

SYMBOLS OF THE PASSION (by Mike Claridge)

Symbols of the Passion



Five Meditations for Holy Week

Mike Claridge

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Author's Notes

I've used Symbols of the Passion on several occasions in Holy Week. It's ideal to use, interspersed with hymns and prayers, as The Last Hour Devotion on Good Friday. It can also be used as a reflective service on Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday.

Symbols of the Passion can be enhanced by using visual props. If you have a projection system a simple internet search will doubtless provide suitable images for each of the meditations. Alternatively use real objects, placed on a centrally placed table, in silence, prior to each reflection.

If you use this feel free to me know how it went.

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1. The Meal

Just an ordinary meal. In an ordinary room. With ordinary friends.

You did what every Jew was called to do that night – and that night in every year.

With family or with friends.

With actions and words as old as faith itself.

With lamb and herbs, with bread and wine, you celebrated the Passover feast.

It's meaning clear despite the mists of time.

It's message always new despite the passing years.

In bread and wine the freedom of your people, though still oppressed, is brought alive again.

From slavery to freedom, in ancient times, you people journeyed over water and desert.

Once slaves, then free, now oppressed again.

You needed the meal. The meal of freedom, thanksgiving and hope.

But this time your words were different, your actions changed.

Taking bread and wine you said,

“This is my body, and this is my blood.

This night I give you myself to set you free from all that is wrong”.

An extraordinary claim.

An extraordinary promise.

Plain bread and cheap wine given such meaning and shared with your friends.

Your eyes met theirs, and in them they saw such love, deep love, an all giving love.

To set them free, somehow, someday?

How you must grieve.

Your simple act with bread and wine has become so complicated.

A meal of freedom, an act of giving,

now bound in rules by the people who claim your name.

You made us free, but we restrict who can come to your table.

You called us to be one, but we have made bread and wine a source of division.

You accepted the outcast, but we only accept those who play by our rules.

When will we see that you, in bread and wine can set us free.

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2. The Whip

The humiliation.

Bound helpless to the stone cold pillar of the guardhouse.

Naked before your torturers.

A whip does its cruellest work.

A whip used for the dogs detested by Romans.

Now used to humiliate a detested man, but a man they hardly know.

How the night had changed.

Arrested as night fell by the hired thugs of the regime.

Betrayed by a friend, and abandoned by others.

Taken to the torturers.

Alone - but in the midst of those who persecuted you.

The foul language of the torturers couldn't hurt you, you'd heard it all before.

But the blows were hard to take.

Fists and sticks beating against your body.

And the whip tearing flesh and biting to the bone.

A cruel instrument of lead tipped cords.

Wielded by someone who knows his trade – his brutal trade.

Passed from man to man throughout the long dark night.

Those who you had challenged now reeked their revenge.

Rulers and religious leaders, foreigner and Jew.

Not knowing what to do with you, but fearing.

Deeply fearing.

Fearing your people who might riot in your cause if you were freed.

Fearing your people who might riot in your cause if you were condemned.

What to do? Who to do it?

They washed their hands and passed you on.

To find a way out, the people must condemn, your people compelled by force of arms.

Everyone fears the threat of violence.

Threats to their family by those who come with clubs and swords.

The people came, they had no choice if those at home are to be spared.

They did as the thugs demanded.

Crucify you?

If that is what they want.

With tears in their eyes their voices signed your death warrant.

You saw them, you loved them.

Hard as it was you knew you must die for them.

Their freedom could be won at a price.

You were that price.

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3. The Crown

Who had called you King?

The expectation of a nation had focussed on you, not of your choice, at least not at first.
Everyone expected a leader, expected their leader.

Someone to push their agenda,
someone to support their ideals,
someone to underwrite their greed.

They had looked for a King – you would do, you would do.

Politicians wanted a figurehead.
A symbol of the nation,
a rallying point to provoke nationalistic fervour against a foreign power,
fervour they could harness for their own aims.

Priests wanted a man who would tow the line.
God's line – but invented by them, not God.
A man of ritual - but not a man close to God in prayer.
A man of sound teaching – but not of compassion.
A man like them with a heart of stone – when God should be a spring of life.

You - a focus of so much expectation.
You - a Jewish carpenter and part time teacher of Israel.
You – who the already powerful wanted to call a King.

But what of those who could not voice their hopes?
The Jew trod underfoot by occupying powers and ripped off by their religious leaders.
The foreigner looked down on by authority
and looked on with suspicion by those they lived among.
For them – for both ordinary Jew and outsider – for them you would be King.

You claimed your throne as you entered Jerusalem.

Scripture had promised that the king would enter riding on a donkey – who are you to disappoint.
You the agitator, revolutionary, heretic, even blasphemous.

The people to whom you wanted to be king greeted you with hosannas.

But your coronation was in other hands and already they were crafting the crown.

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4. The Cross

Stark wood.

Stripped of foliage.

Twisted and gnarled.

Useless for a carpenter's trade.

Useful for a carpenter's death.

Harvests of olives had been taken from its boughs.

It had borne the fruit of new life, the oil of gladness, the black gold of the day.

Now it's fruitful days had gone.

Its bough cut back to rootstock where, in time, new life would spring.

But this old wood can be cast away useful just for the fire – except perhaps....

The Roman guard had taken it from the firewood stock as day was breaking.

They knew where it could be found.

They had used it often enough.

A piece to take a man's weight was all they needed, the olive bough would do.

Strapped to the back of the prisoner.

The rough bark rubbing the bloodied wounds.

His arms strapped to the boughs length.

You struggled under it's weight,

you a man of strength,

a working man,

but weakened by a night of torture.

You fell.

You fell again.

For a while another took your burden – a Simon.

Not your Simon though, he was long gone weeping into the night.

Now the end was in sight.

Through the gates out of the city you glimpsed your destiny.

A bare mound in the midst of the city's rubbish dump.

Not a Green Hill as some would one day sing,

but a stinking foetid place where dogs and flies abound.

Here they laid you.

Ready for the bough that bore you to be hoisted high on the stake.

Maybe they couldn't trust the ropes to hold you

Maybe they wanted to inflict still more pain.

Your hands now to be pierced.

Your blood to soak into the olive wood, death would stain the wood of healing.

Your hour had come.

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5. Nails

From childhood you knew about nails.

They were always around in the carpenters workshop.

Daggers of iron;
glistening when new,
the colour of earth when old.

Instruments of building.
Instruments to bring together pieces of timber.
Instruments to fashion usefulness from raw materials.

But you grew to know that nails were only crude.

Nails were not your crafted joints of a skilled carpenter,
seamlessly binding oak and ash.

Nails were instruments for a quick fix in times of need
best used out of sight where eye cannot see.

Now nails were to be seen in all their crudeness.

A skilled carpenter will be tortured by the crudest items of his trade.

These soldiers do not know how to build, only to destroy.
Destroy a life that has grown to adulthood
surrounded by the very instruments that will be used in his death.

Joints shattered like timber in the hands of a clumsy new apprentice.
But not now joints wood,
now joints flesh and bone.

Crunching as the daggers of iron drive through.

Nails,
some glistening new,
some earth brown,
all turning crimson.

Not out of sight these nails.

Theirs was work intended for all to see.
Lifted high above the crowd.

Not a temporary fix these nails.

Theirs was work intended as to be as permanent as death itself.