

Lenten Reflections

On thirteen lesser-reported followers
of Jesus' Passion



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wild goose
publications



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WEEK ONE: THREE JOSEPHS

I. Joseph the carpenter

I come in at the start.

I didn't hear the end.

Or say a word.

Many a man rears another's child.

*My bride told me. After the pain, the strain,
of living the best I should, and loving more than I could
dream. Called like Ruth to leave the land, my people and my home
to work in tears among the alien corn
that filled my barns with joy.*

*When the years turned
and we returned to milk and honey
we followed the path through the scrolls
together, in synagogue and home
in dim evenings or the hot night
under the rooftop stars. I taught him.*

*I told then how we'd fled
for our lives, under the dark; the stark fear and loss of leaving,
saying nothing, fearing all
on the long road to Gaza, chariots kicking dust in the face,
and us parched, but afraid of the proffered lifts and drinks
and hidden costs,
me powerless to protect: he'd seen with toddler eyes.
We reached the sea and the coast ahead – but no waves parted,*

*though the full boat foundered on the further shore. We lived.
Storytelling's in the family. I taught him.*

*In the workshop I taught those hands
to carve and turn, bind and loosen
and work the best, for neighbour, traveller and friend,
soldier and sinner, stranger, leper, child;
then lost him to the vineyards and the hills
and that other father, and to prayer
too silent for a labouring, dreaming man.*

*He saw me carrying the soldier's pack in the heat, I sensed
the quick tense anger for his dad, then
his voice soft, curious,
asking the man's story, listening to wandering years
till the stilled thug found his mile complete.
'Your lad'll go far,' he told me.*

*I found him talking in the temple, once,
among the men.
I saw the smiles of passing rich, the priestly youth
tolerant of a bright boy and tradesman's accent.
Was there one
who'd listen in the years he'd come to teach?*

*It was clear from then
there'd be no compromise,
but love, consideration and firm purpose
that would cross the world in its strength
and cross the powerful in their pride.
He'd join and try the heart and the grain*

*of the wood for its place
in the workshop of the world.*

*My time was over and the work passed on,
so, called to other work, I said:
'Just mind your mum' to a strong smile, the shine of eyes
wide enough for a region.*

We give thanks ...

For those who hold families together, who labour that we may eat.

For those who tell stories, where God dwells in the depths.

For the gift of reading the scriptures, and for teachers.

We pray ...

For children seeking an education, that their desire might be fulfilled.

For parents seeking to protect their children, through hunger, war or lack of opportunities.

For children who head families, holding in their loss and putting their hopes aside.

For refugees on the road and on the sea; for those who have lost loved ones on the journey, for those prey to people-traffickers, that they may find freedom.

Lord's Prayer

2. Joseph Caiaphas

The high-priesthood was a role for life. Annas was appointed and then deposed by the Roman authorities. His son-in-law Joseph Caiaphas was appointed, and remained high-priest from AD 18–36. Then Annas' remaining four sons were in turn high-priest (the eldest had preceded Caiaphas).

Caiaphas had a son Yeshua. The high-priest Joseph, father of Yeshua, sat in judgement on Yeshua, son of Joseph from Galilee.

One interpretation of the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31 refers to this family of high-priests.

We see Joseph Caiaphas from the outside, a powerful man, tangled in politics and desires, able to see his actions as stemming from the highest possible motives, saving his people from State interference, keeping puppet-kings and preachers from leading people astray into luxury and vice or happiness and spiritual development. He must have been learned; he may have been sincere.

He must have been under huge pressure: from the Roman authorities who wanted the peace kept and could remove him at any time; from a responsibility to the people, locals and pilgrims; from a tradition that the priestly role could not be set aside; from a father-in-law whom he was bound to respect and who seems to have clung to power. Annas in John's Gospel is termed high-priest, as in Acts 4:6, where his name precedes that of his son-in-law.

God did not abandon the high-priest, however tainted his appointment and corrosive his rule. In John's Gospel (11:49–52) he speaks prophetically, though it is to sacrifice one person for the nation. He and his colleagues knew how to plot, how to corner a man they questioned, how to manipulate the crowd. They thought too that taking a quick way out of their problems would solve them.

This is the man who sat in judgement upon Jesus. Who did what thousands of people have done since, determined that giving up one life was worth the value, in the belief that the ends justified the means.

Was it jealousy that made Caiaphas afraid of a preacher so gifted, prayerful and fearless he could have been an ally in some things if a challenge in others? Was Caiaphas aware of how far he fell short himself?

Jesus, who was never subservient to anyone, who loved and accepted everyone but could turn quick as lightning to challenging them, did not spurn the high-priest. He did not defer to him: he objected when he was struck. He let Caiaphas make his own decision. God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, created this man out of love, and did not manipulate him: he had a choice. A lifetime in politics influenced him. Jesus loved Caiaphas too. We are told of no meeting in this life.

We give thanks ...

For the freedom God gives us that we can use for better and for worse.

For those willing to walk the corridors of power in this land.

For the lives of families that can enable, empower us; and we pray they will not smother the lives of their members.

We pray ...

For those in political life, whose decisions help or hinder the lives of many, that they may put the needs of the weakest above the demands of expediency.

For civil servants and all those who deal with the structures by which we live, that they may work for the common good.

For those stuck in traditions and unable to hear outside voices. For our own churches, denominations unable to face death, challenge or change.

For all those left alone with their sin, that they may feel the loving hand of God in their lives, and turn to the sun.

Lord's Prayer

3. Joseph of Arimathea

Like Caiaphas he had followed the impact of Jesus' teaching, his healing, his insistence that some things were the fulfilment of the law, not its opposite. He belonged to the Council, the Sanhedrin, that Caiaphas headed, a Pharisee who believed in the Resurrection, which Caiaphas and the majority as Sadducees did not. What was it in Jesus' preaching on love in this life and a heart for the core of the Law, delight in life, fullness for all, that made one eager to have Jesus removed, and this Joseph a follower, though a fearful, secret one until the end? Was it Jesus' gift of telling stories with laughter and depth and warnings to the wealthy, his being an outsider who had learnt his skills by another path, his spiritual depth?

Like Mary of Magdala, Joseph of Arimathea appears as a witness in all four Gospels, in his case because he gained Jesus' body from Pilate and buried it. He comes in at the end with this public gesture, in John's Gospel accompanied by Nicodemus. With their spices and servants they must have drawn looks from the other shoppers as they hurriedly honoured the body of Jesus before the Sabbath.

One Joseph brought Jesus up, another Joseph tried him, and another Joseph honoured his teachings and his body at the end.

Legends grew around Joseph of Arimathea, including the story of the Glastonbury Thorn, planted by him in England.

*I was called,
Member of Council, merchant, witness,
to speak of my high-priest,
and his years
under the hand of God
and the eye of Annas
and Annas' sons,
and of Yeshua, God save his nation,
and the future of Israel.*

*What can I say
of the little man
lost in a big job,
living the limelight, fearing
the engulfing dark.*

*Could it be that once, man,
you paused in the rain,
and listened once briefly
with no thought of gain?*

*Were you there in the temple
in the courage of youth
when the Galilee hill-child
held us rapt in the truth?*

*Did that smile that encompassed all
once meet your eyes in welcome
before you took another path?*

*I am Joseph from Arimathea:
I come in at the end,
missing the action, keeping my secret
until I challenged authority –
and went over their heads.
Risking my neck.*

*They called me seeker
and witness, and built
legends to give flesh
to how a few men
and more women
were brave at the end
for love without end.*

*Planting beyond the seas and mists a hope
that latecomers too can be
part of the story,
living the tale again,
flowering in our winter.*

We give thanks ...

For those with a sense of justice and the courage to carry it through.

For the work of the international organisations that speak out.

For those who do honour where it is due, for witnesses to goodness and truth.

We pray ...

For political prisoners, for all who pay the penalty for speaking out that others might be free.

That we might have the courage to stand up for what is right, even when no hope is left.

For those in the rescue services who labour to keep people in life, and give honour to those they cannot save.

That we may live Lent to the full, to seek to see the story of Jesus from every angle, and to see ourselves in the people we love and the people we loathe, as we travel through the Gospels in our lives.

Lord's Prayer

WEEK TWO: TWO SEEKERS: MARTHA, PROPHET, AND JOANNA, APOSTLE

1. Martha (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-44, 12:1-3)

I spread a table before him within reach of his foes. God called me to that.

I learnt at the hearth. God called me to that.

I witnessed his truth, I spoke the Word, Christ in the world, Resurrection and Life.

My sister surpassed me.

All time has remembered me.

When they retold the tale, they made Martha the fusspot, the irritant, interrupting the serious business with domestic detail. This was Martha, one of the few women Jesus called by her own name, dropping the usual formal title. 'I have called you by your name, you are mine.' 'You are the Christ, who was to come into the world.' 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.' Against all convention her name comes before her brother's.

Martha the homemaker witnessed before them, that Jesus is the Christ. Who could bring the dead to life. Simon Peter witnessed in front of Jesus' followers when he made his declaration of faith; Martha spoke it before the village and the visitors, some doubting, others hostile. When their enemies plotted to kill Jesus, and Lazarus too, Martha and her sister were in danger. She came to the party and served the meal, knowing of the plotting and what impact her words had had.

Jesus had once calmed Martha his host, brought her back to the central matters. Martha stood aside and let her younger sister surpass her. She cared for her brother, served Simon the Leper, saw Jesus for what he was, and

risked repercussions.

We meet her in hospitals and churches, in the kitchen, in the meeting-place, in the wrong place, at the wrong moment, rustling the papers, keeping the church running, ordering the necessities, speaking the startling word of truth and generosity that comes from a lifetime of understated prayer. Martha is the necessary irritant, the reliable voice, the host with a heart for Christ.

She hid Jews from Nazis, Tutsis from Hutus, Yazidis from Daesh, the trafficked from gangsters. The fusspot at the cooking served Christ in the world.

We give thanks ...

For the people we underestimate, for those who appear to have no specific talent but who make other work possible.

For those who have made the Word of God the study of a lifetime.

For those who take the call to hospitality to its fullness in welcoming the needy and life-worn, the hurt and the homeless, the refugee and stranger.

We pray ...

For the silent witness of courage and the public act. That we might have the insight to speak of Christ in the right place, at the right time.

For the times when we see our work as undervalued by our fellow-humans and by God, when it seems that the easy path is on the road of others.

For the people in our lives who have been scarred by sickness, isolation, and neglect, that they may enjoy the fullness of life and may serve our society.

For the insight to understand and bear witness to God in the world, in the light of the Resurrection.

2. Joanna (Luke 8:1-3, 23:55-6, 24:9-11)

When I took to the road with the dusty preacher, we wandered Galilee and sometimes went the long way, to Jerusalem the golden.

Like Matthew, Jesus looked at me, accepted me, so I admitted how I'd lived, dropped it all and followed him. He made me an apostle, a witness, a friend. I knew the places to stay, the ways to pay, how to provide food, for crowds or a dozen hungry men, and the women on the edges.

The marvel is that Chuza didn't divorce me. The other women had widowhood or sons. Me, I had my background. I used his contacts freely, and his money. I filled the common purse, from his pocket. We'd prostituted more than bodies in that court – at least it yielded cash and standing.

I filled their ears on the road with life at the court, of wild parties and the one where John lost his head. I told of the king's yearnings for the things he thought faith could buy, the novelties, good stories and the hope of a death sealed from torment. Faith to him was something to consume, something bought like a slave to fill the empty spaces of the night, and console the withered heart. I told of his wiliness, his foxiness, his politics aimed to keep him with his power, and his women.

Then came the telling times.

The morning after the party when we had had so much joy together, the men went to sleep in the garden. Jesus was preparing himself for something, we could see. We women stayed in the Upper Room, cleared away, then readied for the night, the wine making our bodies sleepy. But we didn't settle: we talked and prayed: there was something in the air. Then, late at night, there was a hurried tapping at the outer door, a low call through the window, and we let him in. The temple guards had come in the dark and taken Jesus away.

And, of all people, Judas had been with them. 'We can't trust any of us,' he said, 'they've all run away.'

'You can trust John,' I said, 'and he's got contacts. I bet he's followed. You, go to Pilate's palace. I'll send word if I can. Herod the fox is in Jerusalem too, to pray this Passover at his father's house. They know all that goes on in his house.'

It's easy to plan when you've done it for a lifetime, but what chance did we have? These people meant business, no half measures. Not with night-time arrests with the city boiling.

At least I had somewhere I could keep an eye on things. John Mark came with me through the rough streets and drinking soldiers, to Herod's town house. The guard on the kitchen door let in his steward's wife. I slipped behind the arras, into the women's section, back among my cleaner servants and their curiosity and gossip.

I heard it all that dawn. I saw him, our Jesus, bound, and mocked. He never said a word.

The rest is known. We watched all day and did not move. Women helpless against a dark sky and malice. He died. Good men honoured his flesh. We marked the tomb. Then kept the longest Sabbath.

The turn of the morning came. Another journey through the dark and danger called. We went together, us women. Dismayed, afraid, then delayed by impossible hope. Sowing in tears we sang as we reaped. We turned for a lifetime.

We give thanks ...

For the unsung witnesses who have passed to us the stories that make our faith real.

For the steadfastness of friends who have stood by us in our times of trial.

For the joy that breaks through in unexpected ways.

We pray ...

For those who follow, pay and pray and keep us practical.

For those who walk through the corridors of power and keep their eyes on goodness.

For the strength of the marriage bond, that it may bring blessing on its partners and on all whose lives it touches.

That we may be able to recognise the risen Christ in our daily lives and among the people we meet.

Lord's Prayer

WEEK THREE: THREE SIMONS

I. Simon the Zealot

Coming down from the hills changed me. I met him first in that desert, where I'd bloodied and battered and been bloodied and battered, on the steep road to Jericho. We'd both known the force of the law, the brutality, the demands of the military, and the homes smashed during so-called searches, and the homes destroyed as punishment. A cowed people nursed their bitterness in strong community, closed against the other. It was during my second time in prison, when my body ached from the beatings and the years stretched out ahead, that he visited, and brought cold water, clothing, food, and dignity. I fell in love with the romance of faith in a different journey, the knowledge that the hills where we trained were the hills where he prayed. I could see why I needed him but not why he wanted me. In the years of the dirty war we'd lost sight of what we were fighting for: it was more tit for tat, keeping up the fear so we might survive. But he brought me back to the centre, to the goodness and truth and different way to live that I'd known as a child, then a youth. He refreshed my soul.

But follow him? Ex-taxmen, small business-folk, women with histories, there was a place for everybody in his company, I found. And being with him made us start to be kind again. Soldiers have bonds – we look out for each other: this was deeper. We gave without counting the cost, without hope of return. Not just to each other, but we turned aside mistrust and took the risk with strangers. And enjoyed the results. We laughed on the road.

Yet I wasn't much good at the end. I wasn't the hand-to-hand combat type, more the bomb-maker at a distance. I'd given up on hurting people but it was bombastic Simon Peter who was better at security guard roles. I'd seen so much pain: I was scared at the thought of what it would be like. Going all the

way with him. I'd seen my mates executed: even the toughest fall apart. In those hours, those days. That's the point: it doesn't pay to cross authority.

*I did not think, my friend, that I could love
so little, or could be
so self-absorbed I could not see
your body on the other tree,
that I could miss in this, my life's extreme,
your living company.*

*You did not love the loud thief less then, love,
though he could only hear
his groaning anger at the world in pain
which you have held so dear.
So, Christ, if we should turn from you at last,
you are forever near.*

Afghan sacrifice 2001

The mild-mannered man on the city council declared himself a former soldier and an atheist. He'd seen too much in Afghanistan. Then he told a story, just one.

They had been far out in the lawless areas, to the north. They scurried to leave the hostile village as tempers flared. All got in and, the door still open, the helicopter took off. At that moment, through the crowd two women ran and each threw something through the door.

'We thought we were done for.' But the explosion, their lives' final sound, did not come. The pilot flew upwards.

There were two bundles, each a desperately ill baby. 'What mother could do

that, so desperate she risked her child with strangers?’

They cared for the two as best they might. One died on the flight, the other lived and was taken to hospital and then to an orphanage in Kabul.

We give thanks ...

For those who can change their way of life and show us the humanity within the enemy.

For those who recognise their own failures and return to show us how to be braver than they.

For those wars that have ended, for unseen acts of gentleness or of withholding from slaughter, expected or ordered.

We pray ...

For an end to violence, and a recognition that speaking at the table earlier rather than later saves much suffering.

For child soldiers and all they have seen and been brought to do. We pray for those who have suffered at their hands, and for all who seek to work for the future of all.

For the places in the world where violence dominates; for an end to suicide bombing and for an understanding of the cost and casualties.

For a just, peaceful, rapid and lasting solution in Israel-Palestine, the lands where the soles of your feet have touched the earth.

Lord's Prayer

2. Simon the Host (Luke 7:36-50; Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-11)

There were two of us Simons who gave parties, two women who gate-crashed, two occasions when Jesus turned the tables. My Pharisee predecessor Simon was a learned man and a poor host. Jesus thought he was worth time – and Jesus liked a good meal. A nameless woman barged in and showed Simon his shortcomings. I learnt from him.

I started further down the scale, glad to feed Jesus and his crew, and my friends in the village. Jesus thought I was worth time too. I was doubtful though – a healed leper. My guests got plenty of water to wash with – anything less with my medical history wouldn't have gone down well. Skin conditions leave their scars even when you've got the all-clear.

It was a chance for us lads to chat – we'd got Lazarus back – there was more washing needed before and after shaking his hand, and remembering how we'd taken off the burial cloths. We had some jokes about that – Jesus liked a laugh.

Dear old Martha had been cooking for days, getting it as right as she could and as warm as would keep for the Sabbath meal.

The one who barged in on me was respectable enough, Lazarus' sister, so we wouldn't have thought otherwise, though she was, to put it mildly, forward. He has the two living with him: she was the emotional one, listening to Jesus and learning with the men, but hardly expected to join us at a meal! Perhaps she thought she was serving, but her sister was doing it the usual way. In all events, Mary had heard all the stories – first-hand in her case – and this time she topped that other poor woman. She brought in the best nard – the scent filled the house – then she did the hair towel as well. And she a widow, letting

us see her hair. She'd got her brother back and blown her savings. Or what was left of them – perhaps she'd got a discount after the spices for Lazarus. It was over the top of course – she was like that. The tears and all the smells – spices and the cooked meat – were a bit much in a small house – it smelt like a new tomb. Jesus enjoyed himself. Lazarus took it in his stride. There was muttering though. One of the social-conscience men decided to challenge Jesus. That's a risky strategy. He looked at her and he looked at the man. 'Let her alone,' he said. 'You and I, we'll both be poor next week. Let her give while there's still time. Next week's poverty will be with the world forever. So will her gift.'

Not all guests approved of my open table policy. After that they kept away. Perhaps it was the smell of fear. It was like being a leper again, but this time with friends.

We talked about it when it happened. And for weeks afterwards. We wondered if that party had been a turning point, that sent people off to plot. We took Lazarus away for a while, to give him time, we said. We talked too of how the scent filled the house like prayer and made our hearts glad. It was some party.

*May we, who often fail you in the testing place,
here take your place and shame;
knowing the privilege beyond our worth,
may we not bring more blame;
that we, who stand in judgement from our peers,
dishonour not your name.
Waiting for when, in sacrifice and grace,
you are the loss and gain.*

We give thanks ...

For the host who brings all to the table, in the community, at the high-level conference, after the war.

For the sick who give and understand the fear of those struggling to accept illness and disability in others.

For those who have lived with the isolation of illness or loneliness and have given company to others.

We pray ...

That we may, like Simon and Martha, have the gifts that make the table welcoming.

For those who plot harm to others, and seek to thwart the will of God who desires fullness for us all.

For those who have been bought and sold, as slaves, domestic workers, prostitutes and labourers. For all those who engage in people-trafficking and enslavement, that they may turn from their sin and find life.

For those who have the gift of prophetic action, and for those who can receive it.

Lord's Prayer

3. Simon Iscariot (John 6:71,13:2,27; see too Matthew 27:3-10)

His name appears only as the father of Judas, the thief, the betrayer. It places Judas the Everyman in a time and a community, a man with a family, perhaps one that loved him. Judas was not like Barabbas, the 'son of a father', the anonymous troublemaker who gained his freedom at Jesus' expense, the Everyman without the family that gave a person identity, belonging.

Was Simon Iscariot, named three times, a follower of Jesus, sympathiser, even, later, a witness? Was he a man visited, prayed with, by the more patient, large-hearted followers of Jesus? Did they include another bereaved parent, Mary, mother of Jesus? Or was only his name known, this man who had lost his son to a life on the road with an itinerant preacher, and then lost his reputation with a son branded as thief, traitor, and suicide? Did Peter seek out Simon to tell of his own failing, and the meeting that followed?

In the turmoil around the teachings of Jesus, Simon lost his son.

When an adult child goes wrong, there may be regret, grieving and attempt to reason, a determination to stay by them, whatever trouble they bring upon themselves. Judas was not a disowned Barabbas. He'd fallen in love with the words of a wandering preacher, and died a lonely death, cast aside, betrayed by the godly people who had used him.

What can we say to a parent whose son has taken his life? That earth has no sorrow heaven cannot heal? That God understands, encompasses all? That it is a tragedy, whatever someone has done, however their life has spiralled beyond control? However much others tempted and taunted him and will not take their share of blame?

Did the parents ask if God betrayed him, though the manipulation of the priests and handwashing more rigorous than Pilate's?

What can we say to the grief for a life cut short in loneliness, by one for whom the burden of life had become too heavy to bear alone. What do the parents say of those who let their son lose hope and left him to his pain?

Is God there in the small hours, when the world sleeps and the grieving wake, remembering the boy who will not wake again? When they ask if there was something left unsaid, some way to reach him, to say that there is always a way out, a way round the hardest fear, a way home. 'And always a place for you here. If Jesus wears you out, take respite here. If love has worn you out, rest your wounds here. If you took the wrong path, we too will share your shame, and be with you as you turn.'

*After you died,
trapped in cold metal
tubes, machines,
and staff who saw the science not the soul;
when your thwarted breath
slept forever
your story took its route, for good or loss.*

*And though it took a time as you got used
to having died, I sensed
that somewhere far you lived a while the life
you never had, and live also
in all the love you left and all the loss.*

Belfast Covenant, 1988

*That dark Good Friday with the heavy air
beating our anger as the gutters poured,
soaking the poisoned streets, the extra mile*

*torn to harm, our arms scarred
vision stained, souls drained,
our feet leaked blood that streamed,
streamed on the pavements
with no hope spared;
that afternoon
with faith subdued,
price paid, spirit dulled
in the trickling lull
of dank chapels
dripping psalms,
we came, under iron cloud,
lifting eyes to the hills
where, sudden, full, unbidden,
three rainbows showed,
grew, glowed, bowed
over the city waste.*

We give thanks ...

For the friends and families who stay by people in pain, all the way.

For those who support the sinner, the criminal, the social pariah, opposing the actions but regarding the humanity.

For those who work in the emergency services and deal with the aftermath of violent death, for the Samaritans and other organisations that seek to help people avoid suicide and self-harm.

We pray ...

For all families who have lost a loved one by suicide, those whose loved one has harmed themselves alone, and those who have taken others to their deaths.

We pray for all those caught up in war and violence, in the troubled places of the world and in our own land.

For those entrapped by addiction and the lifestyle that drives people into darkness, debt, depression and disordered values. For those who feel their life has no value, that others suffer from their living, that they may find again the value Christ places on them.

We pray for those in the hardest situations, who believe that the only way to keep their integrity is to end their lives. We pray for all those caught up in war and violence, in the troubled places of the world and in our own land.

Lord's Prayer

WEEK FOUR: TWO JUDASES

1. Jude the Obscure (John 14:22-7; see also Letter of Jude)

I am Jude the Apostle, sometimes called Thaddeus, in tradition the patron of lost causes.

What did I do? Follow a call and wander the roads, learning and laughing, loving and returning to the one who taught us of God in all creation. We were sent out, full of the stories of Jesus, the teachings; learning our trade; depending on the hospitality of the poor and of clement weather for nights in the open and empty bellies when this failed. I was one of the group who clung to him, serving, stewarding, distributing food, helping the sick through the crowd. Me and my namesake among the Twelve Men. What else? One night, I asked a question.

‘Do you intend to reveal yourself only to us and not to the world? Are we a special group with special knowledge, private joys beyond the grave?’

It was the answer that mattered. Jesus turned the question as usual, told us that he would be revealed through us, how we lived, how we related, how we served. That it would be lifelong learning, but the Spirit, the Advocate, would come to help us witness, in our work and speech. The Advocate would help us remember, teach us the depth of what Jesus had said and done. And that this would bring us the peace he gave as his parting gift. We had to live it out to understand it. Our work-life balance would ensure it.

I ate the meal and added my voice to the Psalm. I ran away when the going got rough that night. I was there, later, in that upper room where the stories of the women turned into a reality beyond possibility, that changed us forever. When the command to love each other led to the years of learning to

do that, with those we agreed with, those in conflict. When the wound of Judas slowly filled with the peace beyond understanding, that some things are in the careful hands that will one day draw us home.

I was there at Pentecost, when the Advocate came to answer my question. I was doing my work, telling the wonder. Later still, they put my name to a Letter – stand firm, I urged, keep faith in Christ, don't be led astray. Be brave, as once I was not. Years later, the choice came again.

*I did not dare be crucified with you
for if you looked on me with eyes of love,
where could I go?
And if you looked on me with eyes in pain
how could I bear to know
that my short suffering was always yours,
and that you felt the mocking just as keen
as years ahead, when on a different cross
you heard denial in small-hearted folk
whose sounds pursue you down eternal years
in other choice and story, each one ours.*

*I did not dare be crucified with you
but later when you looked on me with love
I did not go
but waiting bore the look of you who writhe
upon a thousand crosses every day
and bleed each second till the end of time.*

We give thanks ...

For those who serve in silence, and whom we often overlook.

For those who work in the unknown places of the world, calling us to stand firm and hold to eternal truths and the dignity of each person.

For those with the 'wrong' names, skin colour, abilities, gender, who live out their calling to the full.

We pray ...

For the people, and peoples, of the world whom we forget when they are not news, for all the suffering we overlook in obscure places not considered worth reporting. We name them as we can ...

For causes that seem lost, for climate change so long denied and now causing ever more suffering, especially among the most vulnerable.

For the hidden numbers who have died obscure on their travels across desert and sea, seeking to reach Europe and the hope of a better, safer, more constructive life. For the families left behind who may never know their story.

For the rescue workers and volunteers and their funders who seek to save people in danger, and honour the dead. For all who are at risk, and those who carry the burden of failed risk.

2. Jude the enigma, son of Simon Iscariot (especially Matthew 27:3-10)

Known as Judas, he is, like Mary of Magdala and Joseph of Arimathea, present in all four Gospels, and is also named in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:15-21). He was chosen by Jesus, was on the road with him, was sent out by him to preach the good news, and was present at the Last Supper. He was holder of the common purse, and termed a thief. He speaks several times in the Gospels, asking questions.

He told the priests and temple guard where to find Jesus on the final night. In Matthew's Gospel he takes money, thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave. When he realises that he has betrayed innocent blood, he tries to return it. When the priests tell him that his sin is his concern alone, he hangs himself. Many suggestions have been made as to his motives; and the extent to which his sin was to point Jesus out in the dark when the company of guards made it clear that arrest and illicit questioning were to follow; or whether it was to give a kiss, the sign of friendship, when he meant the opposite. Another suggestion is that the sin was pride, an attempt to try to force God's hand to Judas' own interpretation of scripture, seeking to make Jesus reveal his identity as the Messiah and his divine power.

For many centuries it was suggested that Judas' ultimate sin was that of despair and rejection of the gift of life by killing himself, a matter long formally considered criminal though often attended with the compassion which is now the common response.

Judas is Everyman, in whom we can see all the possibilities, and our own betrayals.

The morning after

*I did not think he'd do it.
Even the last night he knew,
and told me
that some things read are real.
Now I am alone
with a cold kiss.*

*I hadn't got the easy faith
of Peter, Thomas, Mary.
I'd always questioned,
and put back the urgent price.*

*He'd know, forgive,
where others guessed,
and I'd come back.
Like the son in the story.*

*I loved him to death.
And he did that.
I kissed him: he turned
and looked at me again.*

*After I came here
to the lonely place
where nothing blooms,
I saw the future –
and I no part of it.*

*But me, I couldn't face the eyes
of those who only ran away,*

*and now, for all the ages,
my name is as the instrument, no more.*

*He came here too –
the sun rose as he walked –
and my pain scarcely begun.*

*He offered me his hand
but I hid.
'One day,' he said, 'one day,'
like he always did.*

*For now, I lie alone,
my heart cold,
my mind betrayed,
my love unclaimed,
my spirit wasted.*

We give thanks ...

For those who have gone to the brink of despair and have drawn back, and for the ways in which they serve us all with their gift of hope through the worst situations of their lives.

For those who have made the suffering of others their concern and helped them back to spiritual and bodily health. For all nurses, pastors, doctors and carers.

For those who clear up after human tragedy, for coroners, council workers and volunteer seachers, who serve us silently and unnamed.

We pray ...

For those who seek to use the scriptures to justify their own opinions, and see in their wishes the hand of God.

For unwanted children, those who grow up without the guidance of love, those thrown out of their homes and rejected by their families, for those in prison. That they may know in their lives the hand of the God who never rejects.

For those who have been betrayed – by their church, by their understanding of faith, by their friends and by their pastors. That they may find in their pain the peace that passes understanding and that Christ is present with them, a fellow-sufferer and friend.

For ministers and church people who fail in their calling to care for each person as for Christ, that they may find God again at their centre.

Lord's Prayer

WEEK FIVE: THREE MARYS

Across Europe there are found versions of a medieval song of the seven joys of Mary the Mother. There is a song of her sorrows too, and of the three Marys (the mother, Mary of Magdala and Mary Clophas, sister of Mary the mother), who stayed with Jesus till the end. Here, instead of his mother, we take another Mary.

1. Mary of Bethany

I am Mary from Bethany, disciple of Jesus, widow, sister of Martha. He came to our home, where I learnt, and he loved us as his sisters, and Lazarus as a brother.

Lazarus, our protector in the world of the village and beyond, got ill. He died. Our grief was deep. Our livelihood, the home of hospitality that my sister Martha had made a place of warmth and greeting, was at risk. She, whose heart was big, big enough even to accept in Jesus his wish that I should be taught with the men, she was in danger of being homeless, of having nowhere to exercise her gift, her insight into the needs of all. We might end with nothing but the widow's mite, at the mercy of distant relatives with their own burdens.

It was a big funeral, close to the centre of power. Jesus' fate was sealed when love triumphed. He'd come late. I was angry with him. Martha went to meet him. He spoke with her, then asked for me, his disciple who had sat at his feet and listened but had not yet understood. I was full of grief, bewilderment, but I went to him as ever, to sit at his feet, still his disciple in my pain.

This time there were witnesses, not only his friends, but others, fellow-mourners, who followed me when I went, to support me at the tomb. And stayed

when they found Jesus before us. Jesus who wept with us.

He came to the tomb with us. Then he prayed. Martha was practical as ever, but we waited. And wondered. And heard the stirrings of hope and unbound the impossible joy.

I'd heard of what happened in the house of the Pharisee, and when our own Simon gave a party, I copied the woman there, and made it my own. As he took it like a tune and made it his own in turn. I touched the beloved, anointed him, as the week before we had readied our brother for the tomb. No touch was unclean to him. The scent filled the air. My tears were for him, for the thunder was in the air.

We found that time, that opposition was there, even among his friends at the party. 'Let her alone,' he said. I, the younger sister, was honoured there, prophet and priest of the Christ who knew no boundaries among those called into being out of love.

We were all in danger, so close to the places of power. The one he called back from the grave we hid away so he would not be killed. They got Jesus though.

A few days later he honoured the woman without name. He washed his own followers' feet. There was no role he would not take. Later that night, he was turned in.

We give thanks ...

For those whose mourning has turned into joy, for the return of the lost, for love recognised.

For the joy of company among outcast, traveller, resident and wanderer, and for the gift of hospitality at the heart of our faith.

For the gift of wonder, of companionship with the God who has given us everything, who came into the world and allowed the people he created to show him the next step.

We pray ...

For those who grieve, and especially when death strikes before its time. For those who see the pain of others and cannot help, that they may have the grace of being present, and setting their needs and fears aside.

For those who risk loss in the face of hostility. For those whose homes, livelihoods and safety is at stake.

For the courage to be disciples, learning and listening from Jesus and acting prophetically, in the right time and place; to be courageous in Christ when we meet opposition.

We pray for the gift to draw back from using power against those who are vulnerable in our world.

Lord's Prayer

2. Mary Clophas

I'd seen him from the start, growing up, going away, working, winning hearts, staying in the hills and praying, with a word for each soul. My cousin and nephew, one of the family, and yet. My lads played with him, herded with him, climbed the hills with him to the top of the world. One blood, one village, one future. He threw up the family work, the olive trees and the sheep, he left the goats and the hens and the field of wheat and the vine. He went away to stay in the desert and returned to preach of the kingdom.

When his mother took to the road, what could I do but follow? I loved him like my own. My lads did too – they followed him.

There were good times, and laughter, and generosity from unaccepted people. The company he kept stretched my understanding of the world – it was bigger than village life, bigger than Jerusalem itself. Even the soldiers felt valued when he looked on them. And then, that Passover, when all went wild, and that morning when they nailed him to a cross, naked, bloody; all that goodness, that sharp gift for turning the tale; all that storytelling, that love of God's scriptures, all bent, torn; lost as the sky itself turned dark and priests mocked. Caiaphas stayed at a distance, others less elevated, less easily defiled, came nearer. Was the high-priest aghast? Did he see courage where he expected less? The cursed one on the tree did not curse God. Among all the blood and flies, and filth from people's souls, him mother-naked and shamed, he kept speaking to others. And he prayed. As for me – my anger with God and his priest was put aside for then – my business was Jesus and his mother.

She stood and did not move. How could I not stay with her, she watching her son in his extreme, helpless against malice? Generous to the one who recognised him – the fellow-sufferer, who knew him for real, generous to the one who was engulfed in his pain, courteous to the officer who let her close and was impressed against his experience.

The hours passed, the cries ceased. The darkness lifted. Given the body and the tomb, all was haste, before the Sabbath, before minds changed. Even in death they'd defile him if they could. The men took the lead; there was no time to do much but kiss with tears and wait.

That long empty Sabbath without the light of our joy, while the cold tomb lay apart. We left hastily in the dark, to pass in danger from wolfish men but unheeded by the later-rising rich. We came as the dawn broke and found the

story complete. Later, with Mary my sister, fearful no longer, we laughed again in that upper room.

We give thanks ...

For those who stay with us when we weep, who hold to us in our pain and when we feel the weight of others' sin.

For those with the gift of courage which they have nurtured.

For those who recognise the truth in others different from themselves.

We pray ...

For those overwhelmed with suffering, that they may find Christ with them on the cross, willing to lift the burden and acknowledge the shared pain.

For those who find themselves in the pain of the last garden, among the olives, wondering, bewildered, or empty on the day of the tomb; for all the wrong we have brought upon others or ourselves.

For those who will die today, and those who stay with them, in isolation or loneliness or hospital noise, in among comfort and care, that they may take the final journey into peace.

For all those places in the world where the cry of suffering seems to go unheard, where people are rejected, mocked or abused, that we may seek justice and pursue it.

Lord's Prayer

3. Mary of Magdala

He came to my lakeside town and looked at me. I, the turbulent, unmanageable, frustrated one, felt all the acceptance I'd never met till then. At last my gifts had a place, and my faith was not in vain. I followed him on the road. Me the clever, emotional one, with Joanna to make us prudent, Susanna to remind us of stories, and Salome to keep us respectable. Seven demons released as I was given my right to my gifts! He knew the years of suppression, the infantile roles with no place for my soul. And he released me. There were others with other gifts, better gifts. I heard of the Gentile woman who mouthed him, laughed with him, got what she wanted from him; the woman who had to draw water at midday, who argued with him; and little Mary from Bethany who saw further than any of us, all the way to the cross

'Be a good Jew,' he told me, 'use your gifts to the utmost. God gave women gifts as good as men's. Take yours and use them, fill the world with love and witness. You'll be crucified too. They'll take your name from you, mock you and make you small in the eyes of the world. You'll be rolled into one with prostitutes and madwomen. But not in my eyes,' he said: 'Come follow me.'

I was there with him, as close as we could get, as he rolled in torment, hearing him when he could speak, seeing how he gave, even at the end. I saw him die. I heard the officer take heed of his goodness. I saw other hanged men dispatched from their misery at last, to keep the Sabbath pure.

Then we buried him. Hastily but decently, honouring the body of the best of Jews, who hung accursed on a tree and to us was the heart of love, and our hope and light. All extinguished. We asked why God had let this be done. And how do we live out his teaching when this was done to him by his world? Have we courage enough for the cold years ahead? Among such a mix of people with conflicting claims and threnodies?

We were the witnesses. When two or three are gathered in my name. But what had we witnessed? How the bravest can die well? We kept and wept the Sabbath, the coldest Sabbath, recalling all he had taught of acceptance, freedom, welcome into the heart of the Creator. We were left clinging to bare, chilly faith of the mind alone where the spirit lay buried in the tomb.

Love casts out fear, we knew. Those days had not prepared us for hope. We went in the dark to evade danger where we could. Like him, we stepped aside where needful.

The tomb lay open, robbed. We were dismayed, afraid of the new message. Then coming to meet us, where we were, stretching our hearts, came the story. 'Do not be afraid. Peace I give you, my peace I bequeath you. Go, tell the others. Share the good news. I will be with you wherever you go, till the end of time.'

I was there, the leader, my demons dissolved in the sunrise. His choice of witness and apostle to the Twelve. The story we told was no cold faith. It went to soldiers, slaves and struggling folk, in the courts of the rich and the home of the comfortable. We talked of hope, of people-power that can change the world, and how Spirit-filled in common life we could confront all trials. As silently, as certainly as Jesus.

We give thanks ...

For the risen Christ, casting out all fear, bringing new life on the first day of the week.

For the gifts that God has given, to people of every creed and colour and people and nation, to male and female, rich and poor.

For those who have the courage of leadership throughout the world, who

seek to make it a place where all can exercise the fullness of their humanity.

We pray ...

For those whose lives are limited by the actions of others, who are held in the grip of poverty, debt, illness, and the contempt of others.

For those who grieve, for their loved ones who have died, for the loss of fullness in their own lives.

For those who have given up, through addiction, overwork, bitterness, that they may hear rumours of hope and find it blossom in their lives.

For the sadness of our world, with wars and rumours of war, for the tomb of the hidden wars and its scars, in Central Africa; among the refugees from Myanmar abandoned on the open sea; among all who seek to move to find freedom and fullness.

That Easter may come in our lives and the life of our common world.

Lord's Prayer

WEEK SIX: FRIENDS, FOES AND FOLLOWERS

This year, 2016, we walk through Passion Week with the Gospel of Luke.

In 2016 Good Friday falls on Lady Day, 25 March. This has been celebrated since early times as the day of Jesus' conception, the start of the Incarnation, of Mary's journey to the cross.

The day the sky turned dark for three hours, the rending of the veil of the temple, the pouring out of blood at the death of Jesus may all reflect the start of his life on earth, as expressed in Luke's Gospel.

Marked as the equinox – the time of equal length of day and night, the time after which light will grow, so significant for the harvest in the north of the world – this day was for centuries, under the Julian calendar, the first day of the year. It was a term-day, which marked the turning of the seasons.

It also had mundane uses, in the paying of rent, and in the Julian calendar Lady Day is still the start of the British tax year. Jesus, born at a census imposed by authorities to collect taxes, died on a day our ancestors would have seen as part of the cosmic completion.

There are also three matters not found in other Gospels:

- The sending of Jesus to the court of Herod, and the making of an alliance between Pilate and Herod Antipas. Politics and expedience.
- The women of Jerusalem weeping for Jesus. Compare with palms and hosannas, and with a crowd that preferred Barabbas, 'the son of a father'.
- The reaction of the thieves on the cross, compared to the description of Judas also as a thief.

We can also consider the women marking the tomb to witness to its position and its having been sealed; Mary the mother staying with her son (in John's Gospel); the actions of the people who had brought him to the cross angry at his pain; and the words of Jesus serving to the end, even when he was helpless in all but his voice. Jesus the Word.

We can consider that he died on a tree, the ultimate outrage; that open wounds in a hot country attract flies, an additional torment and a reference to Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies, being here in seeming control; and the reasons why the people who cared for his corpse would wish to wash and anoint it, to free it from larvae, to honour it in death.

We consider then the day of rest as an empty day, when God seemed absent from the world that had rejected him.

We prepare for the annual joy of the first day of the week when the rules were fulfilled and conquered.

Suggested hymn: 'Lord of the morning', John Bell and Graham Maule, Enemy of Apathy: Songs and Chants for Lent, Eastertide and Pentecost, Wild Goose Publications

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