Chichester Cathedral Triduum 2019
Good Friday Meditations

1. Humiliation

The Robing of Christ, 1922

The 'Robing of Christ' was part of a series of four panels that would feature beneath a larger painting –*The Betrayal*- which Spencer worked on whilst living in Petersfield in 1922. We see Christ, blindfolded, being roughly handled by Herod's soldiers who might easily be confused with demons, as he awkwardly tries to be dressed as king with robes more familiar to our own royal family than that of Judaea under Roman occupation. Christ's face is hidden, almost erased, as the faceless soldiers twist him into this dance of death.

Here we see the beginning of the humiliation of God in Jesus Christ. As we approach what St John in his Gospel referred as 'the glorification of the Son of God', to us it appears anything but. Here we see the hopes of Israel, the longed-for Messiah, the one whom the disciples anticipated would turn the Roman Empire upside down and bring liberation to God's people – this very same Master, Teacher, and Friend is now tumbling into the mockery and insults of the people. He who can see into the hearts of all is now blindfolded even as he becomes the victim of our blind rage and desire to thrust truth and love down to the ground.

This humiliation horrifies us and this painting at least might remind us of how Western soldiers in recent history have similarly treated prisoners in their care. The almost playful dance that Spencer portrays here grimly reminds us of how, in Abu Ghraib, the humiliation of Iraqis was treated as something of a game.

It's a deeply unsettling place in which to start our reflections on this Good Friday, but this horror is something long advised for us to ponder down the ages by Christian teachers; it gives us important clues as to what will follow. Francis de Sales in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* from 1609 tells the student Philothea to meditate upon Christ 'stripped, blasphemed…and overwhelmed with every kind of trouble, sorrow and affliction' (*Introduction,* 3.3). In this he follows the tradition of the fourteenth-century Rhineland mystic, Johannes Tauler, who in his *Meditations* encouraged his readers to visualize Christ's humiliation and sufferings:

O mirror of divine brightness, purify my inward eyes, that they may be made fit to contemplate Thee. For it was for this that Thy loving face was made foul with spittle and blood, and was buffeted and smitten.

Ponder that for a moment: our eyes are purified, are made fit to see God as we look upon his face made foul. How peculiar that sounds, if not scandalous. For the Christian, Tauler says, we can only learn to see God and ourselves aright by forcing ourselves to gaze upon this act of horror and humiliation.

This goes right to the heart of what we ponder today: rather than viewing human life and religious devotion to be about furthering our own happiness, about doing the right things that we may be justly rewarded and find blessing, this picture presents the total opposite. Far from receiving the crown of our devotion, the Son of God is thrust to the ground, ground back into the soil from which we are made: kicked, spat at, mocked and derided, God receives nothing but our contempt. And just as humans find peace in their social groups through the victimisation of others, so it's also telling that Herod and Pilate become friends this very day.

We who stand on the edge of this scene, we who yearn for power, for ambition, for wealth and the admiration of others are confronted with a stark and disruptive sight. It is the pursuit of all these things that have brought Christ to this moment. Christ robed and disrobed, stripped and mocked, tells us that all our games are worthless, for what can it mean that the God who humbles himself should be met by our humiliation of Him?

This image and those which follow remind us that, ultimately, our religion can never stay long in the realm of razzle-dazzle, of self-promotion or commercial appeal – for ultimately, we *are* these dancing soldiers who, as T.S. Eliot wrote in *Burnt Norton* are 'Distracted from distraction by distraction/Filled with fancies and empty of meaning/Tumid apathy with no concentration/Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind/That blows before and after time'.

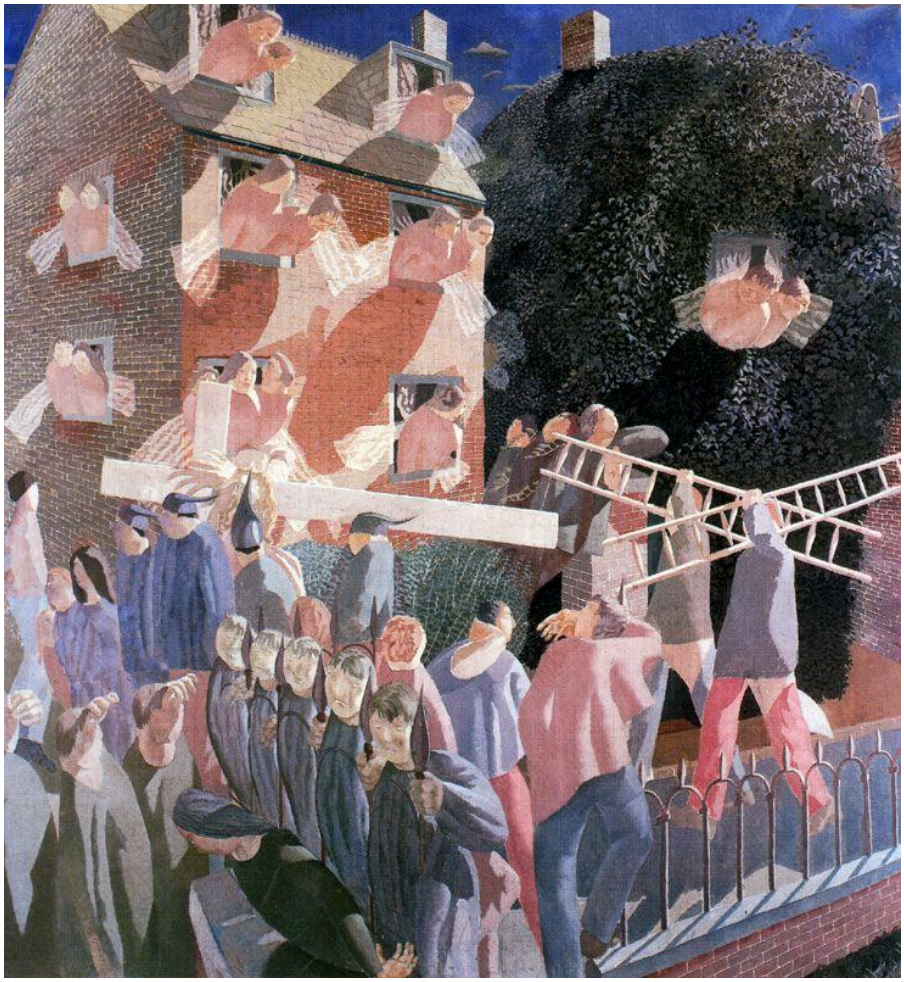
And yet here is the hinge upon which the whole of today turns: that, as Paul wrote to the Philippians in what must be one of the earliest of the hymns of the Church,

He 'who was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (Philippians 2.6-8).

As we gaze upon this humiliation, this death, this *sacrifice,* we see the beginnings of a new world in which all the structures that we thought gave us meaning begin to crack. Even we as scourge, laugh and mock, God in His wisdom and love, is forming a new creation, a new Adam from the dust into which we grind our Lord's face.

As we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews, 'Jesus also suffered *outside* the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him *outside* the camp, and bear the abuse he endured.' (Hebrews 13.12-13).

2. Exile
Christ Carrying the Cross, 1922



Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matthew 16.24)

In our last meditation, we pondered those words from the epistle to the Hebrews, that Jesus suffered *outside the gate* in order to make holy the people through his own blood. Curiously, the author urges us, the reader, to follow him and enter into the way of the cross, even to bear the abuse that he endured. This, of course, echoes our Lord's own advice to his own that if they really want to be his disciples, they must deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him.

Both verses, at first hearing, seem daunting, if not masochistic. And yet now we are presented with this busy scene by Spencer as, in the middle of a crowded Cookham High Street, Christ carries the cross. The title of the painting echoes that of El Greco's soulful vision of Christ with the cross from 1580, but this one seems oddly free of pain. Christ carries his burden almost as lightly as the local carpenters who join him on this procession, as women press their faces against the railings and

those leaning out the windows seem to have gained angel-wings. And yet, as with many of Spencer's paintings, what seems light and airy contains within it suggestions of menace and violence: look at the hooded characters and are those railings, in fact, spears?

The Tate Gallery initially entitled the painting 'Christ Bearing the Cross', which infuriated Spencer. As he wrote, it brought

A sense of suffering which was not my intention. I particularly wished to convey the relationship between the carpenters behind him carrying the ladders and Christ in front carrying the cross. Each doing their job of work and doing it just like workmen . . . Christ was not doing a job or his job, but the job.

Spencer was trying to convey that each one of us has to carry our cross in our everyday life: as everyday as an English village high street, the invitation to deny ourselves, to let go of our own ambitions and desires, and to hand ourselves over to forces beyond our own control. It's even hinted in the carpenters who follow Jesus as their own ladders form a cross.

Thomas Merton, one of the greatest spiritual writers of the twentieth century, wrote about how each one of us has our own 'salvation project'. Like those who built the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, we seek to 'make a name for ourselves' – we set about our salvation projects, building our own towers that we believe will bring us safety, respect and meaning.
I don't necessarily mean here a job; I was sat in a pub in Alfriston recently listening to two elderly ladies having a very competitive conversation about who cooked the tastiest and healthiest dishes. Similarly, social media is rife with people seeking to 'make a name for themselves' as they strain to be seen, admired and liked: it's the perfect platform for our salvation projects. In the hubbub and noise of our own society, hyper-connected and relentlessly competitive, this man walks through carrying a cross, carrying it to a hill outside the city walls.

For the first disciples, to have heard Jesus' words 'take up your cross' meant accepting that you were going to die like a slave, that the future will be taken out of your hands, that you too are being invited to share that humiliation which comes from seeing your own 'salvation project' crumble before you. The invitation is to let go. Let go of believing that you are fully in charge of your life, that what matters isn't 'making a name for yourself' but by stepping into a river which will take us places we know not where.

Think of that glorious vision of the prophet Ezekiel (in the forty-seventh chapter of his prophecy), of a river gushing forth from a normally arid Jerusalem, from the Temple – the Temple, which had been comprehensively destroyed by the

Babylonians. In this vision, Ezekiel is invited to step into the river. First, he's ankle-deep, then he's knee-deep, then up to his wait, until finally he cannot touch the river-floor. This fresh-water river, swarming with life, brimming with promise and watering trees, we are told, "will serve for food and their leaves for healing' (Ezekiel 47.12). For the Christian, this new Temple is Christ himself, whose body is to be torn down and rebuilt in three days (John 2.19). 'To take up our cross' is to be invited to wade into this river of life, until that point that we lose control, until such time as our feet no longer touch the ground and we find ourselves swept along into a new reality, a new world in which healing can be plucked from trees on the river-edge. "To the thirsty," Jesus says in Revelation, "I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life." (Revelation 21.6)

This is the invitation to the disciples and to us. Not to try and capture God with our religiosity which, as Jesus regularly reminds the Pharisees can be its own 'salvation project': rather, we must be undone, even humiliated, as we let ourselves step into the stream of Jesus Christ: a stream in which my neighbour takes priority; in which I find myself in you, and you in me; into this world "in which I discover I am loved for no reason other than that I am and in which I love for no reason other than there is another who needs my love." (George Pattison, *The Phenomenology of a Devout Life,* 155).

To take this path is, like Abraham hearing God's call in the aftermath of Babel, to let go of your past and be uncertain of your future, a life resting entirely upon the faithfulness and goodness of God. This is an invitation, as Spencer sought to show, that's offered as much to the carpenter as it is to the Messiah.

And yet Christ goes, as Spencer notes, to undertake not 'a job, but *the* job' – to conquer the power of Sin and Death that we no longer *need* to secure our salvation, but only to discover that by this exile, outside the city wall, outside our towers of salvation, Love will be victorious – that we *can* let go and discover in the strange everyday that 'In my beginning is my end'. As Eliot wrote with such poignancy in *East Coker,* life will be found in loss:

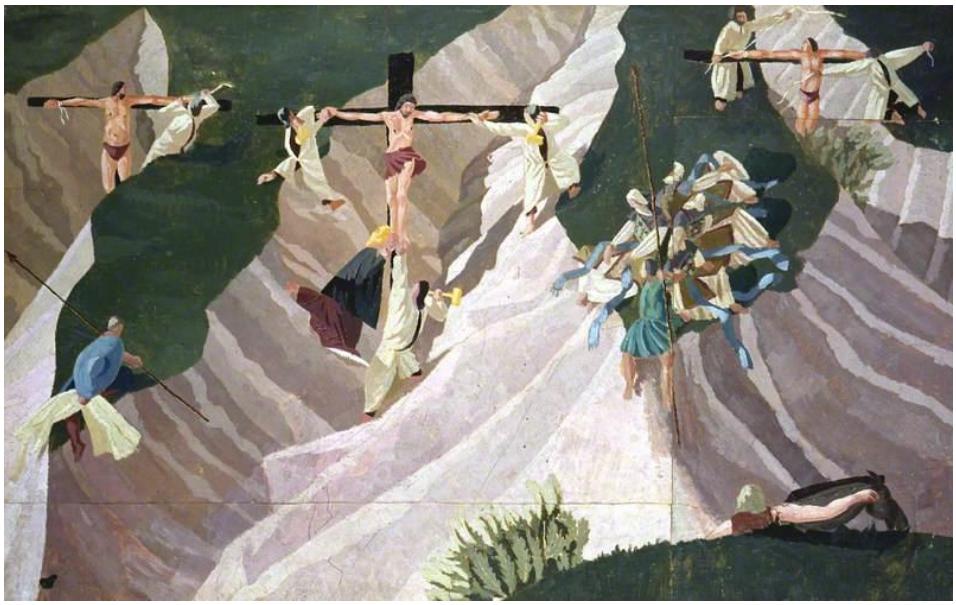
> In order to arrive there,
> To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
> You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
> In order to arrive at what you do not know
> You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
> In order to possess what you do not possess
> You must go by the way of dispossession.
> In order to arrive at what you are not
> You must go through the way in which you are not.

And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11.28-30)

3. Sacrifice

The Crucifixion, 1921



In our last meditation, I invited us not to be afraid of following Christ out of the city, into the unknown, where our sense of control will be lost, where our 'salvation projects' will crumble, and where – like our Lord – we may even face the world's ridicule and humiliation.

Here, now, having done so, we have stumbled over a hill and join a man, tending a donkey, looking out across what seems like a desolate landscape. Three figures, strung up on crosses in three ravines. Again, as in Cookham, those who surround Jesus and do the bidding of the Roman empire look more like angels than operatives of cruel murder. There is no hint of pain or agony. Quite unlike the crucifixions of the Renaissance – think of Grünewald's Issenheim alterpiece, for instance – there's no savagery, but rather an odd stillness, peace, a wintry light. The scarves of the onlookers flap in the wind and a soldier rests with a degree of tranquillity on Christ's right. How different, you might notice, from crucifixions painted by Graham Sutherland or Francis Bacon after the Second World War, or even David Jones after the First.

What are we to make of it? In the aftermath of the Great War, many found Spencer's incorporation of the biblical into the everyday awkward, conflicting with their own sense that the world had changed irrevocably and to suggest otherwise was naïve, if not offensive. Such whimsy in some of Spencer's weaker paintings led Wyndham Lewis to comment acerbically, that 'even his angels wear jumpers'. In this Crucifixion, unlike the other paintings we've seen so far, there's not the same

sense of crisis on the horizon or violence lurking in the pastoral undergrowth. Has it all gone a bit schmaltzy?

It's hard for us to grasp just how horrific a crucifixion would have been, we for whom death is now largely hidden. The savagery and cruelty were astonishing, so much so that as Martin Hengel writes, "the Roman world was largely unanimous that crucifixion was a horrific, disgusting business...The relative scarcity of references to crucifixions in antiquity are less a *historical* problem than an *aesthetic* one...Crucifixion was widespread and frequent, above all in Roman times, but the cultured literary world wanted to have nothing to do with it, and as a rule kept quiet about it." (Hengel, *Crucifixion,* 38). This was a scene to be shunned and shunned because, not just for the sheer horror of the suffering involved, but because this was a suffering that degraded. Crucifixion piles shame upon shame as it dehumanizes the victim, and for a Jew brought particular shame by publicly exposing the criminal's nakedness. Melito of Sardis in the second century wrote: "The Sovereign has been made unrecognizable by his naked body, and is not even allowed a garment to keep him from view. That is why the lights of heaven turned away and the day was darkened." (quoted in Morna Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, 1994, 9-10)). It's precisely this sense of *shame* that defines the cross. This is a shame that declares the King of Glory to be worthless and degraded. As Marilyn McCord Adams wrote, "On the cross, Jesus takes our defilement to the third degree. For crucifixion is not (like the right slit to the throat) a *clean* death. The Isenheim Altarpiece draws a vivid and realistic picture of how – in killing – crucifixion caricatures humanity, twists the body, wrecks psycho-spiritual balance, and does its best not only to blemish but to degrade." (*Horrendous Evils,* 98).

This is a place of godlessness, where humanity has been degraded. How striking then that the first Christians immediately saw it also as a place of sacrifice. For St Paul, crucial to understanding what happens on the cross is the verse from Deuteronomy 21 that 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree' (Deuteronomy 21:23b). For St Paul, each of us is cursed by our failure to meet the demands of the Law, but the Son of God – the righteous one - delivers us: in Galatians, Paul speaks of how Jesus upon himself takes the full force of the curse for us (Galatians 3.13) on the cross. As one of the criminals puts it, "we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' The Lord becomes the full, final and perfect sacrifice allowing us now stand before God defined *not* by shame, not by humiliation, not by twisted bodies inverted by sin but purely in Him who is our representative: who breathes upon us the freedom of the Spirit.

For some, this narrative might suggest that God is nothing but a monstrous father, allowing his own son to be cursed and abandoned. But remember always that we are speaking of the Trinity, of the Son and the Father together, by the power of the

Spirit, as God in Jesus allows himself, as Fleming Rutledge neatly puts it, 'to become less-than-human scum' (Fleming Rutledge). Bonhoeffer also uses stark language, in this blemished, degraded and humanized body 'God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the Cross." (*Cost of Discipleship,* 98) that we may be with him in Paradise.

Our eyes return again to this curiously peaceful sight of the crucifixion. Spencer paints this scene not in the Berkshire Downs but in Yugoslavia, where only several years earlier he'd been serving as a soldier in the Salonika campaign. This crucifixion, as serene as it seems, is in fact pictured in what only very recently had been a landscape of trauma, brutality and fear – into valleys which seem, upon second inspection, like wounds themselves. Maybe, in his own way, the degradation of humanity that Spencer saw on the front line now finds itself framed by the serenity of the cross, by that peace which has been won for us by the self-offering of Christ.

Here, not just humiliation, not just loss, but also shame finds itself turned upside down by the God who humbles himself, who allowed himself to become powerless and absorb *our* shame – our curse - in his body on the tree.

What will mean for *us* to die to the old world? For all of us, who in Paul's words, 'have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death' (Romans 6.3). How do we identify with those who suffer 'outside the camp', in the words of Hebrews (13.13)? – God has won for us a victory through self-giving love and, like him, we discover in our weakness, strength. We boast only in the foolishness of the Cross – that power, victory and triumph must come through our identifying with the shamed, society's losers and in sacrificing ourselves that others may live. For to do so is to identify with the God who has revealed himself to us, in all his glory, in this broken body on the tree.

We stand on the brow of the hill, looking across with that horseman. Will we walk on? Or will we wait awhile, transfixed by the peace in the agony:

Thy beauty, long-desirèd,
hath vanished from our sight;
thy power is all expired,
and quenched the light of light.
Ah me! for whom thou diest,
hide not so far thy grace:
show me, O Love most highest,
the brightness of thy face.

LITURGY OF THE PASSION
HOMILY

'It is finished'

'What are you looking for?' We so often on Good Friday ponder the last words of Jesus that perhaps we miss the importance of his first. *What are you looking for?* Words Jesus addresses to disciples as they start following him beside the sea of Galilee (John 1.38). Little could those disciples have known what it would mean to follow their teacher then; little could they have known, let alone have understood, the path he would eventually take, the path to Gologtha to be strung up, brutally murdered, the victim of human fear, jealousy, and lust for power. 'What are you looking for?'

At the beginning of the Last Supper, we're told by John that Jesus 'having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to perfection'. When Jesus cries out on the cross 'it is finished', the Greek literally means 'it is perfected'! This, John is signifying to us, this is the perfection of love. This tortured, battered, whipped and degraded body – a man abandoned by his people, by all save a few of his disciples – this, John outrageously claims *is* the fulfilment of all God's purposes: the Word made flesh who came to his own and his own did not recognize him.

What are you looking for? Why are you here? What does this horrific form of state execution have to do with your deepest desires, your deepest longings in life? *What are you looking for?*

To answer that question is one which takes a good deal of courage. Many, if not all of us, when asked the question will end up looking into parts of our hearts and examining such experiences that expressing our desires for the future will inevitably be tinged by our past. Perhaps it's grief, a chronic illness, a broken relationship, an addiction that wastes us or a failure that haunts us – to answer this question will mean, as it did for those first disciples that we must confront parts of our lives which seem irreducibly meaningless. Someone very dear to me still lives with the death of her son in such way that to answer the question 'what are you looking for' then seems almost too hard to answer, freighted as it with so much memory she seems to fall swiftly in scepticism or, worse, cynicism.

And yet this *is* the foolishness of which St Paul spoke with such passion: that the purposes of God in Creation have found their perfection on the Cross. This is not to say that Christ somehow performs a miracle here that sweeps all this away. Nor does this execution tell us that pain and suffering are themselves good. But what it does say is that God did not stand afar off.

The same God who, in Jesus, stares piercingly into his disciples' eyes and asks 'what are you looking for' now looks upon us with the same love from the Cross: a gaze tells us that not even horrific rejection and shame, all our own failures and humiliations, even the ultimate vehicle of meaningless - death itself – can now separate us from God's love.

When we venerate the Cross now, we are saying by our bodily action as much as in the words we speak that, in all the mess and pain of our lives; in all the confusion and anxiety of our age; in all that seems ultimately meaningless, Love has conquered. We do not need to fear when asked 'what are you looking for', but only in the shadow of the Cross to hold tight and hope: and not hope that's pie-in-the-sky but a hope that, here and now, even in the valley of shadow of death, God *has* gone before us.

This scandalous, violent death has become for us a victory: the gates of hell have been stormed; God's judgment has been executed upon Sin and Death; the disobedience of Adam has been overtaken by the obedience of Christ; Satan is defeated.

Brothers and sisters, it *is* finished: again, what are *you* looking for?