

Good Friday Meditations by Canon Simon Butler

Perfect Love...

1. Being Alone

It must have been a frightening prospect for Jesus to face the prospect of being alone. Much of his ministry had been spent in the company of people. He had called his disciples and they were also his friends. Now their time together was coming to an end. They had lived together on the road. Life must have been hard and the hardship of that sort of life must have brought the Twelve and Jesus into a deep solidarity. A first-century version of the 'Dunkirk spirit' – people cooperating in adversity. And then there was all time invested in teaching the disciples: showing them the Kingdom; encouraging them when they got it right; laughing with them when their half-hearted attempts at following his example didn't go according to plan; rebuking them when their own self-interested or narrowness obscured his purposes for them. In every sense there must have been a deep bond of friendship between the disciples and the master. None more so than Simon Peter, the rash one, the one who's motto was probably "ready, fire, aim." Jesus had chosen him to lead the motley crew after he had gone. There must have been high hopes for him, despite all the hot-headedness.

And here he was, fast asleep, as Jesus wrestled with his fears, having only hours earlier promised life-long allegiance. Peter had abandoned Jesus to his destiny along with the other disciples. They had left Jesus alone to face the music. What a frightening prospect it was for Jesus – knowing that his closest friends would leave him to be alone at the hour of his greatest need.

Surely others would come to Jesus' aid? What of the crowds who had flocked to see him only days before? Or the hoards that had jostled to see him perform miracles, cast out demons, heal the sick? Or the many that the Gospel writers tell us sat at Jesus feet as he taught with authority? What about them? Surely among them there would be some who would stand by him at the end? Someone with the political clout must be able to help? What about Nicodemus or one of the other 'worthies'?

Apparently not. None of them seemed either able or willing to help. Maybe like so many today they feared those with radical ideas. You can perhaps hear it, 'Oh yes, a great teacher undoubtedly. But, well, if only he could temper his style a bit. It's just too challenging. People aren't ready for it: they need time to absorb these things. I'm sorry to say he was just before his time. In the end he brought it all on himself.'

And so they left him alone, a victim of political expedience and moral cowardice as much as human malice, as he wrestled in the garden, as he faced his interrogators and as he faced his death. Some even reinforced his sense of isolation by mocking him as he died, throwing his words back in his face, underlining the physical agony with the fact that he was dying utterly alone. Not only did Jesus face the frightening prospect of dying, but he faced the fear of doing so alone. The psalm captures the stark terror: "I looked for consolation, but received none, for comfort, but did not find any."⁴ Jesus died alone, devoid of human comfort.

And he died with no sense of God's presence either. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' A cry of utter terror. This was the man who had lived his life in the closest harmony with his Father's will. They had enjoyed "sweet communion, fellowship divine", so much that Jesus could say, 'I and the

Father are one.’ The Son had been sent by the Father and had lived in obedience to him all his life. The Son had lived closer to God than any other human being ever has or ever will. Through the love they had for one another, people had been able to see the wonderful love that the Father had for all people. Through the mutual love that the Father and the Son shared men and women were shown something of the possibility that there is for living for God, living for love. Jesus and his Father had lived a life of passionate, saving love – a passionate, saving love of such great cost that Jesus was now being asked by the Father in love to die. And Jesus, himself, in loving obedience to his Father and in love of humanity, was willing to die for love. But the cost was a terrifying love – for them both. It was to result in Jesus losing any sense of the presence of his Father, so much that he was to cry in his dereliction not ‘My Father’, but ‘My God’, a cry that was to show us the total gulf that now existed in the mind of the Son. His Father had gone, he was alone without any sense of love or purpose. God had abandoned him. He was to die alone – without friends, without followers, without God his Father. The thought of it to me is terrifying.

Most people in the West today live in fear of being alone in the world. Most of us want to try and avoid being lonely. We’ve maybe had a taste of it and we know how awful it is. Perhaps we were once left out of the school sports team or a circle of friends; we may have felt the loneliness of isolation in younger life when work was the be all and end all to some but what we really wanted was a friend; Loneliness haunts many marriages as people dread the day their spouse is no longer there. And for older people, maybe those who have been widowed, the fear of being alone has all to great an intensity when the long winter evenings approach and all there is to do is to have an early night. Everyone fears being alone.

People do strange things to compensate for that fear of loneliness. For some, and I imagine for many places like Sanderstead, that fear of loneliness is compensated for by the accruing of material possessions, as we surround ourselves with nice things as a way of convincing ourselves that things are OK. We call it retail therapy. Much of the fashion for casual sex today is, I think, an expression of reaching out in loneliness, where anyone is better than no-one. And the false intimacy of internet pornography – the single most profitable sector of the online world – is sought out by many married and single as a compensation for loneliness. Others, desperate for a visible sign of community, get involved in poor or false relationships and friendships that can result in unhappiness, false expectations and even violence.

Whatever most people do, deep down the loneliness remains. Deep down we still have a conscious or unconscious dread of being left alone, left without friends, family or even God. Think of your reaction when you see someone here in church or in some other community group, whom you know to be alone. As well as some sense of compassion, most of us I imagine feel pity and sadness for that person partly because somewhere inside we are afraid of being like that. The funny thing is that it is sometimes not those of us who are single or widowed that have this as our greatest fear. People sometimes assume that we do. Many single or widowed people have had to face that particular fear in a way that others haven't and as such they have come to some accommodation with that gear. Fear of being alone is a fear for all sorts of people.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch spiritual guide, picks up this theme of loneliness in one of his books, and he writes at length about it. He encourages us to face our fear of being alone full-square, rather than trying to deny it in the ways I have been speaking of. He talks of the difficult road to conversion from loneliness to solitude. He writes: "To live a spiritual life we must first find the

courage to enter the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. The movement from loneliness to solitude is the beginning of the spiritual life, because it is the movement from the restless sense to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play.”

What Nouwen is encouraging us to do is to get honest with ourselves: to face the fact that we are terrified of being alone, that we are afraid of our inner loneliness and, by staring that fear in the face, thereby disarming its power. That is difficult and it is certainly not comfortable; but it may be the beginning of a transformation that leads to our growth.

Jesus faced his fear of loneliness in Gethsemane, he experienced deep human loneliness as his friends deserted him and he experienced the most profound spiritual loneliness as he found himself abandoned by God at Golgotha. It is an experience that none of us will ever be asked to repeat, thanks to Jesus willingness to face his fear of being alone full-square. As we listen to some music, let us ask Christ, himself having walked the lonely path, let us ask him to give us the strength to face our fear of loneliness, and let us invite the Holy Spirit to transform that fear into something creative...

2. Losing Control

Across the world people are held hostage for political ends by terrorists and governments. Please pray for them during today's service.

It's very hard to imagine what it must be like to be held captive: Alan Johnston the journalist has written of his experience: day upon day of confinement, with little or no natural light, perhaps with no idea of the time of day. The constant fear of beatings or worse as the guards threaten to take out their frustration on you. Johnston spent a lot of time in solitary confinement. Total isolation, no guarantee of what the future might hold, absolutely no freedom to do or to be what one wanted. We can't really imagine what that must be like, even when hostages like Johnston or before him Terry Waite & John McCarthy have written profoundly of their experiences.

One of the reasons we find it hard to imagine what a hostage's experience must be because of the freedom we have. We are free to live where we like, to do the job we want, to live with the people we want to, to make the choices we want to, to go where we want to and so on and so on. We are, by and large, in control of our lives. And we're constantly being encouraged to take more control. It is almost government policy and has been for thirty years now: "we are committed to extending personal choice," say politicians. And so we've seen an explosion in, for example, private medical insurance, which on the whole has lost its image of being for the rich few. Parents are told (even if when it comes to secondary schools, it's a lie) that they have the power to choose their children's schools. It has become easier to finance private education, easier to send children to the state school of our choice. Freedom to choose extends far and wide in our consumer culture. To imagine, then, what it must be like to be a hostage in a foreign land is almost impossible. To

contemplate such a loss of freedom is truly fearful. British Gas used to say in one of their adverts, "Don't you just love being in control?" And we do.

Because we love and have grown accustomed to such control in our lives, because exercising personal power has become an article of faith, the scenario of being held hostage is one of great fear. Kafka's novels illustrate powerfully how even in a comparatively prosperous society, a society where there appears to be a great degree of individual freedom and choice, communities can become so fragmented and rule-bound, that the tyranny of the state can wreak terrible havoc on an isolated individual. When I first read *The Trial* his short novel, which is no easy read, I found it spoke to a real fear in me of being, if not in that exact situation, at least in a situation where I had lost control. As I continue to reflect on that fear in myself, it reveals to me how I actually love the individual power I have, the ability to choose and the ability to control my environment, maybe even to the extent of controlling those around me.

And that is where individual freedom passes into individual tyranny. For in our freedom to control our surroundings, our personal space and the environment in which we live, we have a considerable ability to control those around us. The choices that we can make, the powers that we have, will inadvertently limit the powers of others. So often we do this without wanting to do it, or without realising we're doing it. Personal freedom to choose becomes the personal right to choose and the personal right to choose can so easily affect the liberty of others. My personal freedom to choose private medical insurance means that more doctors spend more time treating paying patients and end up renegotiating their contracts to spend less time working in the NHS. And so waiting lists get longer as our choice means someone else gets less choice. My exercising of my control over a situation means that someone else loses their ability to control their own. That example could be repeated

over and over again. Whether you find that particular example helpful or not, please recognise the main point I make, which is that in exercising control over our lives, we are in fact exercising power not only over ourselves, but also over others, whether we want that power over others or not. The really frightening thing about being a hostage, or a political prisoner, or an atomised individual in a Kafkaesque situation, is the sheer powerlessness of it. We become victims, not controllers, we lose the ability to master our lives (and the lives of others). We become helpless. And that is truly scary.

If there was anyone with power, it was Jesus. As the letter to the Colossians puts it: “in him all things in heaven and earth were created...he is the image of the invisible God.”⁶ He is supremely powerful. As his ministry showed us, he had power over sickness and health, power over the natural order of things. He had the power of great speech and ultimately, in the stories of Lazarus and Jairus’s daughter, he had power over life and death itself. He had more power available to him than any other person. Satan knew that when he tempted Jesus: “If you are the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread...command God’s angels to save you.”

Jesus obviously had the power to do the things that the Devil tempted him with, otherwise they would not have been temptations. But he knew that this crude exercise of power wasn’t the way he was to go about his business.

I wonder if Jesus reflected on those temptations as faced his arrest that night in the Garden of Gethsemane? I wonder if the temptation to get himself out of a nasty hole was in his mind when he asked his father to take the cup from him. For surely he could have got out of the situation by choosing the powerful way. But he didn’t. In fact Jesus chose the way of powerlessness. As he was arrested and tried before Pilate, he too in a way became a hostage, a political prisoner facing a kangaroo court, for the trial of Jesus

before Caiphas was contrary to Jewish law, an illegal trial of political expedience. And on the cross God the Son showed the way of powerlessness and weakness as he voluntarily relinquished his power for the sake of a needy world.

If the last address highlighted the loneliness of the human Jesus, then maybe now we need to focus on the powerlessness of the divine Jesus. In the Garden, as Jesus accepted his fate, it must have been terrifying to realise that voluntarily he had to put aside his power and ability to control situations and to place himself in the hands of others. God himself, in human flesh, choosing powerlessness. Jesus Christ, God in human flesh, opting for vulnerability to circumstance and to other people before our very eyes.

Most of us are afraid of losing control in our lives. Much of the last generation of political talk of power and choice has been in the field of the choice to use our money in the way we want. But that is only part of the story. For the way we use our power involves every aspect of our lives – our money, yes, but also our relationships, our sexuality, our faith, our work, our leisure, our parenting – every area of human interest. Jesus accepted his fear of losing control as he chose the way of powerlessness and vulnerability. God invites us to face the fear of losing control and to place that fear, along with every conscious or unconscious desire to exercise control and power over others, at the foot of the cross. We are called to do that, in faith, not secretly hoping that God will give us our power back, but rather trusting him to make us more like the vulnerable and powerless Jesus, who as Paul puts it in the letter to the Philippians: “though in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...”

And so, in the silence, let us reflect on our fear of losing control, in whatever areas of our lives we most desire to dominate. And let us offer our fears to Christ who made himself powerless and vulnerable for our sakes...

3. Pain

Of all the addresses today, this one is both the most personal and, I guess, the most paradoxical. You may feel that I'm contradicting myself as I go along and I probably am but I do so partly because I am feeling my way and treading on eggshells, and partly because the whole question of human suffering is a great mystery to which there are no 'pat' answers and no perfect solutions.

I'd like us to address the question of our fear of pain and there is, as I see it, only one way for me to do that, and that is to invite you into an experience of my own, and experience that forced me to wrestle with the question of my own fear of pain. I do this, not because I feel I've not the answer but because I struggle with the fear of pain, as I guess most people do. Of all the fears we're afflicted with, the most tangible and consistently scary is probably the fear of pain. There is so much pain around us – in our world, in our community, amongst our families and in the church that, despite our often deep compassion for those in pain, there is always likely to be a part of us that says: 'Oh God, not me.' Many people, having cared for a loved one in great pain, fervently hope that it never comes to them, or that if it does, someone might be there to put us out of our misery. Most of us fear pain.

The experience I am going to share with you is an old one now. It goes back to my time at theological college, when as part our first-year course we spent six months visiting a hospital each Sunday morning, partly to assist in getting people to chapel (it was a very large hospital) and partly to gain experience at ward visiting. The experience I share is from the ward visiting I did, and I'll quote what happened directly out of the report I wrote at the end of the placement:

I was visiting ward D58 one morning and, as I was walking around one of the bays, I noticed that one patient, an elderly man, was watching me walk all the way round. I took this as an invitation for me to approach him. I said 'good morning' and I received a slow, mumbled reply. He continued to talk in a low voice about 'soldiers in the war'. I tried to engage him in conversation but he kept quietly repeating his questions. As time moved on, I felt increasingly uncomfortable about being there with him. Something in me was frightened by this man. I found myself wanting to escape from him, to get away from his half-formed questions and the stale smell of urine. But I couldn't. Something kept me there, half-curious and compassionate, half of me wanting to run away. I knew I had to do something. Knowing that words were not getting through, perhaps out of frustration, I reached out and placed my hand on his shoulder. He slowly looked up, gave me one of the saddest looks I have seen and burst into tears.

It was very difficult to find out much about him. I think he was an old military man (given his grand moustache and a military tie on his locker). Once he had been a soldier, perhaps, given responsibility not only for himself but others as well. But now, he was just 'an old man', losing control of his movement, his brain and his bowels. I sensed he was carrying a great sense of humiliation. A man who was becoming senile, and yet who still had enough awareness to know that he was becoming senile, and who was hating it. When I left I felt angry that life could be so harsh to a man who had in the past had great dignity. But why was I so frightened by being in his presence?

That's the end of the story, a story of quite ordinary but profoundly saddening human pain and suffering. But I wanted to reflect upon my experience of fear in the face of that suffering. And this is where I may end up contradicting myself. For on the one hand I want to recognise that my fear was both natural and helpful. Natural in the sense that most of us would probably recognise a

part of us that would want to escape the suffering that presents itself before us. Helpful because the fear I experienced as I faced my old soldier, helped me to understand the great pain and tragedy that was before me. I suppose almost by definition, pain is something we want to avoid. We can all live with a gentle ache in our joints until the ache becomes intense enough for us to call it pain and then we want it to go away. Fear of pain is helpful because it teaches us the seriousness of pain.

It's also helpful because the fear of pain tells us again that here is something over which we have no control, something that we cannot necessarily master in our own strength. We are so used today of having the control we love over most of our lives. The fear of pain is a reminder to us that here is something we cannot understand and master – human suffering. The fear of pain reminds us that we are not in control. It teaches us to rely on something or someone other than ourselves. Sometimes it teaches us to rely upon God.

But the fear of pain is also a very unhelpful thing. It was in my encounter on ward D58. For my fear of pain as I faced a man with dementia was really a desire to escape from suffering. The fear of pain and suffering can so easily lead us to withdraw, to flee from human misery and pain, into a self-protective cocoon where we put up the emotional barriers as a way of protecting ourselves from suffering pain. The fear of pain can turn us into cold-hearted people, as we isolate ourselves from those in need. I think it's a particular danger for men, who've been brought up in the stiff upper lip tradition of English masculinity. All too often the great pressure on men to be strong and indomitable in the face of pain leads to a real fear of pain and an inability to show compassion.

This negative side of the fear of pain can even show itself when it is we ourselves who are suffering. Whether in illness or in emotional trauma, we

can so easily shut ourselves off from what is really happening because the enormity of the pain is simply too frightening. We can then pretend to others that we are 'fine thank you' when in fact our inner lives are anything but fine. The fear of pain can lead to great inner stress on a suffering individual. The consequences in long term physical and emotional damage can be great.

Jesus, facing his destiny in the Garden of Gethsemane, has to contemplate great pain. We have mentioned earlier the emotional pain of the loss of friends and I will return shortly to the great spiritual pain of his abandonment by God. Add to that the enormity of Christ's physical pain and we see that Jesus had every reason to fear pain. And as I read the Gospels, I think I detect a true fear of what he is about to undergo in terms of pain. But it also seems to me that Jesus' fear of pain is something that he both accepts and rejects. Jesus accepts his fear of pain for he knows it is his Father's will. He uses his fear as a way of trusting God. But he also, it seems to me, does not allow his fear of pain to overcome him so much that he runs away. 'No my will but yours' is a conscious choice to embrace pain, no matter how terrifying it might be to Jesus. What is more, I find that Jesus' fear of pain never allows him to become shut off and introspective in the negative way I have described. Even while he is being crucified he shows his concern for the well-being of others as he prays 'Father, forgive' and instructs John and Mary to care for one another after his death. Even in his agony and isolation Jesus remains in solidarity with and concerned for others in their suffering.

Jesus is a mysterious figure in his suffering. I do not understand his continued care for others in his death. My fear of pain remains too great. I know that when I suffer I become more selfish. Perhaps you do too. As we contemplate Jesus in his fear of pain, let us recognise our own fear of suffering and ask God to transform and redefine that fear into a Christlike fear. Let's meditate on that we listen to some music....

4. Perfect Love

We have visited some very dark places this afternoon. We have entered into an awareness of some of the most profound fears that can assail us and I hope that you've been able to connect with some of the fear in you. The loneliness of Jesus in his betrayal and abandonment maybe speaks of the fear we have of being left alone or abandoned by those close to us. The vulnerability of Jesus speaks to us in our contrasting love of being in control and our fear of being out of control. Jesus faced his coming pain in Gethsemane and that speaks to us of the all too real fear of pain that most of us have. And ultimately, Jesus contemplated and (to my mind) experienced the dreadful possibility of oblivion, of having lived a purposeless and meaningless life. And maybe that speaks to us of the fear that we have that God is not really there, that he is in fact dead and that there is no possibility of hope. We have faced dark things together.

The thing that constantly amazes me is that as we have faced these dark things, as we have explored the things we fear the most – loneliness, weakness, pain, death, meaninglessness – we have, almost imperceptibly, recognised that we are not the first to do so. God himself in Jesus Christ has been there before us. He has trodden the path of fear and walked the way of despair already. So, even as we have explored those fears together, we have done so in the company of Christ, the Man of Sorrows. God knows what it means to be lonely, he knows the way of weakness, he has experienced great human pain, he has faced the terrible possibility of oblivion. What is more – none of us would *choose* to embrace those fears ourselves, we would consider it an act of madness to *willingly* submit ourselves to crushing loneliness, or intense pain. We would think it crazy to *choose* to face our tormentors and persecutors while having absolute power – and yet choose

not to use it. But God in Jesus Christ seems to have done just that. It would seem that God elected to face those fears. As St Paul writes to the Corinthians: 'For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.' God has chosen to walk the path of fear.

But why?

The simple answer would seem to be because he loves us. Perfectly. We hear so much about the love of God and so much of the talk of his love seems trite and ineffectual: God as a divine Derek Nimmo. There is nothing worse than somebody coming up to you when you are going through hell and tritely saying: 'God really loves you.' Apart from being pastorally insensitive and even cruel, it often betrays an unwillingness on the part of the other person to meet us at our point of need. What we really want is someone to share our fears and pains. We want someone to walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death.

But what if God were to show us how much he loves us by experiencing the things we experience? What if God were to go through the most dreadful experiences that we could know? What if he were to face the agony of loneliness, or the powerlessness of vulnerability, or the searing intensity of pain, or the ultimate threat of meaninglessness? What if?...Maybe then we could take our God a little more seriously. Maybe such a God would be worth following, even abandoning ourselves to.

And that is what God does indeed call us to – he calls us to share our fears with him, to say to him: 'Father, I'm scared...help me!' You see the breathtaking thing is that whatever we experience today, because of Jesus, it has been experienced by God. He invites us to let him share the burden of

our fears, to turn to him in our neediest moments. God will not require us to carry our burden alone, he himself has drunk the cup of fear to its dregs. Because of Jesus, none of us need face fear alone.

What's more, the extent of Jesus' suffering, particular as he faces oblivion, will never be matched by our suffering. In some mysterious way, God will not allow us to drink the cup of fear to the intensity of Christ, because Christ had to face his fear alone. And for that we owe God gratitude beyond measure. Our fear is Christ's fear. He has trodden the way of fear with us. He walks it with us now.

And following on from that, because Christ shared our fear, it would seem that experiencing our fears can lead us to God. I mentioned in an earlier talk my own fear of pain as I encountered it in meeting a sick old man. It actually led me to discovering God at work in my fear. God was using my fear to show me that I needed him. I need not try to survive on my own, harbouring my fear, carrying it alone, because God wanted to share my fear, to carry its burden for me, or with me. And I am sure that can be the case for all of our fears. God uses them to lead us to a point of need and then to meet us at that point of need. If we are frightened of being alone, for example, God might be using that fear to lead us to recognise that, because he experienced that fear, he shares the experience. We might then be able to recognise that God has fellowship with us in our loneliness and that therefore we are not as alone as we feared we were and that our fear is unfounded. Because we have walked through our fear we have been led to a deeper meeting with God.

And that is part of the Good News of Christ's suffering and death. Through his passion, through in this case Christ's sharing our fears, we can come to the point of not only *knowing* that our fears are shared, not only *knowing* that our fears can lead us to a meeting place with God, but also that he can *transform*

our fears through his love. The result of Jesus sharing our fears, the consequence of Christ's death is that we can know him in a deeper way than we could possibly have imagined. One of the great Fathers of the Early Church, Irenaeus of Lyons, once said: "Unassumed is unhealed". What he meant was that to save us Jesus had to experience what we experience. Because Jesus faced our fears, he holds out the possibility of having those fears transformed by his love. What can actually happen is that through facing our fears, our deepest dreads, we can through the ministry of Jesus discover that those fears are not really fears at all, but rather places in our lives where God touches us with his love. We can experience salvation in and through our fears. In some ways, that is my own experience, not that God has finished dealing with my fears yet. The places in my life where I have discovered God's most precious God's amazing love have been the places of my greatest fears. God seems to have this wonderful ability to meet our fears with his love and thus to transform them. That is something of what the death of Jesus is about – God meeting us in the darkest places of our lives and shining there the light of his love. That is what St John means when he writes: "Perfect love casts out all fear."¹¹

God has not finished with our fears yet. He has much work to do with us. But through his willingness to suffer and experience our fears, Jesus enables us to open up our fears to God's incredible love. Through his death we can find God's love even in the darkest places. We can experience salvation even from fear. We can discover more and more, that the perfect love of God, shown most clearly in Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, indeed does cast out all fear. Amen.