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The Nail

Being part of the Passion



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For all those – like me – who have got it wrong

*And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and
supplication on the house of David and the
inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that,
when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they
shall mourn for him, as one mourns for
an only child, and weep bitterly over him,
as one weeps over a firstborn.*

(Zechariah 12.10)

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	xi
---------------------	----

Part One: Friday Afternoon

1 Peter	3
2 The Roman centurion	11
3 Pontius Pilate	19
4 Caiaphas	27
5 Judas	35
6 Mary Magdalene	43

Part Two: Friday Evening

7 Pilate's wife	53
------------------------	----

Part Three: Towards Easter

8 Will you let Jesus forgive you?	63
--	----

<i>Suggestions for using this book as a study course in Lent</i>	69
--	----

Introduction

This book began in 1987. I was a couple of years into my curacy at Christ Church and St Paul's, Forest Hill, in the diocese of Southwark, and my training incumbent put me in charge of what we called 'An Hour before the Cross'; a sort of meditative warm-up to the Good Friday liturgy. I had a free hand to do whatever I liked. My idea was to create a service that somehow posed the questions: 'Who killed Christ?' and 'Who was responsible for his killing?' I imagined that we might do this through some sort of dramatic and meditative presentation where different people spoke as if they were characters in the story. Sandwiched together with silence, hymnody and prayer this would then tell the story of Good Friday, the different characters justifying their actions and, as it were, passing on the blame.

I got a little group of people together to help me work on this, and we devised a liturgy that began with a large wooden cross being brought into the worship space and dropped fairly unceremoniously in the middle. Nails were then banged into it and it was erected in the centre of the space. One large nail was left at the foot of the cross. There was silence. Somebody then stepped forward from the congregation and picked up

Introduction

the nail. He then addressed the congregation as if he were one of the Roman soldiers who had just nailed Jesus to the cross, and as if they were the crowd who had just witnessed the event. This wasn't announced. There was no order of service saying who he was. He just picked up the nail and started speaking. It was as he spoke that it dawned on everyone who he was and why he was speaking.

He told the assembled congregation it was not his fault. He said he was just following orders; that this was all in a day's work. It was a horrible thing to do, but it had to be done. He had no choice. And he finished by saying: 'If you're looking for someone to blame for the death of Jesus, then speak to the person who gave the order. Pontius Pilate; he is the person responsible.' He then put the nail down and returned to his seat.

There was silence. This was followed by a meditative hymn and a short prayer, and then someone else stepped forward and picked up the nail. This time it was Pontius Pilate; he justified his actions and passed the blame to the religious authorities, and put down the nail. Then Caiaphas came forward and justified his actions – after all, wasn't it expedient that one man should die so that the whole nation might survive? And he then explained that even one of Jesus' own followers, Judas Iscariot, lost faith in him and betrayed him. Lastly, Judas stepped forward. He also picked up the nail. He told his story. He justified his actions. He put the nail down. But pointing to the congregation, who throughout the liturgy have started to feel more and more like the crowd, he said to

Introduction

them: ‘Aren’t you to blame? You sang Hosanna last Sunday, and greeted him with joy; but this afternoon you bayed for his blood, screaming “Crucify him! Crucify him!”’ Then the four people who had played the four characters all stepped forward and, going among the congregation, gave each person a nail. The inference was clear: we were all responsible.

It was a very moving service. The four parts were not written out, but worked on from notes and improvisation so that each person could speak convincingly ‘in character’. In order to honour that first group properly, I need to record that at that first service Bud Leech took the part of the Roman soldier; John Caldicott – my training incumbent – was Pilate; Roy Ward played Caiaphas; and I took the part of Judas. Behind everything that is written here stands the memory of their creativity.

When it came to handing out the nails, most people – getting the point of the liturgy – received their nail almost as if they were receiving Holy Communion. Some even held out their hands, one resting over another, in the same way that we usually receive the sacrament. One or two refused, which was fine. Most then sat through the remainder of that service, and then all through the Good Friday liturgy that followed, holding their nail. It became their share not just in the service, but in the Passion of Christ.

Many people took their nail home. Months later, I remember visiting one of the more elderly members of the congregation: her nail was propped up on her mantelpiece beside her cross.

Introduction

Since that Good Friday I have performed/celebrated ‘The Nail’ several times on various missions that I have led. It has proved a remarkably effective way of telling the story of the cross and getting over in a powerfully emotional way the cost and the responsibility of the cross: what it means for God, and what it means for us. It is a way of reflecting theologically upon the cross through a retelling of the story.

In 2008 I was invited by the parish of All Saints, Marlow, to speak at their fairly traditional three-hour Good Friday service. This service usually takes the form of six reflective talks interspersed with hymns, prayers and readings. Unsure how to approach it, I turned again to ‘The Nail’. None of it had ever been written down. All the ‘performances’ had been improvised first-person monologues, done by various different people. It had always been the same four characters – the Roman soldier, Pilate, Caiaphas and Judas. I wondered how it would be if I added two additional characters (to fill the three hours I needed at least two more meditations!) and wrote them and delivered them myself. Consequently I added Peter and Mary Magdalene and found they added new depths, offering further contrast to the way we respond to Christ and his cross. Therefore, this new six-act story starts with Peter justifying his own running away from the cross and his denying Jesus; and it finishes with Mary Magdalene, one of the few people who doesn’t run away; she accepts responsibility. I still planned to hand out the nails at the same point: after Judas had said that we were all to blame. But now Mary spoke as first apostle, as the first one who didn’t put the

Introduction

nail down; who held on to it; who accepted her responsibility; who kept on looking at Christ.

The writing came easily. Indeed, it was a joy to immerse myself in the different characters and look again at the story of Christ's Passion from their perspective. The reflections were slightly longer – but then I had more time to fill – and, inevitably, as I was writing the meditations I started to think that they could easily become a book.

What you have here is not much changed from the reflections that were given in Marlow a few years ago. They have been slightly expanded and tidied up, but that's all. I offer them, in the hope that this book can do three things:

- 1 It does what it says on the cover; it is a book about the cross to be read and reflected on, and I hope all sorts of readers will find it helpful and stimulating.
- 2 It can be used by individuals and groups as a study guide for Lent. At the end of the book there are some questions that could be used in group discussion. These continue the theme of imagining yourself into the story, and I hope offer a rather different sort of Lent group.
- 3 Most importantly, it is a book that can still be used for its original intention as a liturgy for Good Friday. As you will see, there are readings at the beginning of each chapter and a prayer at the end: the whole book can be seen as a reflective liturgy. All you need to do is choose some hymns, add a few more prayers of your own and find six good readers to take the parts. I still think it would be

Introduction

helpful to have a large cross erected in the centre of the worship space at the beginning. And of course it is vital to have a large nail for each of the speakers to pick up, hold while they are speaking, and put down when they finish. You will also need lots of nails to hand out to the congregation once Judas has finished speaking.

Better still, use my words here as an inspiration for your own creativity and write or improvise your own reflections based upon this format. That is how this book began, and I would be honoured if this is how it ended up being used: my words leading you to discover your own words and leading you afresh to the Living Word, Christ himself, and him crucified.

I have also added two further reflections. First, something for the evening of Good Friday: Pontius Pilate's wife looking back on the events of the day and her part in it. And then a chapter that poses the question starkly: will we let Jesus forgive us? On the cross, forgiveness is offered freely to everyone. But we need to take it; we need to receive the gift that is given. It is to help people understand their own part in the drama of the cross and the gift of forgiveness that flows from it that is the true purpose of this book.

Stephen Cottrell

The Nail

PART ONE



FRIDAY AFTERNOON

