

## **My Journey to the Cross.**

During Holy Week I went to get some wood to build a large wooden cross for our Good Friday service. The journey to buy this wood was not without its minor challenges. Woodyards, like car garages are an alien world to me. I often feel if I take the car to the garage that I am treated as a foolish woman who knows nothing about mechanics- which on some levels, of course, I am. The smell, ambience, atmosphere of these largely male working places is intimidating. Woodyards evoke in me a similar reaction; I know nothing of cutting wood, buying wood, working with wood.

Driving to the woodyard, I am faced with omens that make me even more uneasy about this shopping trip. Waiting behind a car at the traffic lights, the woman driver in front of me gets out the car and vomits. She does this a few times, then shuts the car door and zooms off. I was considering whether I should get out and help her, when the moment had gone.

A little later, as I pulled into the industrial estate, I made a wrong turn and a taxi driver blazes his car horn at me. Then I see in the corner of my eye that there is a man at the side of the road having a violent nosebleed, blood is pouring down his face, it is everywhere. I stare, incomprehensibly.

The two sights linger in my mind, the woman being sick, the man with a nosebleed. Sick and blood.

On the industrial estate, I try and locate the woodyard. I pull over and a man driving a van gesticulates at me, aggressively driving behind me to park.

I don't belong here, I think to myself. I look at the building that I've pulled up alongside, it doesn't look promising, I don't think I'm in the right place. It was a stupid idea to try and make a large cross. I should give up, this won't work. What was I thinking? I can't do this.

My sense of being in the wrong place, of being disorientated and put off my mission, reminds me of how women in our Gospel narrative today are dismissed and diminished. Their accounts, their testimony are belittled. Luke tells us:

***Then they (the women) remembered Jesus' words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.***

**But these words seemed to them (the male disciples) an idle tale, and they did not believe them.**

The women are not part of the close male circle around Jesus; they have not been taught by Jesus as the twelve male disciples have. They have been in the background. Anyway, aren't they all called Mary? Mary, the mother of, Mary the daughter of.

The women in our Gospel narratives are accustomed to living and operating in the shadowed places. They linger out of the way. Waiting and watching, but unnoticed. They are known vaguely, if at all. Many of them are not even named in the narrative. Nameless women, working in the background. They are in the kitchen, or a few steps behind on the road. They are there with the supplies, the food, the water, whilst the men, the disciples are in the light with Jesus. The men are important and valued.

Yet, at the moment of greatest grief, at the time of abandonment and fear, the women come just that bit closer into view.

Mark tells us about women at the site of the crucifixion:

**“There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, <sup>41</sup> who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem. Mark 15:40-41**

Very few women in our Gospel narratives dare to come forward into the light, but a few do. For example, Mary, the sister of Martha, who sits at Jesus' feet as though she were a disciple and is commended by Jesus. It is a bold move. She is not a man; she should not be listening and learning but doing the domestic tasks. Then there is Mary who anoints Jesus' feet with oils and with her tears. She is commended by Jesus for her love and devotion. Other voices criticize them: why is

she here, she should be doing the dishes!; – why is she here, she’s a sinful, wasteful woman.

***[Pause]***

‘Hello Sister’: this is the second time in Cambridge that I’ve been called Sister. The first time was in Addenbrookes hospital, in an elevator. A man got in the lift, tattoos all up his arm, ‘hello, sister’, he said cheerfully and began to tell me all about his Christian tattoos.

**“Hello Sister.”**

The words come to me like a warm hug. After the vomit, the blood, the aggression, the welcome startles me. This time, it’s in the woodyard reception. I’ve made it in, miraculously, to the customer service entrance. I’ve even dared to ask for some wood.

The shop assistant happily goes to find some wood with me that will work for the making of the Cross. He asks me about the church that I’m from and tells me he’s a Catholic. Not only that but he insists on **buying** the plank of wood that I need for the making of the Cross.

He tells me he’s from Nigeria and he knows St Paul’s. Suddenly, the fear and the omens are turned to nothing. He is a brother in Christ, a fellow traveller on the road.

On returning home with the wood, Olav turns the two planks into the wooden cross. It reminds me of Joseph, who was a carpenter. How familiar he must have been with wood, with how to work with wood, with the meaning of wood. In the *Manchester Carols*, a contemporary re-writing of the Christmas story by Carol Ann Duffy with music by Sasha Johnson Manning there is a carol called 'Trees'.\* In it the writer makes connections between Joseph's profession as a carpenter, and the objects that connect with Jesus' birth, life and suffering. The lyrics are cast as a conversation between Joseph and different types of trees. It begins with the evocation of a wooden cradle:

**Joseph stood by the Cherry Tree,  
said "These hands work at carpentry  
Tell me what gifts you have for me,  
what gifts you have for me."  
The tree's reply was wind in leaves,  
"For all your joys and all your griefs  
I'll give you wood for a cradle."**

And ends with the evocation of Jesus suffering on the cross:

**\*(To listen to Trees: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clt5Pa0i27c>)**

**Joseph stood by the Elder Tree,  
said "These hands work at carpentry.  
Tell me what gifts you have for me,  
what gifts you have for me."  
The tree's reply was rain on leaves,  
"For all your joys and all your griefs  
I'll give you wood for a cross."**

Becky and I try carrying the newly made cross together.

It's heavy to carry all alone- much easier to share the weight.

We are reminded that Jesus was too weak to carry the cross at all.

Mark tells us: "then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross".

Cyrene is in modern day Libya and Simon of Cyrene has been heralded as an African Saint.

Effran Menny writes in a blog devoted to black voices: "It is figures like Simon of Cyrene that give me an immense hope for Catholics of African descent. Despite our trials, suffering unjust treatment, and overcoming countless barriers, we can pick up our cross with the aid of Christ walking with us. We can look to him for a source of strength in our quest for liberation and as the foundation of nourishment for

our soul." (<https://www.blackcatholicmessenger.org/simon-of-cyrene-reflection/>)

On Good Friday, members of our congregation carried in the wooden Cross and we placed candles on it as we prayed for our world. In the ancient liturgy on Good Friday, the priest declares: Behold, the wood of the Cross on which was hung the saviour of the world. And all respond: ***Come, let us worship.***

Walking the way of the cross as we do during Holy Week, means finding ourselves in the narrative, and figuring out each year where we are in relation to Jesus. Are we carrying the cross for him, waiting in the distance, demanding he be crucified, washing our hands of the whole affair, denying him, mocking him, or sitting at the empty tomb....

I wonder where you have found yourself this year.

For me, this year, I was reminded how Jesus turns up in the unexpected places- among the omens of vomit and blood, angry drivers, and out of the way industrial estates - disorientated and lacking confidence, I was met with grace and generosity. Jesus graces the back alleys, the forgotten streets, the shadows. Jesus after all was crucified outside the city walls- in Golgotha, with that horrendous meaning, *the place of the skull.*

Having been in the worst place Jesus sees the broken hearted, he dwells with the poor and the downtrodden, he sits with the sick and ill. He does not turn his face away.

Jesus too can be seen with those who have been hanging back, waiting and watching, not giving up, not running away. Out of the limelight but faithful and true they may become like Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles- the ones with a story to tell. Not women with an idle tale, but disciples of Jesus with new life to share.

Today, the Cross stands not as a symbol of torture, or the relentless and cruel power of the state, but as a symbol of God's love. The transformation that occurs at Easter is radical and life-affirming. Overwhelming power, hatred, rejection, cruelty, is not the end. God has overcome the worst that the world has to offer and redeems it with his love. Giving us the courage like him to shine the light of God's love in the darkest of places.

Eternal God,  
in the cross of Jesus  
We see the cost of our sin  
and the depth of your love:  
In humble hope and fear  
May we place at his feet  
All that we have and all that we are  
Through him who has redeemed us through the depth of his love.

**Amen**