



Stations of the Cross

The fourteen images of Jesus' passion that make up the Stations of the Cross on the walls of St Anne's, allow us to take a prayer pilgrimage with Jesus on his journey to crucifixion. It's a sombre and sorrowful journey, as we set ourselves alongside Jesus in the suffering he undergoes. As we do so, we pray for those who suffer in our world today. We reflect on the examples of kindness shown to Jesus by courageous people during his trials. Stations of the Cross enable us to profoundly experience the lengths to which God is prepared to go, to show us how loved we are. In turn, they inspire us to give of ourselves in love to others.

You might wish to read and consider one station each day in the two weeks leading up to Easter, or read a few at a time, or give an hour of your time to slowly reading and praying them all in one sitting. We have written these reflections that they may be a blessing to you and bring you closer to the love of Jesus this Passiontide.

Revd Fraser Dyer and Revd Vanessa Elston



Station I

Jesus is condemned to death

In this image, we see Jesus being led away by a soldier. His hands bound, while Pontius Pilate washes his hands, symbolising his unwillingness to take responsibility for the injustice that is about to happen to Jesus. Where do we turn a blind eye to the wrongs of the world? When do we assume it is for others to make the decisions or sort the problems out? Ask God to show you where your voice could make a real difference.



Station 2

Jesus takes up the cross

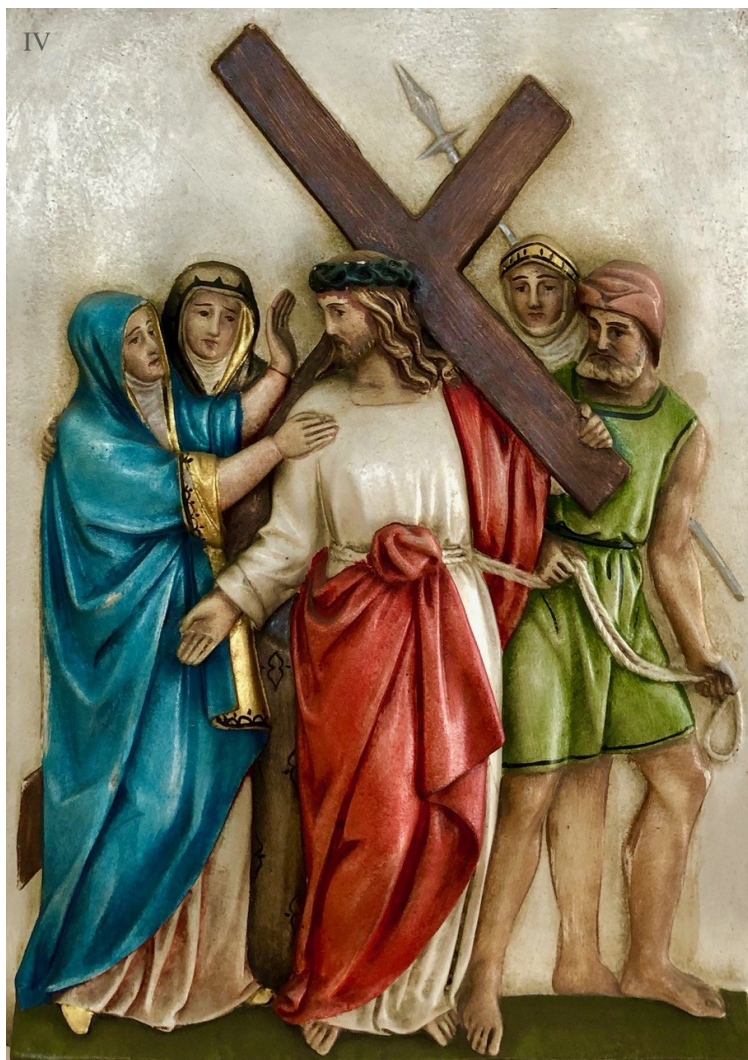
In this image we see Jesus being given his cross to carry, he looks serene, set on this path. The gospel accounts tell us that he had been flogged and had a crown of thorns pressed into his skull, mocked, spat at and hit over the head, so he wouldn't have looked like this physically. It is hard for us to grasp that he underwent all this willingly. As human beings we naturally seek to avoid suffering, we don't take up heavy burdens willingly, but only if they are forced on us. So much of humanity down the ages has had the burdens of poverty, sickness, oppression and isolation forced upon them. In this time of coronavirus, we are now all sharing in something of this together, though many will carry a heavier burden than others. As Jesus was willing to take up the burden of the cross for us how much are we willing to carry the burden we are being asked to carry?



Station 3

Jesus falls for the first time

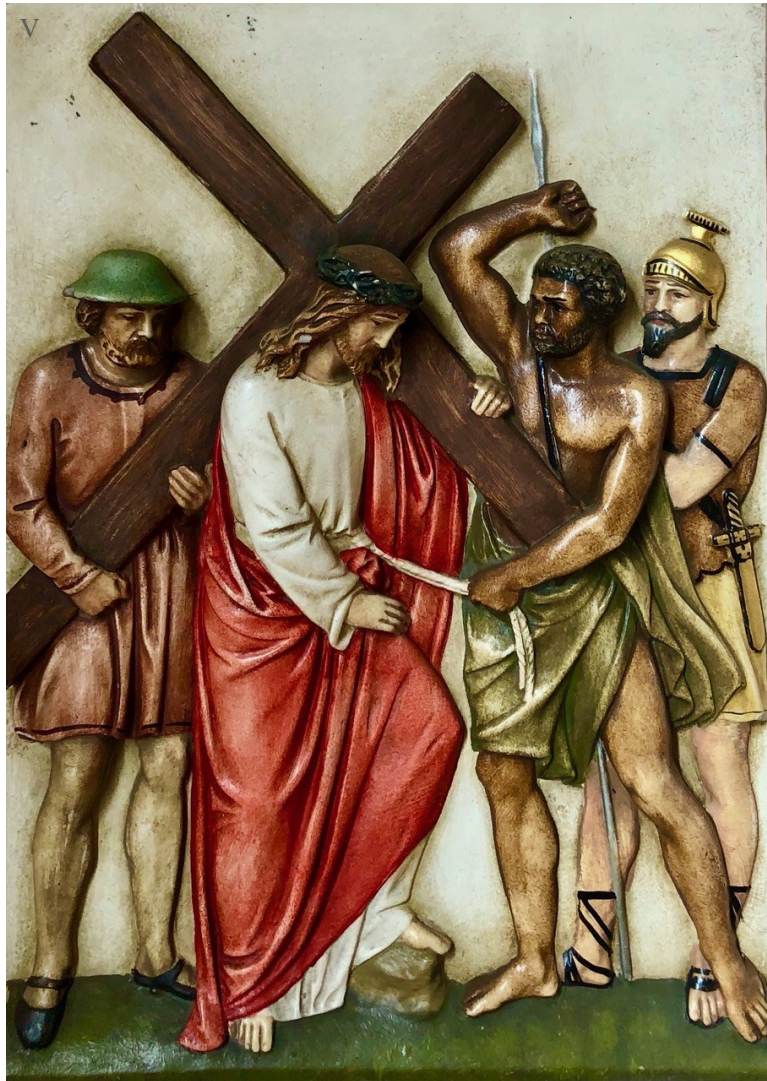
Already badly beaten up by the soldiers, the weight of the cross is too much for Jesus to bear. He falls to the ground and is beaten further for his trouble while a soldier and a religious leader look on. What do you see in the face of Jesus in this image? Perhaps, like me, you see humility and sorrow? Jesus's suffering is just as it would be for any others in that situation. And yet, as his knees hit the ground, the posture is also of prayer. He would know that his Heavenly Father was with him in this terrible journey, and that the story of his suffering was not just about him but the whole of humanity.



Station 4

Jesus meets his mother

In this station we see Mary reaching out to her son, to touch him, and almost it seems to bless him, though her face is one of sorrow and anguish. As a mother she is desperate to protect her son, to stop this terrible thing from happening, but there is also a look of resignation in her face, she is not asking him to turn back, she is letting him go. Jesus turns to her, he too reaches out, he acknowledges her pain. What can have been going through Mary's mind and heart at this point. All the turmoil and grief of a mother watching the suffering of her son, but there's more going on. Let us go back, over 30 years, to the young woman who was visited by the Angel Gabriel 'Greetings favoured one, the Lord is with you', she is given the promise that the son she is going to conceive by the Holy Spirit 'will be called the Son of God, that he will be given the throne of David, that he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end'. Mary received the promise of the Messiah, the longed for hope of Israel. And she believed. She bursts out in song when she visits her cousin, 'My Soul magnifies the Lord, surely from now all generations will call me blessed, and her heart pours out the coming of the upside down Kingdom of God.' Where is this Mary now? How does she make sense of what is happening to the one she believes was destined to save Israel. She does not understand what is happening. It makes no sense. Why? Why my son does this have to happen? And she gets no answer, except the compassion and love in the gaze of her son. Hold on Mary, you may not understand, but hold on, the sword will pierce your soul, but this is not the end.



Station 5

Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry the cross

It was the tradition, in Roman times, that anyone condemned to crucifixion should carry the cross beam of the cross to the place of execution. Jesus, who's already been brutally whipped by the Roman soldiers, doesn't have the energy or strength to keep carrying his cross. Matthew's Gospel tells us that the soldiers spat on him and struck him repeatedly on the head with a staff. A passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, is forced to carry the cross for him. Simon is an African, from the north of the continent, where Eastern Libya is today. He's a devout Jew, who has journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. His skin is a different colour, marking him out as a foreigner, so the soldiers feel entitled to order him about. This station reminds us not only of the suffering that Jesus underwent even before being nailed to the cross, but points to the human condition of seeing a stranger as someone to be looked down on and exploited. As we look at the image of Simon, we remember all who have been oppressed by those in power and all in our society today who are treated as less than whole because of a different appearance.



Station 6

Veronica wipes the face of Jesus

In this station we see a woman offering Jesus a cloth. The image conveys a sense of powerful connection in the gaze between the woman and Christ. Jesus is fully recognising and receiving her offering. The story of Veronica is not recorded in the gospels, it is part of Church tradition, of a woman moved with sympathy when she saw Christ's face covered with spit, blood, sweat and mud, she offers her veil, so that he could wipe his face. Jesus accepts her cloth, holds it to his face and then hands it back to her, the image of his face miraculously impressed upon it. These traditions may or may not have some root in an actual historical encounter, we cannot know, but they can still speak to us in a profound way. Veronica's act is a small act of solidarity with Christ's suffering, she offers what she has and Christ recognises her act. We can often feel overwhelmed by the suffering in our world, particularly now as we see health systems struggling to contain the coronavirus. We can easily despair or become indifferent to the sufferings of others because it is too much for us to cope with. But Jesus says that every small act of care and solidarity is noticed by him, he receives such acts done to others as if they were being done to him. They are not lost. They make up the millions of small acts of kindness that are holding our world together in this epidemic. Jesus affirms every small offering, because to stand in solidarity with suffering is to truly bare the image of Christ.



Station 7

Jesus falls for a second time

We look at this image and we see Jesus once more struggling to cope with the weight of the cross in the light of the beatings he's already endured. Simon of Cyrene tries to assist and help Jesus get upright again. If you've ever tripped and fallen on the pavement outside, you will know what a humiliating experience it can be. The very basic thing we can do for ourselves is to hold ourselves upright and be able to continue our day like that. And when we lose our balance and fall to the ground, then we lose our dignity, sometimes our pride and we feel humiliated. The Latin for the ground is 'humus' – and it is the root of the word 'humiliation' but also of 'humility'. It is when we touch the ground that all pretence of who we want to show to the world is lost and we become, simply, our essential self. When we are humbled, or when we act in humility, then we do so rooted in the truth of who we are, grounded in reality rather than in self-delusion or pretence. When Jesus falls to the ground, it is a mark of the humility that he takes on. And I am reminded of the words that St Paul writes to the church in Philippians, in chapter 2, where he says that "Christ Jesus, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death; even death upon a cross."



Station 8

Jesus meets the woman of Jerusalem

In this image Jesus turns to some women, they look like they come from comfortable backgrounds, they are dressed well, and one of them holds her child as the other weeps. The gospel of Luke tells us that among the people following Jesus 'were woman who were beating their breasts and wailing for him'. Jesus turns to them and says 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.'

In these words Jesus is prophesying the coming destruction of Jerusalem but he is also pointing towards all the coming tragedy and terrible events that will come upon the world. In the midst of his own suffering Jesus is only too aware of all the suffering that it is still to come. He feels for those women and for all who live in this age of sorrow, pain and death, for all who are called to walk through this vale of tears. But we can take comfort from this encounter that just as Christ saw and spoke to these women, he also sees and speaks to us. We are noticed, we are seen, we are not disregarded, we are held in Christ's gaze. His suffering is part of our suffering, and our suffering is part of his.

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Station 9

Jesus falls for the third time

It's becoming painful to observe the struggle of Jesus on his way to Calvary. As we visit another Station where, again, he falls under the weight of the burden he's carrying, we become profoundly aware of the suffering that he is enduring. When there's nothing else to catch us, there is the ground. And as Jesus falls to the ground, it's the last of the supports available to him. The help from Simon of Cyrene hasn't taken enough of the burden from him. The support of his skeleton and his muscles, his own framework, cannot bear him aloft any longer. When we lose all else, we have the ground to fall on and to hold us. Sometimes God is referred to as 'the ground of our being' and when we strip everything else away, there is God to hold us. And in these peculiar times and challenging times, as we have to strip away from our lives so much of what we had considered was essential and now realise we can do without, perhaps we begin to reflect on what matters most in our life; what are the fundamentals that support and sustain us? And as we let go of the superfluous, let us relish being held by the ground of our being, sustained and supported in whatever challenges we're facing through lockdown, isolation or illness.



Station 10

Jesus is stripped

Although most paintings of the crucifixion show Jesus wearing a loin cloth, it is most likely that he would have been crucified naked. It was part of the humiliation, and degradation that went with Roman Crucifixion. Stripping someone of their clothes is a way of stripping them of their identity and dignity, it is a way of shaming. In most cultures of the world we are only fully naked with those with whom we are most intimate, as children with our parents and as adults with our partners, siblings or maybe even our closest friends. To be naked requires absolute trust, because without our clothes there is nothing to hide behind, we have no status, no covering. Clothes give us more than just physical protection, they give us emotional and psychological protection, a sense of dignity and respect. To be stripped naked is to be vulnerable in every possible sense. The gospel of John tells us that Jesus' undergarment was a seamless tunic, an item of considerable value, woven in one piece from top to bottom, instead of being two pieces of fabric stitched together. This detail is significant. The garment that Jesus wears closest to his skin is whole and complete, just as his humanity is whole and complete. One of the images of the fall is of human beings realising they are naked and feeling ashamed, that something is missing, that we have lost our completeness, our wholeness. One of the images of salvation is of being clothed again that our dignity and wholeness is being restored to us in Christ. But in order for us to be clothed again, Christ has to be stripped of his clothing. He has to become naked to all the world.



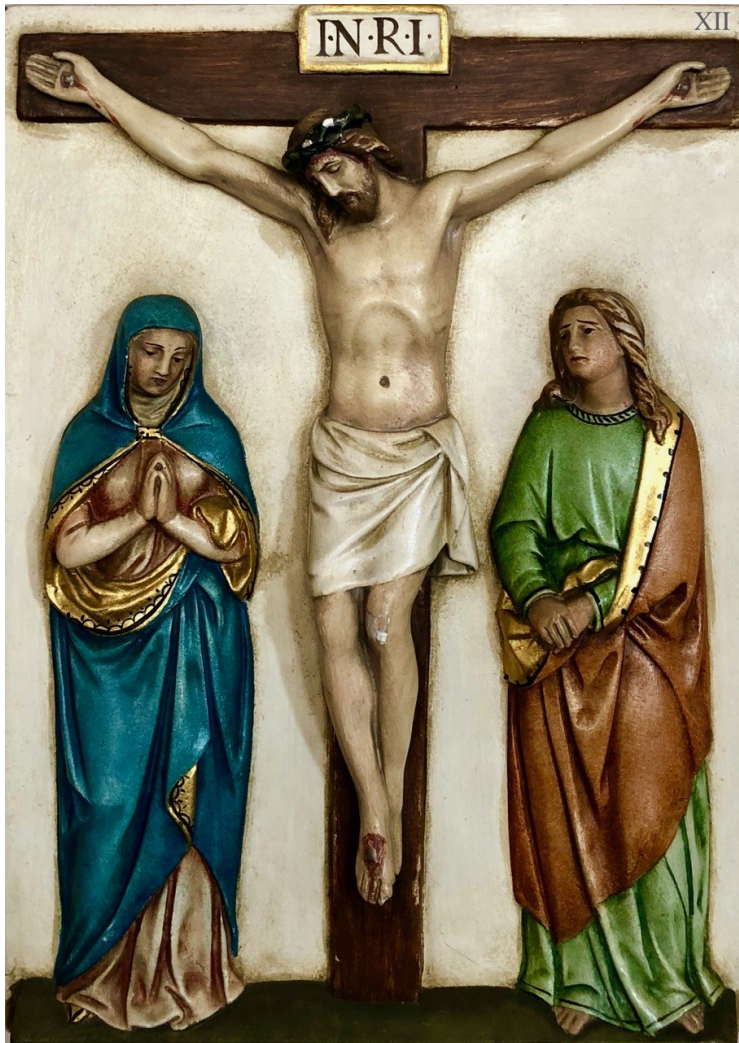
Station II

Jesus is nailed to the cross

In this Station, we see the final part of Jesus's journey to Calvary where they begin to nail him to the wood of the cross. In our Station today, we see two religious leaders looking on, disapprovingly, in the background. We see someone at the behest of a Roman soldier beginning to drive the nail into Jesus's left hand. And we see, also, in this Station, Simon of Cyrene, who is supporting the body of Jesus and I see this, very much, as an act of compassion. That, in this final moment of the horror of his suffering, Jesus has someone there who lends him support, who cares for him, who props him up in these final moments. And we look at Jesus's face; we see his sorrow, his anguish, a sense of resignation, perhaps, at the inevitable. But in that face of sorrow, I see within it, his sorrow for humanity, for the human condition, for his compassion for the suffering that we endure and, of course, the greatest suffering of all which is death, which he came to encounter alongside us. There is nothing we can go through that Jesus has not already gone through for us before.

In Luke's Gospel, it says:

When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified him there along with the criminals - one, on his right; the other, on his left. Jesus said "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" and they divided up his clothes by casting lots.



Station 12

Jesus dies on the cross

In this station Jesus hangs on the cross, his head is slumped, his face is ashen grey, he has just breathed his last and given up his spirit, the struggle is over, the life has drained from his body. His mother Mary looks deathly pale, she bows her head, another figure also stands close by. In the gospel of John we are told that the disciple whom Jesus loved remained by Mary's side, his expression of grief encompasses Mary's sorrow as well as his own. Christ has died. We stand in silence with these two figures. The whole world has stopped in this moment. The sun's light has failed and the curtain of the temple is torn in two. The sword pierces Mary's soul. Sometimes when a person dies, when they breathe their last, you can almost see the Spirit leaving their body, I saw this in my father's own death. His spirit left in his last breath and his body became matter, flesh, no longer animated by spirit. My father was no longer there. He had gone. Death is something the living struggle to comprehend, it is particularly hard when life is cut prematurely short, when children die before their parents. It is one of the hardest blows life can deal, to watch your own child die. What is the point? Where is the meaning in that? How can a heart contain such grief and pain? The gospel of John records how Jesus, looking down from the cross, spoke to Mary 'Woman, here is your son, and to his disciple 'here is your mother'. He creates a new family and from that hour the disciple takes Mary into his home. Even at the point of his death something new is being formed. But Jesus still has to die. We stand in silence. We cannot speak. Life as we know it will never be the same again.



Station 13

Jesus is placed the arms of his mother

In this station, we see the dead body of Jesus taken down from the cross and resting in the arms of his mother Mary. It's a scene that is not described in the Gospels, though the other women who are there with Mary in this image, are. In Mark's Gospel, it talks about women watching from a distance, among them Mary Magdalene, Mary (the Mother of James the Younger and of Joseph) and Salome. Mark tells us that these women had followed Jesus and cared for his needs, and that many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there at the cross. It is not Jesus' band of male disciples who are tending to him at this time, but it is the women and this image of the body of Jesus in the arms of Mary his mother, which has been handed down to us by church tradition, is one that is incredibly touching because it reminds us of the nativity, of that stable in Bethlehem where the new born baby is in his mother's arms, surrounded by Joseph, the animals, the shepherds, the wise men from the East; all the promise and hope and prophecy that was foretold about that Christ child has come to this moment in time when Jesus is dead, back in his mother's arms as she tends him. Surely it was not supposed to be like this? It is against the natural order of things for a parent to bury one of their own children. And yet the reality for some parents is that this is exactly what they do and, in Mary, here we see someone who knows and understands what that is like. But also in this image, we have a choice to make as followers of Jesus. For however we think that God works in our lives, whatever our hopes and expectations are about God in Christ, so often we can feel a sense of disappointment, that things have not turned out the way we hoped or prayed for, and it is easy for us to get stuck in this Good Friday moment, weighted down with the disappointment and the grief and the wondering. But my friends, we are not Friday people. We are Sunday people and Sunday is coming.



Station 14

Jesus is placed in the tomb

Here we have the body of Jesus being lifted by two men we have not seen before. They are going to place his body in a nearby tomb, as the gospel of John tells us: 'Now there was a garden where he was crucified, and in the garden was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid.' The men are waiting for Mary to say her final goodbye to her son. She holds his wounded hand, she struggles to let go, but the Sabbath is approaching and Jesus has to be buried. The gospel of John tells us the identities of the two men who came to bury Jesus, one is Joseph of Arimathea, who is called a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one, because of his fear of the Jewish elite, those who had handed Jesus over to be crucified. Joseph has gone to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus. The other man is Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, the man who earlier in John's gospel had gone to Jesus in the night to ask him how a man could be born again. These are both powerful, wealthy and influential men. They are both secret followers of Jesus. They bring pounds of myrrh and aloes to wrap Jesus body in spices with linen cloths for his burial. It is the rich and the powerful who bury Jesus, in one of their own tombs. And here we must pause. Here our story enters the silence of the Sabbath. The Jewish Sabbath begun when the sun went down on the Friday evening. The stone is rolled across Jesus' tomb just as the sun is setting and darkness descends. All is quiet. The shadowy figures disperse and each makes their own way home through vacant streets. Exhausted and drained. There is nothing more to be done. The emptiness of the Sabbath holds everything still. The garden is now empty. With the setting of the sun we enter the silence of death. Easter Saturday is that strange day suspended between crucifixion and resurrection. The day without words. The day where we reach the limit of all thinking and talking. Jesus body lies cold and lifeless in the cool hard rock of the sepulchre. Absence. Silence. God in death. God in the corpse. God with us.