

# The Cross: Week 5

Steve Watson | Daily Bible Guide | 2020

**Monday, March 23**

**John 19:25b-30 (NRSV)**

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. <sup>26</sup> When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." <sup>27</sup> Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

<sup>28</sup> After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." <sup>29</sup> A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. <sup>30</sup> When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

## Points of Interest

- In Jesus' generosity to his mother and his favorite student, we are reminded of his love, his heroism, and his ideal, exceptional humanity. Just afterwards, as he thirsts, we are reminded of the needs and suffering he shares with us all. Sleepless and dehydrated after a half day of interrogation and torture, Jesus thirsts.
- We'll look Wednesday at the psalm Jesus is quoting. And next week, we'll look at the sixth word, "It is finished."
- The offering of sour wine is a gesture of compassion for Jesus, to help with his thirst and maybe slightly dull his pain. Hyssop was a medicinal plant, associated with cleansing, and also used in the original Passover - to spread lamb's blood on Jewish doorposts, as a sign of the households God was sparing from judgement on their Egyptian oppressors. The gospel of John associates Jesus with the Passover, particularly with the sacrificial lamb, again and again. More on that next week.
- For today, we simply remember that Jesus thirsted, and Jesus thirsts, with us. Jesus lived in solidarity with human suffering and victimization. Jesus experienced and identified with lack - lack of water to quench thirst, lack of food to sate hunger, lack of justice, lack of health, lack of resources, lack of dignity. Jesus still identifies powerfully with humans who lack most. When people suffer, that is not a sign of God's absence. It is where God will most reliably be found, in the shoes and on the side of people who suffer.

## **A Direction for Prayer**

For any family or friends who persistently suffer - be it from physical or mental sickness, from poverty or racism or trauma or grief or anything - pray that they will know God with them in compassion and love, glad to be with them in solidarity and in strength for liberation.

## **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

*Solidarity* – (1) Tell Jesus your greatest need you have today, knowing Jesus sees and feels your pain, is glad to be with you in it, and is strong enough to help. (2) If you know of someone in significant distress or need, send them a note to show them you see and feel their pain as well.

## Tuesday, March 24

“Christ Recrucified” by Countee Cullen

Today we offer to you a poem to supplement our Bible readings. The author was one of many poets associated with the Harlem Renaissance, a blossoming of powerful Black art and culture centered in Harlem in the 1920s. Before this series on the Cross, the Reservoir staff team studied James Cone’s remarkable book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, which examines the cross through the lens of African-American faith born of suffering under injustice and oppression.

Chapter 4 of Cone’s book, which you really must read, is titled “The Recrucified Christ in Black Literary Imagination” and is full of analysis of this and other poetry. All quotations in my points of interest are from this chapter by James Cone.

The South is crucifying Christ again  
By all the laws of ancient rote and rule:  
The ribald cries of “Save yourself” and “fool”  
Din in his ear, the thorns grope for his brain,  
And where they bite, swift springing rivers stain  
His gaudy, purple robe of ridicule  
With sullen red; and acid wine to cool  
His thirst is thrust at him, with lurking pain.  
Christ’s awful wrong is that he’s dark of hue,  
The sin for which no blamelessness atones;  
But lest the sameness of the cross should tire,  
They kill him now with famished tongues of fire,  
And while he burns, good men, and women too,  
Shout, battling for black and brittle bones.

### Points of Interest

- Cullen’s writing is a little old-fashioned in style and form. This poem is in a form called a sonnet - 16 lines, made up of three four-line sections and a final couplet, following particular rules of rhythm and rhyme.
- “Like Countee Cullen, many black . . . artists saw clearly what white theologians and clergy ignored and what black religious scholars and ministers merely alluded to: that in the United States, the clearest image of the crucified Christ was the figure of an innocent black victim, dangling from a lynching tree.”
- In this country, you can’t approach Jesus on the cross in without examining this nation’s long legacy of the oppression and murder of innocent black bodies.
- “Christ, poetically and religiously, was symbolically the first lynchee.”
- “Christians follow a crucified Savior. What could pose a more blatant contradiction to such a religion than lynching? And yet White Christians were silent in the face of this contradiction.”
- While White people have stigmatized, marginalized, and brutalized Black people, there is the irony of supposedly “good men, and women too” who cheer on and profit, whether

these be the crowds who came out to watch public lynchings in the early 20th century, the voters and legislators and companies who pursued America's War on Drugs and mass incarceration of Black men from the 1970s through the present, or the suburban residents of the past and present or the new urban residents of today's gentrification who label and avoid Black neighborhoods and structurally exclude most Black and brown people from their prosperity.

- The religious poetry of the Harlem renaissance joins Jesus on the cross and the weight of scripture in telling us that Jesus Christ is to be found in solidarity with human suffering, and on the side of human liberation.

### **A Direction for Prayer**

Think of some way that your city or region has long excluded or marginalized Black Americans. Ask yourself where Jesus' sympathies might be strongest here. Pray that many people, perhaps including yourself, will actively join Jesus in the struggle for liberation.

### **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

*Solidarity* – (1) Tell Jesus your greatest need you have today, knowing Jesus sees and feels your pain, is glad to be with you in it, and is strong enough to help. (2) If you know of someone in significant distress or need, send them a note to show them you see and feel their pain as well.

## Wednesday, March 25

### Psalm 69:19-36 (NRSV)

<sup>19</sup> You know the insults I receive,  
and my shame and dishonor;  
my foes are all known to you.  
<sup>20</sup> Insults have broken my heart,  
so that I am in despair.  
I looked for pity, but there was none;  
and for comforters, but I found none.  
<sup>21</sup> They gave me poison for food,  
and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.  
<sup>22</sup> Let their table be a trap for them,  
a snare for their allies.  
<sup>23</sup> Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and make their loins tremble continually.  
<sup>24</sup> Pour out your indignation upon them,  
and let your burning anger overtake them.  
<sup>25</sup> May their camp be a desolation;  
let no one live in their tents.  
<sup>26</sup> For they persecute those whom you have struck down,  
and those whom you have wounded, they attack still more.  
<sup>27</sup> Add guilt to their guilt;  
may they have no acquittal from you.  
<sup>28</sup> Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;  
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.  
<sup>29</sup> But I am lowly and in pain;  
let your salvation, O God, protect me.  
<sup>30</sup> I will praise the name of God with a song;  
I will magnify him with thanksgiving.  
<sup>31</sup> This will please the Lord more than an ox  
or a bull with horns and hoofs.  
<sup>32</sup> Let the oppressed see it and be glad;  
you who seek God, let your hearts revive.  
<sup>33</sup> For the Lord hears the needy,  
and does not despise his own that are in bonds.  
<sup>34</sup> Let heaven and earth praise him,  
the seas and everything that moves in them.  
<sup>35</sup> For God will save Zion  
and rebuild the cities of Judah;  
and his servants shall live there and possess it;  
<sup>36</sup> the children of his servants shall inherit it,  
and those who love his name shall live in it.

### Points of Interest

- For Bible readers across the centuries, Jesus' thirst has brought this psalm of lament to mind.
- In psalms of lament, people put words and poetry and music to experiences of hunger, thirst, anger, suffering, and everything that is hard and unfair in the world. Laments don't

hold back all the range of emotional and spiritual turmoil. Real enemies - not scapegoats - are named and blamed; we are free to pray for their comeuppance, that they'll stop being able to do harm and finally get what they deserve. Psalms of lament even give us permission to blame God, to question God, to get angry with God, and to ask God to do something.

- Psalms of lament aren't theological textbooks. They don't tell us how to accurately diagnose and analyse God's role in suffering. But they are psychological liberators - they give us freedom and encouragement to feel and speak. And they teach us about theological geography - they tell us that God is with the victimized and hurt, never with those that harm or prophet off of others' suffering.
- God "hears the needy and does not despise his own who are in bonds." God is very much not like most people in this regard. How do you see and relate to people who are much poorer than you? Who are profoundly disabled? Who are addicted? Who are in prison? Who collect unemployment or disability funds? Who wait at the borders of this country? These are God's special friends. God has profound empathy for them, and takes their side in a dispute. Sometimes, depending on your life experience and social location, this will greatly comfort us. Sometimes, this will and should greatly trouble us.
- Sometimes God's kids who suffer have to take the long view - hoping for their own freedom and redemption (the servants in the final verse who rebuild and flourish after loss) and sometimes hoping that the next generation will find the flourishing that they didn't (the children who inherit God's good turn around).

## **A Direction for Prayer**

Pray for your church, that you and every other person there will grow into more of God's empathy for and solidarity with the poorest, most disabled, most addicted, most imprisoned residents of our communities and region and world.

## **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

*Solidarity* – (1) Tell Jesus your greatest need you have today, knowing Jesus sees and feels your pain, is glad to be with you in it, and is strong enough to help. (2) If you know of someone in significant distress or need, send them a note to show them you see and feel their pain as well.

## Thursday, March 26

### Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV)

<sup>31</sup> "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' <sup>41</sup> Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

### Points of Interest

- Jesus told this story to crowds in Jerusalem, just days before his arrest and crucifixion.
- Many people have read this story as a tale of heaven and hell, and who goes where. I think that's a mistake. This is a parable - a little fictional story using common language and ideas of the day, with a big twist meant to provoke and make a point. Jesus' contemporaries assumed some form of post-mortem punishment and rewards. Jesus takes those assumptions but says something surprising with them. This is not a treatise on heaven or hell or anything else about the afterlife - those are all mentioned briefly for shock value.
- I've mainly read and even taught this parable as a call to compassion action and social justice. Jesus wants us to do good for those that are hungry and thirsty and those who are outsiders or poor or sick or imprisoned. That moral reading is not a bad reading, but it's not the only thing Jesus is saying, maybe not the main thing Jesus is saying either.
- The most profound and surprising thing Jesus says isn't about what *we* should *do* but about who and where *he is*. Jesus is with the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the stranger (which means the outcast or the foreigner), the imprisoned. Jesus is the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the stranger, the imprisoned.

- Father Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy industries, writes powerfully about Jesus' solidarity. He teaches us that those on the margins are our most reliable spiritual guides. He reminds us that Jesus didn't most preach radical charity or do-gooder-ism or service. Jesus taught radical solidarity, radical kinship.
- The prisoner is my brother. The hungry one is my sister. The outcast is my Savior. The sick one is Jesus. If this radical change of mindset results in service or giving that respects the dignity and actual needs of others, that's great. But it's a call not just to service, but to a real change of mindset, and to radical relationship, humble learning, and deep advocacy.
- In other words, when we think of or seek to relate to those whose needs are larger than ours, we don't first ask: what do I have to give, and how can I serve? We can first ask: how can I learn? How can I see Jesus? What relationship from me would most honor Jesus' presence with them?

### **A Direction for Prayer**

Who in your circle of family and friends is most hungry or thirsty or sick or imprisoned or estranged? Pray for God's compassionate love to be theirs today. Also ask yourself: what if, in my whole circle of family and friends, Jesus is most with this person? How does that change my view of them? How can they and I experience more kinship?

### **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

*Solidarity* – (1) Tell Jesus your greatest need you have today, knowing Jesus sees and feels your pain, is glad to be with you in it, and is strong enough to help. (2) If you know of someone in significant distress or need, send them a note to show them you see and feel their pain as well.

## Friday, March 27

### Hebrews 2:14-18 (NRSV)

<sup>14</sup> Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup> and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. <sup>16</sup> For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. <sup>17</sup> Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

### Points of Interest

- “The children” here are God’s whole big human family, which includes Jesus, and you and me, and loads of people that we all love and despise. Jesus shares our flesh and blood, and we are to share Jesus’ victory over death and fear.
- That Jesus is for the help of the “descendants of Abraham” is not a tribal comment or one of religious favoritism. Jews, Christians, and Muslims can all make some reasonable theological claim to be children of Abraham, even if they wouldn’t all agree on this. I think this is meant to be inclusive of all people who are reaching toward God in faith, however best they understand God today.
- For Jesus to connect us with God - to be our faithful priest - Jesus felt he had to become like us in every way. For Jesus, solidarity precedes service. Connection comes before charity. You can’t help people you don’t side with, love, know, and understand. True for God, true for people and organizations too.
- We’ll talk most about Jesus as sacrifice next week, but for now let’s note that however Jesus helped us become one with God, it is first about being one with us.
- Jesus’ sacrifice here isn’t connected with one-time punishment as much as ongoing solidarity, empathy, and help. This is not how most of us understand sacrifice. The book of Hebrews reframes and upends most human notions of sacrifice and scapegoating.
- On a practical level, it might be more helpful to think about and pray to Jesus not as a far-off messenger of a far-off God, but as your favorite family member. Who knows you best? Who loves you most? Who has walked in your shoes most intimately, asking the best questions, listening the most, really getting you? That would be Jesus. Not just for you, or for me, but for all of us.

## **A Direction for Prayer**

Pray for any children and youth among your family and friends, that they would know Jesus walks in their shoes, really getting them. Pray as well that each of them would have at least one adult who does this as well - who shows them what Jesus is like by listening with them and connecting with humble empathy and great listening ears.

## **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

*Solidarity* – (1) Tell Jesus your greatest need you have today, knowing Jesus sees and feels your pain, is glad to be with you in it, and is strong enough to help. (2) If you know of someone in significant distress or need, send them a note to show them you see and feel their pain as well.