

## Bishop Harold Miller's Holy Week Series 2011

### *The Wounds of Jesus*

#### *1. His back*

There is something about Church of Ireland sensibilities which does not find it easy to focus on the theme I have chosen for this year's Holy Week addresses: *The Wounds of Jesus*. It may be a reaction to some of the gory and mawkish art we have seen in parts of Roman Catholicism with its apparent tastelessness; or the over-indulgent, highly descriptive evangelistic preaching of some protestants which goes into every detail of the sufferings of Jesus to get what we might consider a cheap, over-emotional response. And so we are inclined to stick to tasteful gold crosses, just like my own pectoral cross, devoid of any hint of a body or blood, emphasising the triumph of Calvary; and subdued liturgies of tidy, quiet, internal devotion, which have a part to play, but are not the whole story.

So I have challenged myself to a new series of Holy Week addresses focussing on the wounds of Jesus. I was started on this track when my good friend, Christina Baxter, who spoke at last year's *Bishop's Bible Week*, wrote a book on this subject, with the same title as these addresses, in 2004, which was chosen as the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book. It is sub-titled: *A Meditation on the Crucified Saviour*, and is one of very few Anglican books on this theme. It is excellent, but out of print, so I have to admit that I will be using some of Christina's insights in this week's talks.

Our hymns serve us well in this area, and a few verses from some of them set the scene as we begin our meditations:

Come, see his hands and his feet,  
the scars that speak of sacrifice,  
hands that flung stars into space  
to cruel nails surrendered. *Graham Kendrick (20<sup>th</sup> Century)*

I sometimes think about the cross,  
and shut my eyes and try to see  
the cruel nails and crown of thorns  
and Jesus crucified for me. *W. Walsham How (19<sup>th</sup> Century)*

Behold him, all ye that pass by,  
The bleeding Prince of life and peace!  
Come, sinners, see your maker die,  
And say was ever grief like this?  
Come, feel with me the blood applied:  
My Lord, my Love is crucified. *Charles Wesley (18<sup>th</sup> Century)*

And as we progress through the different wounds, we will use other hymns and songs to focus our devotion.

Don't be afraid to look on the wounds of Jesus. Don't be afraid to love the wounds of Jesus. He still carries them in his heavenly body, for eternity. We who are redeemed by Christ will gaze on them with wonder one day. Don't escape from the awfulness and strange beauty of them. By them we are healed and in them we find our very salvation.

It is that picture of the wounds of Jesus in his exalted body with which we begin tonight. That's where my personal story begins, as a young lad present in St Katharine's Church in Fortwilliam on the occasion when the East Window of 'Christ in Glory' was unveiled. The congregation had been waiting to see the new window with eager expectation, but when it was revealed there were very different opinions, and even some consternation, when it was clear that the exalted Lord was also by the marks on his body, the crucified one.

We know that, of course, from his meeting after the resurrection with Thomas, when the risen Christ says to the doubter:

Put your fingers here, and see my hands, and put out your hand,  
and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe'. *John 20:27.*

But the aspect of *The Wounds of Christ* with which we begin today is not seen in that window, or in any other stained-glass window which I know. We can see clearly, as the hymn *O dearest Lord* does, his sacred head and the crown of thorns, his sacred hands and feet and the nails, his sacred heart and the spear, but the aspect we cannot see and might easily forget is his *sacred back*. The back of Jesus is hidden from our sight most of the time in the stained glass images.

The passage of scripture from which we start our meditation is *Isaiah 50*, which powerfully presents the back of the Suffering Servant to us:

'I gave my back to those who strike' *Isaiah 50: 6.*

As the Gospels tell the story of the Passion of Jesus, they are remarkably reticent and factual about the back of Jesus. His back comes into the picture more by filling out what is said with our imagination than by the text itself.

Here is what we have to go on: In Mark's Gospel (15:15):

'So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas,  
and having *scourged* Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.'

In Matthew (27:26), pretty well exactly the same.

In Luke (18:32-33), Jesus prophesies his death, a prophecy they could not grasp at that time:

'For (the Son of Man) will be delivered over to the Gentiles  
and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon.  
and after *flogging* him, they will kill him...'

And in John (19:1):

'Then Pilate took Jesus and *flogged* him.'

Christina Baxter notes that in Matthew and Mark, the scourging or flogging comes as part of the punishment after Pilate's sentence, whereas in John, it comes before he is sentenced. She comments:

If we are right to read the two narratives of flogging found in  
the Gospels together... we may suppose that Jesus endured  
two floggings. If that was indeed the case, then it is no  
wonder that he did not hang on the cross long before he died.'

*O dearest Lord, thy sacred back, with whips was flogged for me.*

The back of Jesus is

the back of the one who is determined obediently to follow the will of his Father no matter what;

the back turned away from all sin;

the back which must have been well known to his disciples who literally followed him on the way;

the back which the disciples saw, or slept when they should have seen it, that last night when he was a little  
distance from them in the Garden of Gethsemane working through his emotions with his Father.

No wonder the words of the Suffering Servant are so immediately applied to Jesus in their prophetic fulfilment:

‘The Lord has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious;  
I turned not backward.’ *Isaiah 50:5*,

and when he says in v7:

‘But the Lord God helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced,  
therefore I have set my face like flint.’

My *English Standard Version Study Bible* put the guts of those verses in a simple note:

The servant chose his sufferings willingly and he moves forward with resolute determination, confident in God’s overruling help.

The same idea is expressed in another way in *Hebrews 12:1-2*:

‘Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.’

The back of Jesus is the back which is seen leading the way for all Christians into the suffering which brings glory and joy. His face too is set like flint to do the will of the Father, obediently to the end.

The back of Jesus also bears the punishment we are due. We return to the Suffering Servant again, in *Isaiah 53: 4-5*

‘Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,  
yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed  
for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement which brought  
us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.’

The back that leads us in the right direction is the back which bears the cruel flagellation of the Roman whip. The whip with little pieces of bone at the end of each piece of leather to ensure it does the greatest damage. If it had been the Jews inflicting the punishment the limit would have been forty lashes less one; but for the Romans there was no limit. And the amazing wonder is this: that in his very lacerations: his open bleeding wounds, his ‘stripes’, we find our healing, and not just our healing in a general way, but our healing from our sins. He takes our punishment as our substitute; and he carries our iniquities and transgressions. Peter puts it like this in *1 Peter 2:24*:

‘(Christ) himself bore our sins in his body on the tree,  
That we might die to sin, and live to righteousness.  
By his wounds you have been healed.’

The back which leads the way, and the back which bears the punishment is also the back which carries the weight so that our yoke may be easy and our burden light. St Bernard of Clairvaux put it like this in a prayer:

O loving Jesus... I salute and worship the most sacred wound on your shoulder on which you carried the heavy Cross, which so tore your flesh and laid bare your bones as to inflict on you an anguish greater than any other wound of your most blessed body.

That may be an exaggeration - the idea that the wound on Jesus shoulder inflicted the greatest anguish - but in terms of human pain, the weight of the cross on top of the agony of scourging must have been excruciating.

Some of us have been part of a Good Friday Procession from time to time, walking in the way of the Cross. Last year I had that experience from Waringstown to Donaghcloney. The cross was heavy enough, but it was on wheels, and we who carried it were in good health. None of us had been scourged. None of us was bleeding. We were able to pass the cross on to others when we were tired.

With Jesus, the burden was such that he could carry it no longer, and they had to find Simon of Cyrene to share it- otherwise Jesus would not have survived to be crucified.

I don't know about you, but one of the pictures which particularly rings a bell with me is that of Christian in *the Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan:

'Now I saw in my dream, that the highway up which Christian was to go was fenced on either side with a wall, and that wall was called 'Salvation'.....Up this way, therefore did burdened Christian run; but not without great difficulty because of the load on his back.

He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up to the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble; and so continued to do until it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in and I saw it no more.'

Behold the man upon a cross,  
My sin upon his shoulders. *Stuart Townend*

Burdens are lifted at Calvary, because Jesus with his wounded back, carries not only the weight of wood, but the weight of all human sin, to that hill where we find our salvation.