

**Good Friday: CCSY, 2 April 2010**

*Isa 52:13-53:12; 1 Cor 1:18-31; John 18:1-19:42*

*That was the day they killed the Son of God  
on a squat hill-top by Jerusalem.  
Zion was bare, her children from their maze  
sucked by the demon curiosity clean through the gates.  
The very halt and blind had somehow got themselves up to the hill.*

*After the ceremonial preparation,  
the scourging, nailing, nailing against the wood,  
erection of the main trees with their burden,  
while from the hill rose an orchestral wailing,  
they were there at last, high up in the soft spring day.  
We watched the writhings, heard the moanings,  
Saw the three heads turning on their separate axles like broken wheels left spinning.  
Round his head was loosely bound a crown of plaited thorn that hurt at random,  
stinging temple and brow as the pain swung into its envious circle.  
In front the wreath was gathered in a knot that as he stared  
looked like the last stump left of a death-wounded deer's great antlers.*

*Some who came to stare grew silent as they looked, indignant or sorry.  
But the hardened old and the hard-hearted young,  
although at odds from the first morning cursed him with one curse,  
having prayed for a Rabbi or an armed Messiah and found the Son of God.  
What use to them was a God or a Son of God?  
Of what avail for purposes such as theirs?  
Beside the cross-foot, alone, four women stood and did not move all day.  
The sun revolved, the shadow wheeled, the evening fell.  
His head lay on his breast,  
but in his breast they watched his heart move on by itself alone,  
accomplishing its journey.  
Their taunts grew louder, sharpened by the knowledge that he was walking  
in the part of death, far from their rage.  
Yet all grew stale at last, spite, curiosity, envy, hate itself.  
They waited only for death, and death was slow and came so quietly  
they scarce could mark it.  
They were angry then with death and death's deceit.*

*I was a stranger, could not read these people or this outlandish deity.  
Did a God indeed in dying cross my life that day by chance,  
he on his road and I on mine?*

Edwin Muir's poem, 'The Killing',<sup>1</sup> puts the whole Gospel into the form of a problem. That's the thing about the cross: the fact of it is brutally plain; but what it might mean, what this sign might signify, well, that's a genuinely open question. What has become the Church's primary symbol began its life under the aegis of politics not religion: a public execution with captions in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew so that all could see, read, and interpret, not just those few who imagined it had only to do with them.

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Collected Poems of Edwin Muir*, Faber & Faber.

According to Martin Luther, the cross is not just ‘a’ problem; it is ‘the’ problem: *crux probat omnia* – the cross tests, probes, problematizes everything. The *Encyclopedic World Dictionary* defines ‘crux’ as a vital, basic, or decisive point, something of a troubling or puzzling nature; a perplexing difficulty. Thus St Paul can describe his *whole gospel*, his ‘good news’ to the church in Corinth, as ‘a word of the cross’ (1 Cor 1:18) – a word, a sign, which, he acknowledges, is a *problem*: foolishness, a stumbling block, a *scandal* (1:18, 22-23).

*Crux probat omnia. Everything* is tried in its crucible: politics, notions of justice, ethical systems, economies, tribal and ethnic loyalties, social structures, church order.

And here, today, the cross is an inescapable problem also for me – perhaps even ‘the’ problem ‘of’ me – a quandary of my making and re-making: did a God indeed, in dying, cross my life that day?

It’s a question we excuse ourselves for ducking; after all, I was a stranger, could not read these people or this outlandish deity.

But, in truth, I am no stranger; or, rather, the Crucified is no stranger to me. As Sebastian Moore explains in a book of the same title, ‘I most deeply discover Jesus as the man I never was, only when I realize that my *not* being wholly a man is what crucifies him . . . [and] in the heart of the crucified I [recognize] myself.’<sup>2</sup>

The Mystery Play to be read here tonight opens – much as Jesus Christ Superstar does in something of a reprise of the genre – with a soliloquy from Judas, who vents his frustrations with Jesus: ‘By dear God in majesty, I am as angry as I can be, and some way I will revengéd be, as soon as ever I may.’

Jesus is not the victim of blind, impersonal, cosmic forces of evil, but of my fear – anticipated in the choices and responses of Judas and Pilate and Peter and Caiaphas, and repeated over and over again in history and in my own story – my fear of the fullness of life to which God is calling me: this dreaded yet desired self Jesus somehow represents; a personhood I crucify rather than become.<sup>3</sup> How else to cope with Jesus than to bury him so deep that all the problems he exposes are buried with him, especially ‘the problem of me’?

‘Yet all grew stale at last, spite, curiosity, envy, hate itself. They waited only for death, and death was slow, and came so quietly they scarce could mark it. They were angry then with death, and death’s deceit.’

In an irony that would not be lost on the writer of the fourth gospel, my crucifying of that all-too-familiar stranger, this outlandish, useless deity, turns out to be the way into the personhood, the fullness of human being that he reveals in me, and from which I hide my face (Isa 53:3). Forced to hear myself say, with Judas, and Pilate, and Peter, and Caiaphas, ‘I hate that which makes for life’, I expose myself to sorrow; and sorrow bears me to the heart of the crucified, where I discover what I am doing to myself.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Crucified is no Stranger* (London: DLT, 1977), 21, emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, see also x.

‘See from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingling down; did e’er such love and sorrow meet?’<sup>4</sup> In piercing him, I am pierced. In the blood and water which flow from his side, God’s love meets my sorrow. As the violence I do to the person I’m afraid to become collapses on itself, the cross becomes a sign of my lost and recovered humanity, and I am reborn.<sup>5</sup>

There’s an ancient Roman rite – an office of readings for use on Holy Saturday – in which Christ speaks to us from the tomb:

For the sake of you, who left a garden, I was betrayed in a garden... See on my face the spittle I received in order to restore to you the life I once breathed into you. See there the marks of the blows I received in order to refashion your [] nature in my image...I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side for you who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side has healed the pain in yours. My sleep will rouse you from yours... the sword that pierced me has sheathed the sword [you turned against yourself].

Here then, in its sharpest relief, narrowed down into the tip of a soldier’s spear, we have the vital and decisive point, the crux of the matter.

Drawn in blood and water with that crude stylus is a sign of the fatal and life-giving intersection of God’s life and mine – of God’s life and the life of the world: a problem that just won’t go away.

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<sup>4</sup> From the hymn following the sermon, ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’ (Isaac Watts, 1674-1748)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*