

Stations of the Cross in this time of the Coronavirus pandemic

These powerful reflections are extracted from the book "Holy Week Voices of the Holy Land" published by the Friends of the Holy Land and recommended by the Diocese of Westminster for use in Lent

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Lord Jesus, during this time of severe test and trial for the whole human family, we turn to you. As we reflect on your Passion and death, help us to learn from you how to respond to the challenges we face at this time. Help us to deepen our trust and faith in you. May we be united with all who suffer at this time, and with all those who are helping others to carry their crosses. Guide us, Lord, in your ways. Purify us, Lord, in your love. Heal us, Lord, in your mercy. Lead us back into your light and your truth. We ask this in your precious name and through your precious blood. Amen

The 1st Station – Jesus is Condemned to Death

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you. Because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world.

Have we ever washed our hands as often as in these days of the coronavirus? Every time we touch something which could have been infected by another's touch, we wash and wash again. Pilate washes his hands as a gesture of dismissal and denial – that he wants nothing more to do with Jesus, that he bears no responsibility for all that will follow. But Pilate's hands will now forever be stained by guilt – the guilt of not standing up for the truth, the guilt of giving into fear of the crowd, the fear of what his superiors would do if he made the wrong move. We too are stained, infected every time we choose fear over love, compromise over truth.

Wash us, Lord, in the power of your blood.

The 2nd Station – Jesus takes up his Cross *We adore you, O Christ...*

Jesus the carpenter, who knows how to craft wood and reveal its inner beauty, receives a rough, splintered trunk of wood, hacked and hewn without any craft or care. The virus too has no concern for its victims – it spreads voraciously at every opportunity, just like our human greed and sin, which is the true burden which Jesus takes upon his shoulders. How depressing those pictures have been of young and fit people hoarding and stockpiling food while leaving the elderly and the poor with unwanted scraps. But to willingly risk our lives so as to save others, as so many doctors, nurses, medical professionals and members of the emergency services are doing at this time – this is a heroic path to walk. It is the path which Jesus walks for us. Which path will I choose? Will this crisis bring out the best or the worst in me?

Help us, Lord, to learn from your example. Strengthen all who carry heavy crosses at this time for the good of others.

The 3rd Station – Jesus Falls the First Time *We adore you, O Christ...*

We are on our knees – pushed to limits most of us have never experienced before. Economies, health-care systems, food-supply chains – all stretched to breaking point. We are naturally afraid of being weak and vulnerable. We like to be in control, to be comfortable and secure. But Jesus shows us that there is grace in weakness, that we only really open ourselves up to the sufferings of others when we experience our own vulnerability and the closeness of death. The only way to raise up others is ourselves to fall beside them. Perhaps for too long too many of us have been passive bystanders in the crowd, watching at a distance the suffering, the daily struggle for survival of so many in our world without ever really being touched by their pain or moved into action. But now we are all united in this danger, there is no more "them and us". The virus can reach us all.

Show us, Lord, how to walk together, to fall together and rise together. This is the way of the cross.

The 4th Station – Jesus Meets his Mother *We adore you, O Christ...*

During March we celebrate Mother's Day – a day when we normally journey home to be with our mums, to thank them with chocolates and flowers for the love, the very life they have given to us. But this year, because of the virus, most of us could not risk that journey and so we could not be together to thank, to touch, to hug. This must have been one of the greatest comforts on Jesus' walk with the cross – that Mary was there, as she always had been. She reached out to him in his agony and isolation, and shared with him the blessing of touch, of tenderness when all around was anger and rage.

Mary, at this time when so many of our family members are separated and alone, be to us a source of consolation, of contact and care. Help us to know your motherly mantle covering us all, comforting us in the pain and separation we feel.

The 5th Station – Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to Carry the Cross *We adore you, O Christ...*

How much easier we find it to give help than to receive it ourselves. Being dependent on others is not a path we naturally choose. But how many in our communities live their daily lives dependent on the care of others. And in this new situation we face, with the need for social distancing and minimum human contact so as to limit the spread of the virus, it is those who are most dependent on the daily closeness and contact of others who are most vulnerable. If this virus does no other good than this, it will have been something – if it can open our eyes to the vulnerability of so many around us, often hidden away from the public eye, reliant for so much on the army of Simon of Cyrene's who come to their aid at their time of need. Jesus, the Son of God, willingly surrenders his power and might, and becomes one of these 'little ones', reliant on the hands and help of another. Perhaps this is you now, or it will be you in the years to come. We need each other.

Open our eyes, Lord, to the gift of the vulnerable, to the beauty of the carer. Help us to understand that true human dignity lies in the respect and care we give to those most in need amongst us.

The 6th Station – Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus *We adore you, O Christ...*

Yes, this is a time when many are dying, when many suffer in so many ways. But at the same time, in the panic and the pain, there is grace and gift. We are rediscovering the beauty of kindness, the power of seemingly small acts of love to bring comfort and hope. A concerned phone call to someone on their own, a neighbour you may hardly have spoken to before now bringing you shopping, a nation opening its windows in unison to cheer and applaud its health-care workers. Powerful because totally sincere, no self-interest, nothing in it for me, no self-promotion or profit – just real, authentic concern for the good of the other. This is what Veronica does. Moved with pity for Jesus, she steps forward from the angry crowd and presses a soothing cloth to his bloodied face to give him a sweet moment of relief from it all. And her unexpected, unsought for reward is to have his sacred image imprinted on that cloth. There is beauty in the blood. There is grace in the virus.

Lord, may we, like Veronica and her cloth, be imprinted with your own image through our acts of pure kindness, compassion and care for each other.

The 7th Station – Jesus Falls the Second Time *We adore you, O Christ...*

Another fall. This time it takes Jesus longer to find the strength to rise again. And yet rise he does, drawing on his Father's love and his need to reach that cross, to offer his life for us. We too have hidden strengths within us – seldom sought but there, gifted by God deep within us. It's not our own strength, as we like to think, which helps us to rise but the Spirit of God – a Spirit which is only revealed when we too respond to the Father's love for us, when we too live our lives for others. This is our true self, our deepest humanity, too often hidden and lost beneath layers of self – self-interest, self-centredness, self-pity. As Jesus' skin is scraped from his body by the jagged cross and the hard, unforgiving ground every time he falls, so may our selfishness be scraped away from us. Just like the cross, the virus is bringing suffering and pain, but may it also, like the cross, lead to a purification, a purging of our self.

Lord Jesus, in our weakness, in our falling and rising, may we discover our deepest, God-given selves.

The 8th Station – Jesus speaks to the Women of Jerusalem *We adore you, O Christ...*

Who were these 'daughters of Jerusalem'? Perhaps a group, a sisterhood who dedicated themselves to the lamentation and consolation of their Jewish brothers condemned to death... But Jesus, when he meets them, is not concerned about his own suffering, but tries instead to awaken the women to the threat which hangs over their own lives. Within just a couple of generations, the holy city of Jerusalem, at whose gates these women weep, will be reduced to rubble and ruin. "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me but for yourselves and for your children." Jesus' words are not the voice of a God who wills suffering and death, but they are a passionate call to conversion and life. Violence and rebellion always lead to destruction and death. Is God allowing this virus to shake the world, as he allowed Jesus to go the cross, so as to awaken us to the dangers we risk if we continue to see ourselves as the masters of life, forgetting or even rejecting God's place in our world? SARS, Ebola, now Covid-19 – each time the virus spreads wider and deeper. If we continue to exploit the earth, to exploit each other are we not creating the cause of our own ruin?

Awaken in us, Lord, the sincere desire to live once more in communion with you and your creation, and in solidarity with others, with a profound respect for the sanctity of life.

The 9th Station – Jesus Falls the Third Time *We adore you, O Christ...*

It seems like it is almost all over. The soldiers fear that this prisoner might not make it to the place of execution. They look upon him as a broken man, pathetic, crushed. And yet there is a dignity, a spirit in this man which they have never seen before. They help him to stagger on, to walk these final steps to the cross. We only discover the deepest truths about ourselves and others through sorrow, pain and suffering. Brought low we see the world around us with different eyes – patients in hospital wards, corridors and intensive care – no longer divided or defined by class, language or culture, by their political views or social status – now all are united in the struggle for life, for the next hour, the next breath. Brought low, yes, but brought together as well. The virus affects not just the poor as usual, but also presidents and princes too. It brings us all down to earth, and reminds us of our shared humanity.

Let us learn, Lord, from your humility. We all stand on the same earth, from dust we have all come and to dust we shall all return. Let us not live in injustice or division any more.

The 10th Station – Jesus is Stripped *We adore you, O Christ...*

The condemned are crucified naked, deliberately stripped not only of their clothes but also of their human dignity. Jesus experiences the ultimate vulnerability of the defenceless – no shield or security to protect him. It is staggering that the God who formed our human bodies with such love now allows his own body to be so abused and profaned. This is how we so often return God's love – not with gratitude and reverence but with rejection and ridicule. And yet, not all – the hands of nurses and care workers who lovingly tend the bodies of their patients... The compassion of those moved to respond to the sufferings of others by sacrificing something of themselves...

May this virus, Lord, strip us of our callousness, indifference and brutality towards each other and restore in us a tender, whole-hearted compassion.

The 11th Station – Jesus is Nailed to the Cross *We adore you, O Christ...*

Now even the freedom to move is taken away from Jesus. Huge nails are hammered through his hands and feet to pin him to the cross. The blood once more flows from his body, staining the wood and ground below. As the cross is lifted up his whole weight hangs on those nails. Gravity pulls him lower and lower. Every time he struggles to pull himself up to breathe, his strength, his ability to cling to life slips away. The gift of movement, of physical strength, of breath, of life itself is all so precious. But Lord, we have taken so much for granted – seen it as our right to have and to hold, to possess and profit.

Lord, may this virus, which threatens to take everything away from us, teach us to see life with fresh eyes – as a gift from you, to be used well, with gratitude and humility, for your glory, for our good and the good of others.

The 12th Station – Jesus Dies on the Cross *We adore you, O Christ...*

For three hours Jesus hangs on the cross, with only a faithful few to support him. Every sinew in his body is pierced with pain. Every intake of breath costs him so much. It is our breathing which the virus affects, causing patients, like Jesus, to fight for every gasp. And yet, as his life ebbs away, Jesus gives his greatest lesson in love. Every precious word gasped from his mouth is a word of forgiveness, compassion and care for others: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”, “This day you will be with me in paradise.”, “Woman, behold your son.” This is total self-giving, total unconditional service and love. And then that last gasp, those final words saved for the Father: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” In these early afternoon hours, darkness covers the earth. The light of the world is extinguished, it seems. As the virus spreads, our world is also covered with a terrible darkness – of anxiety and fear, and the dread of death.

In this darkness, Lord, help us to learn from your hour of death and to be filled with faith not fear, and not with terror but with trust in you.

The 13th Station – Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross *We adore you, O Christ...*

Jesus’ lifeless body rests in his mother’s arms. A sacred embrace beyond words. After all the anger and din of the crucifixion, there is a profound silence and stillness in this intimate moment. The crowds have gone home to prepare for the Passover, although the lamb has already been sacrificed. Jesus is held in the mystery of death. He has gone before us. The virus has forced us to stay in our homes, the streets are deserted. There is a silence, a stillness around us which we have perhaps never known before. Yes, there is regret and loss, there is grief in this absence of life. But there is also something precious, a presence which invites us to listen to ourselves once more. To pause, to reflect and not live in relentless activity and distraction. In this silence God invites us to contemplate the deepest questions of our lives – what is most essential, most sacred. And yes, to contemplate death itself – but no longer in fear for Christ waits for us there. We think of all those we have known who have died.

Lord, we entrust them to your loving embrace, and ourselves as well, in the hour of our own death.

The 14th Station – Jesus is Laid in the Tomb *We adore you, O Christ...*

The faithful few take Jesus’ body to its resting place. His body is placed in the grave, returned to the earth as we all one day shall be. The huge stone over the tomb seems like the final sign of the permanence of death. It represents every fear, every anxiety I allow to take hold of me, expecting defeat, struggling to believe. Why does my fear so often speak louder than my faith? Jesus promises that there is no stone, no rock, no matter how heavy, which he cannot remove. Lord, strengthen my trust, my faith in you. Scripture tells us that the tomb was in a garden – a promise of new life, of resurrection. Help us, Lord, in these dark, wintry days of the pandemic, to remember that this suffering will pass – spring will return.

Thank you, Lord, for this way of the cross. During this time of test and trial for us all, help us, Lord, to learn and live the lessons of your Passion and death. Help us to hold fast to our faith in the Resurrection.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, as we end this Way of the Cross, help us to be ever more united with our whole human family, for whom you gave your life. As we enter deeper into the pain and suffering of the coronavirus pandemic, may we imitate you in our compassion and care for others, and in seeking the Father’s will above all else. We ask this in your precious name and through your precious blood. Amen.

We conclude by praying an *Our Father*, a *Hail Mary* and a *Glory be* for the Pope’s intention.

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