**Journeying with Jesus. Edited by Lucy Russell**

**The First Station: Jesus is condemned to death**

(Chris Bain, Director of CAFOD)

The condemnation by the Sanhedrin seems a formality. On the face of it, Jesus’ answers to the priests, to Herod and to Pilate were cool and measured. But we know that, aware of his fate, the human Jesus had spent an agonising vigil the previous night at Gethsemene, seating blood. He had suffered beatings and humiliation. Most damningly, he was betrayed by those he loved, and who had said they loved him.

The thing is, it was love in the dock; the love that was Jesus, forgave sinners, said that we must turn the other cheek, wanted the rich to give up their wealth, said we were all equal, spoke familiarly to women, and empowered the poor. He said that what we did to the least of his brothers we did to him; that the most important commandment was love.

This love in uncomfortable, unacceptable, unrealistic, naive. It is too costly; it breaks all our man-made rules.

More than a billion people today live on less than a pound a day; eight million people a year die before they are five of preventable and treatable disease. The love that is Jesus would be weeping. Pope John Paul II said that we see Christ’s face on every poor person in the world; yet still we allow the suffering.

We still condemn him to death.

*Jesus, we know what it’s like to feel abandoned, betrayed and afraid. Give us the gift of love so we can offer hope and love to those who face death through poverty or war. Amen.*

**The Second Station: Jesus takes up his cross**

(Peter Hitchens, columnist for the Mail on Sunday)

Jesus takes up his cross. But we do not follow his example, if we can avoid it. It is all very well to be reassured that, “Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake.” But in its twenty-first century form, this reviling does not feel blessed. It often just feels embarrassing, which is not especially ennobling. The power of soft persecution is sometimes greater than that of the old-fashioned hard kind. If someone tries to bully us out of our faith, then our pride may compel us to fight back. But if our enemies more subtly seek to make us look foolish, then we may well give in. We should be readier to understand that, just as Christ is so much greater than we are, our sacrifices and humiliations are bound to seem petty beside his.

But if we allow ourselves to be embarrassed out of our faith, then much worse will follow. And I believe it has done. The Churches have helped this to happen, by themselves being embarrassed by the things they are supposed to say. How many prayers are now about vague and fashionable political causes, which by espousing we do not alter? How many sermons never actually mention God, Christ or the Resurrection? And so we lay down our cross, and sidle apologetically away, mumbling that we didn’t really mean it – and it is just another normal day in Jerusalem.

**The Third Station: Jesus falls for the first time.**

(Paul Farmer, CEO of Mind)

Most people like to think of themselves as able to cope with the challenges that life throws at them. Most of us find a public exposure of our failings difficult to handle. We get embarrassed when we trip up on a step, or forget our lines in a presentation, or if we slip playing football, allowing the other side to score a goal.

This moment in Jesus’ journey, when he falls for the first time, is an immense test of his personal strength and resilience. His physical strength is tested - he’s carrying a heavy cross, a cross which will ultimately bear him in his last moments. But it’s his mental strength, his resilience, which is being tested the most. . He has already been humiliated in public, and is now on his journey, surrounded by a large, jeering, hostile crowd. His supporters have evaporated, afraid for their own safety. He is alone, isolated and beaten. His fall is not just one of physical exhaustion, but an expression of mental uncertainty, maybe for the first time.

However, Jesus has profound depths of resilience. He knows what he has to do and is determined to see it through. Whilst down, he perhaps thinks about his conversation with the Father in Gethsemene. His task is simple, to recover, get up and continue on his journey. He does this, doubtless to more jeers, and moves on. His physical strength is sapping, but his mental resolve is as great as ever.

For so many people, the first experiences and signs of a mental health problem are terrifying and incomprehensible. It’s unclear what is happening; tasks which previously were simple are now incredibly difficult. You find it difficult to work, sleep or eat properly. You just don’t understand what is happening to you, and that’s frightening. People around you start treating you differently, because you’re behaving differently; ‘he’s not the person he once was.’

And so the first fall for people is often a frightening moment. , but also a moment of realisation that something isn’t as it was. For people with a severe mental health problem, that can involve a hospital admission, but it’s more likely to be the moment when you go to the GP, that admission of a problem, or maybe tell your boss.

Like Jesus, though, the act of the fall – the moment of admission – is frailty, but it is also a source of strength. You still have some physical and emotional resilience; you can get back up and try again. You need help, but people want to help you. Perhaps now more than ever you are realising who you are and what you have to do to get back up.

*Lord, we ask you to give us the resilience to cope with the challenges of life; to recognise our own frailties, and seek your support to overcome them. Help us to be able to learn from our falls, and to be able to recover, stronger from the experience.*

**The Fourth Station: Jesus meets his mother.**

(Joel Edwards, Micah International against poverty)

She saw him coming up the hill and couldn’t believe her eyes. Her Son was bleeding, spat upon with a crown of thorns, carrying a cross. She stood there, the guiltiest woman in Jerusalem. But when their eyes met as he passed, it happened all over again; incomprehensible hope. It was easier to be pregnant with a Saviour than to give birth to an inscrutable Son.

Just for a moment, as the crowds closed in behind him, she wasn’t sure she had the strength to follow him to the Place of the Skull. Now, more than ever, she was still wondering why.

Through all the years, his words of wisdom and turning water into wine, Mary never really understood. But she had always hoped – even now.

It’s not just the bad news which defeats us. The mindless killing by a drunk driver, the discovery of a terminal illness, or the fact that our life partner just walked out, are all bad enough. Even the grand scale of injustices in our world which impales the poor and destroys their future is hard to handle. . But what really hurts is knowing why God allows it all and stands back to watch his own reputation pelted by cynicism. It makes it hard to follow him up the hill.

Our worst discomfort is not getting God.

But if Mary has anything redemptive to say to us it’s this: hope is probably at its very best in the presence of excruciating uncertainty.

**The Fifth Station: Simon of Cyrene carries the cross.**

(Danny McAlister, former director of high security, HMP)

It was definitely not the plan.

He had travelled nine hundred miles from Cyrenia, leaving his wife and two sons behind, to be in Jerusalem for the Passover: that was the plan.

His sandal trap had broken and he was on his way to have it mended; nine hundred miles, remember.

If only he had cut through past the baker’s, but he had decided to cut across the main drag as it was quicker. He knew there were often ‘crims’ being brought up to Golgotha to be executed: not his problem.

He was waiting to cross to the cobbler’s, aware that a procession to Golgotha was passing by: inconvenient.

He did not know if the prisoners passing were thieves, murders, rapists or just troublesome, but he knew where they were going: not his business.

He saw that one ‘crim’ was in a right state, kept falling down, staggering – he must have had a right hammering: it happens.

And then, and this he could well do without, he was pulled out of the crowd (why me?) and compelled to help the beat up bloke. Well, actually, the bloke was so done in he ended up carrying the whole cross while the bloke staggered on ahead: hold up.

With the weight lifted, the bloke could speak; he spoke to some women, but not to him, at least he didn’t think he had; anyway, he had his hands full: heavy thing this.

He was hacked off that by touching the cross he was defiled and would not be able to partake of Passover; what a liberty: nine e hundred miles, mind.

It’s never a convenient time and it’s rarely the plan. It is often a right pain and none of our business anyway. Cross carrying is rarely planned in the diary.

*Lord, let me carry the cross when it is inconvenient, unplanned, unwelcome, and I could well do without it.*

**The Sixth Station: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.**

(Ben Bano, producer of a DVD on dementia for Caritas)

I went to see Mum in her residential home last Sunday. She wasn’t able to recognise me, and thought I was my Dad. She is not aware that he died a few years ago. I tried so hard to communicate with her and reassure her. I came away from my visit upset that she had deteriorated so quickly – her dementia was only diagnosed three years ago. She spends a lot of time in bed, seemingly oblivious to what is going on around her. I know I need to understand that this is the course of Alzheimer’s disease, but it is so difficult to see her in this state.

Today after Mass I had a talk with our priest. He reminded me that, as Mum’s mental and physical faculties fail, she needs me and the rest of the family to help her hold on to her identity. We need to understand that Mum’s spiritual self is still intact – and we can nurture it with memories, prayers and hymns which have meant a lot to her during her life.

Mum gets easily upset. But this afternoon I took one of her favourite hymn books to her. We sung together one of the old Welsh hymns she had sung in her childhood. It was lovely to see how her eyes lit up. She gets great pleasure from receiving Communion each Sunday from one of our Eucharistic ministers.

Lord, I am here before you with Mum at my side. We are in her bedroom – on the walls are pictures of Dad and of special times for both of them. Help me to realise that she is still very precious in your eyes even as her mental and physical faculties fail.

In her weakened state, help me to see her as a gift to you and to us, a source of grace and inspiration to myself and out family.

I have wiped her face before I leave her today. Just as Veronica wiped her face as an act of love in your suffering, I give Mum this act of love – and I pray that she will be ever closer to you as her dementia advances.

**The Seventh Station: Jesus falls the second time.**

(Sheila Hollins, psychiatrist)

On my knees, beaten, no strength to go on, despite encouragement from those closest to me, I feel despair, it all feels pointless, why did I let myself get so tired? I rage against my aggressors and feel humiliated. If only I had anticipated what they would demand of me. If only I had been better prepared this wouldn’t have happened, and my weakness wouldn’t have been found out. But then it happens a second time.

And someone shows kindness to me, just a little thing – wiping my brow, offering me some water, helping me to my feet, and encouraging me. Hope restores my strength and I struggle on with my load lightened. Thank you whoever you are.

In my reflection on the seventh station, I see in Jesus both the vulnerability and the strengths of so many members of our community, and I also see my own struggles. It all depends on how you look at things. As you meditate on this station, I ask you too to reflect on any time when you felt vulnerable and on what helped you to overcome those feelings of weakness. Now think about two people you know who you see as dependent on others to protect them from the unkindness of life. Perhaps it’s the autistic woman worshipping in your parish, who everybody avoids after Mass because of her lack of friends and lack of social skill. Or the person with cerebral palsy who has been mugged more times than he can remember by youths who find it funny that he cannot fight back. But what about the young Mum who takes her seriously disabled child to playgroup and joins the other mothers in helping them to be comfortable with disability rather than staying behind her own closed doors, or the man who gave up his job to care for his wife after she had a stroke and had to face a house move as well when his mortgage became unaffordable.

Jesus allowed himself to become vulnerable to show that he understands the burdens we will encounter in our own lives. His example of falling a second time gives me strength and helps me to believe in the triumph of the cross.

**The Eighth Station: Jesus meets the daughters of Jerusalem.**

Una Kroll, GP and campaigner for women’s ordination)

*“Women of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children too.” (Luke 23.28)*

When I was a child, you sent a Jewish refugee and her daughter to our home in England for shelter. I recall their tears, their desperate hope for the father they left behind; hope unfulfilled. I remember the two Polish children who came to live with us during the Second World War. I shared their pain of separation from our roots: for two of my Baltic cousins in the German Army died on the Russian front, and the third lingered in a Russian prison for twelve years before eventual release. That is how you taught me compassion for friends and enemies alike. That is how you taught me to cross boundaries that divide us. That is how you brought me to my work of prayer and reconciliation in conflict situations.

Our tears are our prayers for our own people, yet as we weep we hear the cries of all people throughout our world. We weep with our friends – and with our persecutors too. Such wanton killing, Lord, of the little ones who starve through our greed, those who die of thirst, those who are carelessly killed in war, , those who are raped and left to die, those who die as slaves; as you wept, we weep. Your tears, Lord, and your words on the Way to the Cross, inspire in us a desire to help you heal the pain of the world.

*So, Lord, help us to find ways to help you to heal the pain of your world. Help us to cross the boundaries that divide us. Help us to treasure your creation so that future generations can live in harmony.*

**The Ninth Station: Jesus falls the third time.**

(Jonathan Romain, Minister of Maidenhead Synagogue)

It happened out of the blue. One moment we were best friends – in fact we had been since we came to the school three years earlier – then suddenly we were fighting in the playground during every lunch hour. It was Christians against Jews. I was Jewish, my three friends were Christian, and although that had never been an issue in the past, now we were on opposite sides, while some other eight year olds with whom I’d barely spoken before, but who were also Jewish, were fighting alongside me.

I do not know what caused the eruption of religious divisions and, once the headmaster stepped in to reprimand everyone, the lunch time battles ceased and old friendships resumed as if nothing had happened.

We had no idea why being Jewish or Christian mattered so much. Yet, somehow, the prejudices and conflicts of previous generations he re-ignited in us.

Part of me ignored it entirely and carried on with my friendships. Part of me was mortified and it changed my perceptions forever. Up to that point, I knew I was Jewish but had not reckoned I was different or a potential target.

The experience could have led me to become insular and mix only with fellow Jews, or to submerge anonymously into gentile company and throw off my Jewish identity. Instead, I instinctively felt that being both adamantly Jewish and thoroughly part of wider society might sometimes be painful but was the better path.

It also taught me – though I would not have used such terms at the time – that inter-faith dialogue and improving Jewish—Christian relations was vital. This has to be at ecclesiastical level, with rabbis and priests exploring both our common roots and the reasons for where we diverge. It also has to be a t the lay level, encouraging ordinary Christians and Jews to see each other as like themselves.

The stakes are high. It is about social harmony. It is also about rectifying the religious mistakes of the past on both sides. We don’t want Jesus to fall a fourth time, or us with him.

**The Tenth Station: Jesus is stripped of his garments.**

(Timothy Radcliffe, Dominican and writer)

We take off our clothes to wash or to prepare for sleep. This is quite different from having them torn from us by force. A friend of mine, going through immigration control in a rough part of the world, made the mistake of showing his irritation. He was stripped and searched. This was a ritual humiliation, such as Jesus endured.

We claim an identity by the clothes we wear. People’s good pride is undermined when they are forced to wear clothes they would not choose, as when the Nazis forced Jews and gay people to wear specially coloured stars. And if our clothes were stripped from us, then we lose face and more. We are unprotected from the gaze of others, leaving us feeling disempowered and vulnerable. The media often strip people naked on their pages, exposing their failures and weaknesses. We will all have known moments of shame when we were shown up, with our little secrets unveiled. We are seen as we are, and fear that we shall not be loved.

After the fall, Adam and Eve hid in the bushes from the sight of God. How could God love them after they had grabbed the forbidden fruit? But God has compassion on them and gives them skins. This was just a foretaste of God’s deeper kindness when, in Jesus, our own shame is embraced and God is stripped and then left naked on the cross.

When the early Christians came to baptism, the bishop would shout out: “Off with your clothes.” They stripped for immersion in the waters of baptism. There is no need for any shame. Gregory of Nyssa wrote, “Casting off these fading leaves which veil our lives we should once again present ourselves before the eyes of our Maker.”

This means that we too can throw away our ‘fig leaves’. We need no disguises to gain God’s love. We do not need to claim status by broadcasting our achievements, or making absurd claims to self-importance. We do not need to project an impressive facade, or be propped up by other’s admiration. In the words of a fourth century prayer, “Unveil our eyes, give us confidence, do not let us be ashamed or embarrassed, do not let us despise ourselves.” Jesus has been stripped. We need not fear to be naked. We are loved as we are.

**The Eleventh Station: Jesus is nailed to the cross.**

(Ann Widdecombe, former MP and novelist)

One of our Lord’s greatest mental agonies on the cross must have been seeing how let down everyone around him felt. He knew that this was not the end but his mother, disciples and followers thought it was and he had to cause them disappointment and distress in order to do what was right. He would have watched his mother watching him, and known that he had the power to come down from the cross and turn her sorrow to joy but that he must not: there was a much greater cause to serve.

Sometimes we have to find the courage to let other people down, even our nearest and dearest because we know that what we are doing is right. A student who has received the best and most expensive education may have to say to his parents that he is not following his father into the City but is going to work in the Third World, or a politician may have to disappoint local supporters by espousing a cause they do not believe in, or a daughter resist an arranged marriage the parents have set their hearts on.

In so many ways, big and small, we undergo conflicts of loyalty in which we know someone we love or respect will feel let down. Our Lord showed us this path in his most agonising moments.

**The Twelfth Station: Jesus is crucified.**

(Robin Baird-Smith, publisher and director of The Tablet)

There is an essential ambiguity on the last words of Jesus from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” We are accustomed in modern western culture to treat such sentiments as automatically defeatist. This must be the cry of despair we feel. There is no doubt why Albert Camus once wrote, “How can I subscribe to a religion when the central image is a punctured, deflated human being pinned to two pieces of wood with nails.”

But I believe this is to misunderstand an essential element in Jewish psychology. To the Jewish believer, the relationship between man and God is an argument, a running battle. Job shakes his fist at heaven. God shouts back, “Answer thou me.” The image of Gentle Jesus meek and mild may be very appealing to many. Not to me. Look at the image of Jesus in Pasolini’s brilliant film *The Gospel According to St Matthew*. Here, Jesus is a quick tempered human being with volatile emotions – full of insatiable love for humanity but turning in an instant to anger. In fact, the two are not incompatible.

As a young man attending the synagogue, Jesus would have been brought up in the tradition of argument and dispute. The Jews arrive at the truth by disputing about interpretation of the Torah. They argue their heads off, even to this day. This was Jesus’ world.

On the cross then, when he exclaims, “Why has thou forsaken me?” There is here more than meets the eye. Despair, maybe, but also the expression of anger. The repression of anger, as the psychologists tell us emphatically, results in depression, despair.

And one thing all theologians agree about is that though Jesus was divine – he was truly human. As St Paul tells us in the Epistle to the Philippians, God emptied himself to become man.

**The Thirteenth Station: Jesus is taken down from the cross.**

(Margaret Mizen, whose son was murdered in 2008)

Mary was at the foot of the Cross. As Jesus was taken down from it, she was confronted with the death of her beloved Son. When I arrived at the place where Jimmy was dying, I was confronted by the reality that something really bad had happened; I think I knew then that he was dead, even before it was confirmed.

The day Jimmy died, many people came to our house. Although I was so grateful for people supporting us, I was overwhelmed at the response. During the evening I sought sanctuary in my bedroom and just lay on the bed. Lying down I was struck by thoughts of Mary at the foot of the Cross. I’d watched my son Tommy cradling Jimmy in his arms as he died. I had such a sense of the pain, both mentally and physically, that Mary must have felt. At the time, a part of me was experiencing a comfort and joy, I was aware of a voice, “Jimmy is safe. He is with me.” I didn’t know what to make of it, but that sense of Jimmy being in Heaven, with Jesus, has stayed with me. To this day I believe my son was taken for a reason. I don’t know what that reason is, but maybe Jimmy has become a focus for young people. I often ask for the intercession of my beautiful son for all young people, growing in a world that has become so used to violence, to work for Peace.

ON New Year’s Day, of the year that Jimmy died, two girls who were fellow students were killed in a car crash. The entire year group, including Jimmy, attended both the funerals. We were told after Jimmy died that all the students has spent much time discussing their own mortalities. They all asked what their funerals would look like, and what they would like people to say about them after their deaths. Jimmy had said he ‘just wanted to be remembered’.

*Lord, I thank you for the gift of Jimmy. Thank you for the joy he brought to all who knew him. May his life and witness give hope to all our precious young people. Amen*

**The Fourteenth Station: Jesus’ body is laid in the tomb.**

(Rachel Denton, catholic hermit)

The body of a dead person becomes a non-person very quickly. A friend once told me that, at the moment of his father dying, although the physical change was very slight, the sense of ‘who’ he was left his body very quickly, and it became a ‘what’, a thing.

When I think of the people that I am tempted to turn into a ‘what’ rather than a ‘who’, homeless people figure highly. Their obvious poverty troubles me; the limit of what I am able, prepared, to offer them accuses me. It is easier to bury them outside of my life-zone; ‘the homeless’, a thing to be dealt with, a dilemma, a problem, a sense of unease. It is easier to roll the stone into place.

Recently, I was walking through Lincoln with another friend. We came across a young woman on the street, quietly asking for money. We gave her a little, with a word or two of conversation about street life. As we were moving on, she surprised us both by taking hold of my friend’s hand and asking if she could give him a hug. My friend hesitated: the woman was dirty, smelly, possibly inebriated; we were dressed for a celebratory meal. Then with a wry grimace towards me, ever so gently, he bent down and held her briefly. Her request, his response, my inclusion in it; whose was the gift?

If we dare to admit someone else’s humanity, we risk the possibility that they might ask for more than we are prepared to give.

If we dare to admit someone else’s humanity, we risk the possibility that they might want to give us more than we are prepared to accept.

It is safer to roll the stone into place and to walk away.