Judas expected. Others believe that Judas betrayed Jesus because of fear. It seemed

to the disciple that Jesus was leading, not just himself, but also his followers and even the nation into a fatal encounter with Rome.

Though we don't know exactly why Judas betrayed Jesus, we do know that Jesus felt betrayed by his disciple, with whom Jesus had shared so much of his life. When Judas, leading a group of temple guards to arrest Jesus, identified Jesus by attempting to kiss him, Jesus said, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" (22:48). The one Jesus had trusted rejected him, turning him over to those who would see that he was crucified by Roman soldiers on the following day.

As we look back on this scene, it's easy to condemn Judas. Few people in history have been more despised than Judas and for good reason. Yet by heaping disdain on Judas, we miss the chance to confront the Judas in ourselves. How many times have we betrayed Jesus, not in the obvious and literal way of Judas, but in our hearts and actions? How many times have we confessed Jesus as Lord, only to enthrone ourselves as the true lord of our lives? How many times have we worshiped Jesus with our

lips, not with a kiss, but with words, songs, and prayers, only to reject him in our hearts and actions?

When we stand back and reflect, we want to be completely devoted to Jesus. But in the day-to-day challenges of faith, the Judas lurking within us sometimes reveals him/herself. We too can betray our Lord. So, if we have fallen short and, in some way or other, betrayed our Lord, we come before him in repentance, asking for forgiveness, seeking a fresh start, grateful for his mercy and grace, which allow us to love and serve him in spite of our failings.



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 3

## JESUS IS CONDEMNED BY THE SANHEDRIN



*“All of them asked, “Are you, then, the Son of God?” He said to them, “You say that I am.” Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!” (Lk. 22: 70-71)*

According to Jewish law, it was wrong to try a criminal in the night. So, properly, those who accused Jesus waited until dawn, when the “assembly” or “council” could legally gather (the “council” is, more literally, the “Sanhedrin”).

What was his crime? What had he done that was worthy of death? For one thing, only days earlier Jesus had made a mess of the temple, interrupting its sacrifices and labeling it as a “den of robbers,” a phrase Jesus borrowed from Jeremiah in one of the ancient prophet’s

predictions of the temple's demise. By speaking so negatively of the temple, Jesus was seen by the Jewish officials to be speaking negatively of God himself. The temple was, after all, the house of God, the place where God had chosen to dwell. Thus, by speaking poorly of the temple, Jesus was believed to have been blaspheming God. Moreover, in his trial, Jesus not only wouldn't reject his messiahship, but he also claimed that he would be "seated at the right hand of the power of God" as the promised Son of Man (Luke 22:69). This was perceived by the council, beginning with the high priest, as blasphemy and clear evidence of Jesus's guilt.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus wasn't clearer about who he was and what he had come to do? It seems like it would have been so much easier for all, including those of us who seek to follow Jesus today, if he had only said, "Yes, I am the Messiah, but not in the sense you expect. I have been anointed by God to bring the kingdom, but not in a military-political way. The kingdom is coming through transformed hearts, communities, and cultures. Most of all, the kingdom is coming through my death, as I bear

the sin of Israel, and, indeed, the sin of the world. As Messiah, I must also suffer in the role of Isaiah's Servant." Yet Jesus didn't say this directly. It's something we have to piece together from his words and deeds.

And we, like the people of his day, even his disciples, often get things confused. We rightly reject the notion of Jesus as a military-political Messiah. But then we tend to limit his saving work to post-mortem Heaven for individual believers, rather than transformation of the whole cosmos, beginning with our world today, including the world of work. We don't make the connection between Jesus as the Messiah and the prayer he taught us: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

When we confess Jesus as Christ or Messiah, we're acknowledging him as our personal Savior. But we're saying more than this. We're also recognizing that he came to inaugurate the kingdom of God. At the same time, we recognize that God's kingdom isn't completely present in our lives, and we look forward to the day when all will be fulfilled.



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you,  
take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 4

## PETER DENIES JESUS



*“But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about!” At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly!” (Lk. 22:60-62)*

Why did Peter deny Jesus? After all, he had been one of the first to follow Jesus, leaving so much behind to walk the uncertain road of discipleship. Peter had seen mighty wonders as his Master healed the sick, cast out demons, and even raised the dead. Peter had witnessed the miracle of the transfiguration. And he had even walked on water for a few brief moments. So why did Peter, of all people, deny Jesus?

Because he was afraid. Fear. Fear can startle us in the middle of the night and keep us awake for

hours. It prevents us from reaching for our dreams or from reaching out to others in love. Fear cripples our souls and binds our hearts. It locks us in prison and throws away the key.

Fear. What power it can have over us! Fear leads us to do what we would otherwise never do, and it keeps us from doing that which we know to be right. When we're afraid, we can forget our commitments, our values, and our loves. In fearful moments, all we think of is how to protect ourselves, perhaps at any cost. In fear we can strike out thoughtlessly against a perceived enemy. In fear we run away rather than standing for what we believe. Fear causes our adrenaline to race and compromises our judgment.

Peter was afraid, understandably so. All that he had hoped seemed to be crumbling before him. The one he believed to be the Messiah, the Savior of Israel, was now arrested. Jesus's death seemed certain and with his death the end of Peter's reason for living.

Now, if you've never felt the powerful grip of fear, you may not understand Peter. You may look upon him with scorn, rather than empathic

pity. But if you've known real fear, then you also know how fear can motivate you to act in ways you might never have imagined. You may even understand how Peter could have denied his Lord. In saying this, we are not excusing Peter's behavior. Not by a long shot. What Peter did was wrong. Fear has the power to make all of us do or say that which we later regret.

What is the antidote to such fear? It's trusting God. It's believing the Word of Christ. It's experiencing the perfect love of God that casts out fear (1 John 4:18). We don't conquer fear through rationalization and mind-control. Rather, we overcome fear by leaning more fully into the strong arms of God and knowing that he will never let us go.



Prayer: "Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything. Amen."

# STATION 5

## JESUS IS JUDGED BY PILATE



*“A third time he said to them, “Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.” But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.”*  
(Lk. 23:22-25)

There has been a tendency in the Christian telling of the Passion story to exonerate Pilate, or at least to make him an unwilling pawn of the Jewish leaders and crowds. First, it overlooks Pilate’s record of cruelty in his dealings with the Jewish people. Far from being some benevolent

ruler, Pilate frequently offended and grievously mistreated those he was sent to govern.

Second, it's unlikely that Pilate would have been forced to act contrary to his will by the Jewish leaders and the crowd they rounded up to call for the crucifixion of Jesus. But Pilate was no doubt concerned about whether such an action in the case of Jesus would lead to revolt. So, we have every reason to believe that Pilate in fact wanted Jesus to be crucified; otherwise he would not have sentenced him to death.

Third, what we see in the Gospels is, in all likelihood, a carefully scripted plot by Pilate. Knowing how popular Jesus was among the masses, Pilate knew he faced the possibility of insurrection if he himself was believed to be responsible for the death of Jesus. So he had to find a way to use his authority to crucify Jesus, and, at the same time, to publicly wash his hands of this decision. Thus he cleverly toyed with the Jewish leaders and their supporters, until it appeared as if he was compelled against his will to have Jesus crucified. Thus Pilate could get rid of Jesus and, at the same time, insure that

popular anger would be directed at Jewish leaders and not at himself and Rome.

Why have we taken time to establish Pilate's actual guilt for the death of Jesus? Because Pilate must not be excused for his central role in the death of Jesus. He alone had the authority in Jerusalem to sentence Jesus to death by crucifixion, and he must bear this guilt. Here is a paradigm of a person who fails to take responsibility for his actions. Perhaps Pilate really believed he was innocent of Jesus's death. Perhaps even he was playacting for his own political benefit. Either way, Pilate issued the verdict that sent Jesus to the cross. Yet he did so in such a way as to appear innocent of Jesus's blood. He did not take responsibility for what he had done.

How often do we do this sort of thing ourselves? How often do we rationalize our sins, blaming them upon others? How often do we fail to take responsibility for what we have done wrong, preferring to assign credit to our parents for raising us wrong, our society for mistreating us, our boss for abusing us, our spouse for misunderstanding us?



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you,  
take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 6

## JESUS IS SCOURGED AND CROWNED WITH THORNS



*“Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, “Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?” They kept heaping many other insults on him.” (Lk. 22:63-65)*

What cruel irony! Jesus finally received the words he deserved: “Hail, King of the Jews!” For once he wore a crown upon his head. Yet it was not the golden crown of sovereignty or the olive crown of victory, but the thorny crown of suffering. No doubt they dug deep into the head of the suffering king. We can’t really imagine the physical pain, not to mention the emotional and spiritual anguish endured by the King of kings. What incomprehensible irony! Jesus, the true king of Israel, endured the pain and mockery of

the crown of thorns as part of his humiliation for us and our salvation.

What was the result of his torture, beyond the transient agony? Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2:5-11:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Did you catch that? Because Jesus humbled himself, because he endured the humiliation of the cross, including the crown of thorns, therefore God exalted him to the highest place.

For Jesus, the path to glory as King of kings included the path of disgrace. Because he wore the crown of thorns, Jesus would receive the crown of universal worship.

As you consider the physical suffering of Jesus, what is evoked in you? How does the physical suffering of our Lord help us to connect with his spiritual suffering? In what ways might we imitate the humility of Jesus in our lives?



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 7

## JESUS TAKES UP HIS CROSS



*“After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.” (Mk. 15:20)*

Jesus had said this would happen. For quite some time he had predicted his suffering and death. The first time came right after Peter confessed him to be the Messiah. Jesus responded: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Luke 9:22). So even though the Roman soldiers led Jesus out to crucify him, they were only doing what he had said they would do. Indeed, they were doing what he chose to happen and in many ways caused to happen.

After all, Jesus had been preaching that God alone was the true King and that his kingdom was at hand . . . not exactly the kind of message Rome liked to hear. And Jesus had been in regular conflict with Jewish leaders, who saw him as a nuisance and a threat both to their leadership and to the whole Jewish people. Then, Jesus stirred up the crowds by riding into Jerusalem as a messianic king. He disturbed the Jewish officials by ransacking the temple and halting its sacrifices, accusing the temple leaders of being no better than a bunch of thieves.

In the final events of his life, Jesus seemed to be orchestrating events that might otherwise have been out of his control. He appeared to know that Judas was planning to betray him and to consent to the betrayal. Jesus did not defend himself before the Sanhedrin, perhaps because he knew this was a lost cause. But he didn't try to set Pilate straight either in the hope of being freed. And, of course, Jesus did not call down legions of angels to deliver him.

So, though "they led him out to crucify him," Jesus was no passive victim. He picked up his cross and walked to Golgotha because he had

chosen the way of suffering, the Via Dolorosa. He believed this to be the will of God, the way by which he would realize his messianic destiny. Jesus chose to suffer and die so that he might fulfill Isaiah's vision of the Suffering Servant of God, the one who was "despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity." As this Servant, Jesus "has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases." Moreover, "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" (Isaiah 53:3-5).

So, though the crucifixion of Jesus is horrendous from one point of view, it is also wondrous from another perspective. The cross demonstrates the inestimable love, mercy, and grace of God. As the classic Charles Wesley hymn "And Can It Be" celebrates with wonder, "Amazing love! How can it be, That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?"



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you,  
take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 8

## SIMON OF CYRENE HELPS JESUS TO CARRY THE CROSS



*“As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. (Lk. 23:26)*

The eighth station of the biblical stations is called “Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to Carry the Cross.” It is identical to the fifth station in the traditional numbering system. Both are based on Luke 23:26, in which an otherwise unknown man named Simon, from the city of Cyrene (in modern Libya), is pressed into service. He helps Jesus carry his cross to Golgotha, where Jesus will be crucified.

If one walks the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem and stops at the fifth station, one could read a sign in

Latin that reads: SIMONI CYRENAIO CURX IMPONITUR, meaning, “The cross is imposed on Simon of Cyrene.” But, across the narrow street, another sign identified this location as the fifth traditional station, with a large Roman number V. And then another sign points to “Pizza de la Rosa.”

It may be a bit upsetting to see this sign, “Pizza de la Rosa,” at first. It feels as if a hostile world is invading this sacred space. In fact, though, the Via Dolorosa does not go through some quiet garden in Jerusalem, a place for uninterrupted meditation. It is mainly in the Muslim quarter of the city, which is filled with crowded little streets, souvenir shops, and places to buy omnipresent Coca-Cola.

At first, I one can be disappointed by the reality of the Via Dolorosa. But, if we think about it, this scene may struck us strangely appropriate. Remember, Jesus did not come into some antiseptic world. He was not born as a prince, safely separated from the nitty-gritty realities of society. Rather, he came into the real world, the world of commerce and conflict. As Jesus and Simon carried the cross through

Jerusalem, nobody played Celtic harp music in the background. Rather, the din of a crowded city filled the air. There might not have been t-shirt shops back then, but there were plenty of vendors selling and customers buying, people who might have paused for a moment to watch two poor souls carry a cross to Golgotha before they got back to their business.

The Word Incarnate didn't hide away in some Eden-like garden. Rather, he came into the world of hunger, disease, ethnic conflict, political domination, religious hypocrisy, and lost humanity. Into this world, our world, Jesus brought a vision of God's reign. He offered healing to the sick, food to the hungry, meaning to the despairing, and hope for all.



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 9

## JESUS MEETS THE WOMEN OF JERUSALEM



*“A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”. (Lk. 23:27-31)*

Whenever we may picture Jesus meeting the women of Jerusalem along the Via Dolorosa, we may imagine there were just two or three women, no doubt followers of Jesus, who were weeping for him. Meanwhile, the rest of the

Jewish crowd was egging on the Roman soldiers, eager to see Jesus crucified. Yet, a closer study of the New Testament can help us see things we completely overlooked before. For example, Luke 23:27 notes that “a great number of people followed [Jesus]” as he walked to Golgotha. Luke gives no indication that they were crying out for Jesus’s death. In fact, by mentioning the women weeping for Jesus, Luke implies that at least many among the “great number of the people” were upset by what was happening to Jesus. There’s no evidence that they were egging on the Roman soldiers, as I had once imagined. Luke makes this even clearer a few verses later, after Jesus’s death: “And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts” (Luke 23:48). This can only mean that the great majority of Jews who witnessed Jesus’s crucifixion were horrified, not happy, to see him die. They were certainly not among those who had earlier called for his crucifixion in Pilate’s courtyard.

It is important for us to understand what really happened in the death of Jesus for a

number of reasons, not the least of which is the sad history of anti-Semitism among Christians. For too long it was acceptable to utter the familiar refrain, “The Jews killed Christ.” And for too long many Christians used this as an excuse to persecute Jews who lived centuries after the death of Jesus, and who therefore had nothing to do with his death.

And, of course, we’re also missing the main point of Jesus’s sacrifice. He did not die primarily as a helpless victim of Roman or Jewish injustice. He chose to die on the cross in faithfulness to the Father’s will and so as to bear the sin of the world. If anyone is to blame for the death of Jesus, it’s those of us who are sinners, which, by the way, means all of us. Then the mystery of grace astounds us. We realize that Jesus is bearing our sin so that we might be forgiven, that he is dying in our place so that we might live in his place.



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 10

## JESUS IS CRUCIFIED



*“When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots to divide his clothing. . . . When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’” (Lk. 23:33-34,47)*

“They crucified Jesus.” “They,” in this case, refers to the Roman soldiers. Rome alone had the authority and the audacity to crucify people, one of the cruelest forms of execution ever devised. Crucifixion was so disgusting that Roman authors rarely referred to it. It was better left unmentioned. The point of crucifixion was not just punishment of the criminal. It was intimidation. It was state-sponsored terrorism. If you were a Roman subject and you were in the

least tempted to revolt against Rome, the brutal reality of crucifixion might be enough to dissuade you from foolish insurrection. At least that was Rome's hope.

The soldiers who crucified Jesus were doing their work. They didn't choose to crucify Jesus and those alongside him. Rather, they were simply obeying orders, orders issued from Pontius Pilate and implemented by their commanding centurion. Even so, we wonder how these soldiers could have nailed other human beings, including Jesus, to crosses. It's hard to imagine more dreadful work. Luke gives us a clue as to how the soldiers managed to do what can seem to us almost unthinkable. In Luke 23:36-37 we read, "The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'" Mockery dehumanizes the victim. If the soldiers saw Jesus as less than human, then they could summon up the will to nail him to a cross.

Mockery also dehumanizes the mocker, however. When we make fun of others, we diminish ourselves. We become less kind, less

openhearted, less compassionate, less relational, and, therefore, less human. Our work can do this to us, and not just the work of crucifixion, but any work that dehumanizes others.

Yet, with God's help, we can learn to see people as people, as those created in God's own image and therefore worthy of respect. We can be like the centurion, who, in Luke 23:47, managed to break out of his work-inspired stupor and see Jesus with new eyes. May God grant us the grace to maintain open hearts to those we encounter in our work. May we see them as they really are, sacred creatures bearing God's own image.



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 11

## JESUS PROMISES HIS KINGDOM TO THE GOOD THIEF



*“One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” (Lk. 23:39-43)*

Three men being crucified, suffering excruciating pain, literally. (The word “excruciating” comes from the Latin *cruciare*, “to crucify.”) One man begins taunting Jesus,

sarcastically calling out for salvation he believes Jesus can't deliver. The other, sensing something that he has never felt before, defends Jesus as an innocent victim. Then, in desperate hope, he cries out: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." In response Jesus says a most astounding thing, a most encouraging thing, a most curious thing: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The word "Paradise" comes from a Persian word meaning "garden." It was used to describe a place of beauty, peace, and joy. In Jewish thought, Paradise represented the Garden of Eden and could stand for the joys of heaven. Paradise was just about as far as one could get from crucifixion. Yet, in spite of the apparent absurdity of it, and in spite of the spiteful laughter of the crowd, Jesus promises that the thief will join him in Paradise even this very day.

Luke 23:39-43 has often perplexed Christians who believe that salvation comes only by explicitly confessing Jesus as Savior and Lord. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" hardly fits the bill here. Whatever the desperate thief believed about Jesus, it's unlikely

that he prayed what we call “the sinner’s prayer” while on his cross. Moreover, we have no reason to believe that Jesus straightened out the thief’s theology before offering the promise of Paradise. No, what we have in the text of Luke is a cry of minimal faith and maximal desperation. And what we have from the mouth of Jesus is a response of monumental mercy.

If this crucified criminal could have hope, then perhaps you and I can as well. We hope, not in our goodness, not in our good intentions, but in the matchless mercy of God. How do you respond to the promise of Jesus to the thief who cried out to him for mercy? How have you experienced God’s mercy in your life? Do you need God’s mercy in a special way right now?



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 12

## JESUS ON THE CROSS, HIS MOTHER, AND HIS DISCIPLE



*“Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.” (Jn. 19:25-27)*

Though, according to the Gospel record, most of the men who followed Jesus did not stay with him at the cross, his female followers remained to observe his death. All four New Testament Gospels mention this striking fact (Matt 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:49; John 19:25). John alone specifies that Mary the

mother of Jesus was among the women who remained near him until the end. In the Gospel of John, Mary was standing next to “the disciple whom [Jesus] loved,” believed traditionally to be John, one of Jesus’s closest disciples and the source of the Gospel that bears his name. Observing these two, Jesus said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son,” and to the beloved disciple, “Here is your mother” (19:26-27). The writer of the Gospel adds, “And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home” (19:27).

The basic meaning of Jesus’s statement is clear. He was entrusting care of his mother to one of his most intimate friends and followers. He was making sure that she would be loved and cared for after Jesus’s death. Jesus knew he could trust his beloved follower with such an important responsibility. (We don’t know much about the relationship of Jesus and his natural siblings at this point. Earlier in his ministry they seemed to have been less than fully supportive of his ministry [see Mark 3:21]. Later, Jesus’s brother James became one of the main leaders of the Christian church.)

Commentators throughout the ages have rightly noticed Jesus's attention to the needs of others, in this case his mother, even in his hour of excruciating suffering. The Gospels don't tell us too much about Mary's experience or faith at this time. She surely knew from the very beginning that Jesus was extraordinary and that God had something very special in store for him. There were moments when she understood that Jesus's destiny would not be an easy one, for him or for her. For example, in Luke 2, when Simeon praised God upon seeing the baby Jesus, he delivered a chilling prophecy to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel . . . and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (2:34-35). As we reflect upon the meaning of Christ's death this week, Mary's presence at the cross reminds us of the deeply human drama that is occurring, even as this drama points beyond to the majesty and mystery of God's plan for salvation.



Prayer: "Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything. Amen."

# STATION 13

## JESUS DIES ON THE CROSS



*“It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’” (Lk. 23:44-47)*

At first glance, Luke’s version of the centurion’s response to Jesus’s death seems like a glaring understatement. “Certainly this man was innocent,” rightly identifies Jesus’s lack of guilt. It makes clear once again the fact that he didn’t deserve to be crucified for sedition against Rome. He was no ordinary revolutionary, no guerrilla warrior, no terrorist. So, yes, “this man was innocent.” But couldn’t Luke have done better

than this in his telling of the story? Mark's version seems so much stronger: "Truly this man was God's Son!"

We can't be sure why Luke fashioned the narrative of Jesus's death as he did. But we can understand that "Certainly this man was innocent" carried more weight with Luke than it might seem. Some translations, including the classic King James, have, "Certainly this was a righteous man" (23:47). This is a literal translation of the Greek, which uses the word *dikaios* to describe Jesus. *Dikaios* can mean innocent, but it is the usual word for "righteous," and the base of such words as "righteousness, justice, justification" (*dikaiosyne*) and "justify" (*dikaioo*). From the lips of the centurion comes something far more than recognition of Jesus's innocence. It's an ironic confession of his character as the righteous one, indeed, The Righteous One of God.

Because Jesus was righteous, because he was innocent, not just of crimes that deserved crucifixion, but of all wrongdoing, he was able to make many righteous by bearing the sin of others. He became the spotless sacrifice for all

people. Thus, his being The Righteous One is absolutely essential for his death on the cross to bring about salvation.

So, the apparently simple expression of the centurion, “Certainly this man was innocent” turns out to mean much more than it suggests on the surface. Jesus was not just innocent, but righteous. And he was not just any old righteous person, but The Righteous One who came to fulfill the role of the Suffering Servant. Through his righteous life, and through his sacrificial death, we receive the gift of his own righteousness. What a wonder!



Prayer: “Oh Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything. Amen.”

# STATION 14

## JESUS IS PLACED IN THE TOMB



*“Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning.” (Lk. 23:50-54)*

After Jesus died, his body was placed in a tomb. This was better treatment than many crucified people would have received. Their bodies were often discarded by Roman soldiers and left exposed, unless they had families or friends nearby to care for them. The body of Jesus was fortunate enough to receive unusual

attention from a man named Joseph, who was both a member of the Sanhedrin and a follower of Jesus. He made sure the body of his Master was appropriately buried, so that, later, the bones of Jesus could be finally interred in an ossuary (a special box for bones). Little did Joseph know that God had other plans for the body of Jesus.

In most human societies appropriate burial of dead bodies is a sacred tradition. It matters profoundly that we ensure the proper resting place for those who have died. Yet, after burials happen, we don't generally mention them specifically. Why? Why did the earliest Christians, and then why did the writers of the Gospels, consider it so important to mention the actual burial of Jesus? To put the question a different way, what does "and that he was buried" add to the essential Christian message? For one thing, it prepares the way for the affirmation of the resurrection. To say that Jesus died and was raised without mentioning his burial could lead to a misunderstanding of the story. One might think that Jesus was immediately brought back to life from the cross

or that he was immediately jettisoned to heaven. “And that he was buried” eliminates these options and explains the place from which Jesus was raised.

Perhaps Charles Wesley penned one of the best responses to the mystery of Christ’s real death early in the eighteenth century. Our closing prayer will be the words of his beloved hymn, “And Can It Be That I Should Gain?” I can think of no better way to finish this reflection on the fourteenth station of the cross. The main purpose of The Stations of the Cross is to draw us more deeply into the reality, mystery, and mercy of the cross, so that we might experience the love of God more truly and powerfully.



**Prayer:** And can it be that I should gain, An interest in the Savior’s blood? Died He for me, who caused His pain – For me, who Him to death pursued?

Amazing love! How can it be, That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me? Amazing love! How can it be, That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

‘Tis mystery all: th’Immortal dies: Who can explore His strange design? In vain the firstborn seraph tries, To sound the depths of love divine.

‘Tis mercy all! Let earth adore, Let angel minds inquire no more. ‘Tis mercy all! Let earth adore; Let angel minds inquire no more.

He left His Father’s throne above, So free, so infinite His grace – Emptied Himself of all but love, And bled for Adam’s helpless race: ‘Tis mercy all, immense and free, For O my God, it found out me! ‘Tis mercy all, immense and free, For O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature’s night; Thine eye diffused a quickening ray – I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. Still the small inward voice I hear, That whispers all my sins forgiven; Still the atoning blood is near, That quenched the wrath of hostile Heaven.

I feel the life His wounds impart; I feel the Savior in my heart. I feel the life His wounds impart; I feel the Savior in my heart. No

condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in  
Him, is mine; Alive in Him, my living Head, And  
clothed in righteousness divine, Bold I approach  
th'eternal throne, And claim the crown, through  
Christ my own. Bold I approach th'eternal  
throne, And claim the crown, through Christ my  
own. *Amen.*

# LENTEN SEASON



Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday (the Saturday right before Easter Sunday). The forty days represents the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, enduring the temptation of Satan and preparing to begin his ministry.

Lent is a time of repentance, fasting and preparation for the coming of Easter. It is a time of self-examination and reflection. As Christians, we focus on our relationship with God, growing

as disciples and extending ourselves, often choosing to give up something or to volunteer and give of ourselves for others