STATIONS OF THE CROSS

LENT & EASTER
In the early days of the Church, Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem sought to identify with Jesus by walking along the Via Dolorosa, the route of Jesus’ final journey on earth to his crucifixion and death, stopping at various points – stations – to ponder and enter into the reality and significance of his suffering. In the Middle Ages, the practice of reproducing these stations as an aid to devotion sprang up elsewhere, as a result of which Stations of the Cross can be found on many sites and in churches throughout the world.

Lent, the period of time Jesus spent in the desert after his baptism, where he experienced temptation and endured considerable spiritual struggle, is the traditional time when Christians walk the Way of the Cross, because this season reaches its climax in Holy Week: Maundy Thursday, the day of the Last Supper, Good Friday, when Jesus died, and Holy Saturday, when Jesus lay in the tomb prior to his resurrection on Easter Day.

Christians believe that in Jesus’ acceptance of his suffering, in his meeting with forgiveness of the hatred, violence and anger unleashed on him at the hands of the religious and political authorities of the day, and in the sheer love and compassion with which he embraced the worst of which human beings are capable, the very nature and being of God as love is revealed. Stations of the Cross are a way of discovering that love for ourselves.

The fourteen stations in the Minster were created by Jerry Scott, an artist and regular worshipper here. The creation of these stations was a long-held ambition of Jerry’s. The Chapter of York rejoices in the fulfilment of this ambition and is also immensely grateful to Jerry for the generosity with which he has given them to the Minster.

The pictures are abstract, and this provides a wonderful opportunity to look carefully to see what might be there. There are no right answers; the pictures speak to each of us in their own way. The important thing is not to think too much but to look in silence, to let the pictures be, to let them speak for themselves. We hope that as you walk the Way of the Cross, you will discover — perhaps for the first time in some cases — the all-embracing, limitless, abundant love of God for you and for all that is.

The Revd Canon Dr Christopher Collingwood
WALK THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS IN YORK MINSTER

Follow the highlighted route starting in the North Transept, stopping at each of the 14 stations and finishing in the South Transept.

The prayer on page 20 will help your contemplation of the Stations of the Cross.
Purple, the colour of the Emperor and of imperial power, of worldly might, dominates the background. In the midst of this are suggestions of weapons and helmets, representing the forces amassed against Jesus. The full weight of brutality and inhumanity is brought to bear on Jesus as he is sentenced to die. Yet he is not lost in this. He stands strong and solid, more clearly defined.

He offers another way. Is it a chasuble, the Roman garment now transformed into the sign of priesthood, that he wears, a sign of selfless love as the ultimate reality?

Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified

Mark 15:15

Then [the soldiers] led him away to crucify him

Matthew 27:27

At first sight, this just seems to be a blur; nothing seems to be clear, there’s nothing for the eyes to settle on. Is the passing of the death sentence on Jesus simply received by him and others as a shock, having the effect of sending us into a spin, where nothing is clear anymore? Not even the shape of the cross is immediately visible. Perhaps the reality of the cross and all that it entails takes time to sink in. Gradually, though, human silhouettes begin to emerge, even faces. In the midst of all this brutality, is there still some humanity to be discerned, quiet, hidden, unexpected and hopeful?
JESUS FALLS FOR THE FIRST TIME

He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth

Isaiah 53:7

By contrast, the cross here is more solid, dark and heavy. The weight of the cross can be felt. On the left of the picture human figures huddle together. Amidst all the angular and spare lines is the shape of the very human figure of Jesus in the centre. The contours of his body are delineated by soft curves. Our true nature is characterised by a gentle strength of love and compassion, which are mysteriously brought forth by the burden of the cross. And the shapes in the top right of the picture: are they the windows of a gothic church? Is it sometimes the oppression of the Church which also contributes to the weight of the cross?

JESUS MEETS HIS MOTHER

Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene

John 19:25

The cross stands foursquare and the two figures of Jesus and his mother are not separated by the cross, rather the cross stands behind but not between them. Which figure is which? Is it Mary on the left, standing taller than Jesus? If so, is Jesus even now drawing on the strength of love which he first knew in his mother? Even when we are most desolate, love is always present somehow.
Explanations of suffering are more often than not offensive and hurtful because they seem to trivialise and diminish the stark reality. What we most desire and need when we suffer is not words but the presence of another. Simon’s help as a companion in suffering must have been welcome to Jesus. As we look closely, though, it is not just the figures of Jesus and Simon which become visible; there are others, too, some of which seem to emerge out of others. Suffering is universal and there is a solidarity in it. Being willing to share in the suffering of all is the root of compassion.

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus

Luke 23:26

Set against the straight lines of the cross in the centre are the rounded figures of Jesus and Veronica on the right. As Veronica wipes the face of Jesus, there is intimacy and tenderness, almost an embrace. Is it in this that we see the ‘true image’ (the meaning of ‘Veronica’) of who we are and of who God is: a mutuality and reciprocity of tender and intimate love?

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me

Matthew 25:35-36
**JESUS FALLS FOR THE SECOND TIME**

*I gave my back to those who struck me [...] The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced*

Isaiah 50:6-7

The cross itself occupies more of the picture here than before, and the figure of Jesus is less distinct. He kneels and bows and yet does not appear to be bowed down by the experience. His shape seems to merge into the ground on which he is set, but in a scene so horrifying, the colour green, the colour of growth, is noticeably visible on the cross. Jesus said, ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’ (John 12:24). Does this picture invite us to see the seeds of life already present in the dying and death of Jesus?

**JESUS MEETS THE WOMEN OF JERUSALEM**

*A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him*

Luke 23:27

It is so often women who bear the weight of suffering. The figures of the women are more clearly defined here, as is that of Jesus himself. The women are here as a group and yet they have their own individual and personal stories of pain and grief to tell. Having fallen for the second time, Jesus now stands upright, firmly rooted, more in control perhaps, more ‘himself’. It is to him that the women come. As Peter said, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life’ (John 6:68). The cries of agony can be glimpsed on the women’s faces and Jesus faces and absorbs them. The cross overshadows them and seems to unite them all. In his own suffering, Jesus is at one with the women and with all who suffer, and in this is comfort and hope: ‘It is for this reason that I came into the world’ (John 12:27)
Could anyone bear the full weight of this suffering? Would not anyone crumple? There are faces in the top left corner of the picture. Who are these? Why are they there? Are they mere onlookers, watching at a distance, not getting involved, taking some kind of warped pleasure in the plight of another or are they looking for a way to help, to support, to reach out in compassion? Green predominates. Can we really believe that this is the path to life and growth for all?

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength
1 Corinthians 1:25

To be laid bare - literally - is uncomfortable. Only in relationships of the utmost intimacy do we feel safe enough to be seen for who we truly are. Only when we know we are loved are we willing to reveal all. So Jesus is stripped of his clothes by the soldiers in order to expose and shame him. It is an act of lovelessness. Here, though, Jesus does not hide from shame; he dominates the picture. Is he naked or clothed? Is he standing or sitting? A white garment appears to hang around his legs; he is not completely stripped. And yet the shape of his body and the clothes below seem to mark the outline of a chair, rather like a throne or a bishop's cathedral the sign of authority to teach. Signs of worldly might - spears - can be seen on the right and the left. Does Jesus's authority lie in his vulnerability and, if so, what is he teaching?
The human figure of Jesus seems to have disappeared almost entirely. The cross itself seems to be all there is. His head is visible – but the rest of his body? Is this act so brutal that pain is all there is?

The cross itself seems to be laid over the other people in the scene, as if it is being lifted up: ‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself’ (John 12:32). And what is the building in the top left – a church again? If so, what is the relationship between the Church – set at a distance – and the cross?

How stark the cross is! There is no mistaking its shape. Its lines are so rigid, unyielding, unbending. The human body is not like that. It has curves, softness, flexibility and suppleness. Yet here the human body of Jesus has been forced into a metaphorical straightjacket, into something alien and unnatural. Death is natural but not this one. We try to draw straight lines around life, to contain it within boundaries, to make it manageable, to make it conform to our preconceptions and expectations. In so doing, we suffocate ourselves and others, we squeeze the life out of who we are.
JESUS IS TAKEN DOWN FROM THE CROSS

Joseph of Arimathea [...] asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body.

John 19:38

The body of Jesus is more clearly defined here, even though it is lifeless. The naked body of Jesus seems to be wrapped in a shroud. It is as if Jesus were swaddled, as he was at birth. Although the figures around the cross appear to be grief-stricken, within this death are the seeds of new birth, of life.

JESUS IS LAID IN THE TOMB

Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

John 19:41-42

It is over. The body of Jesus is laid in an empty tomb. The dead body is like a chrysalis, a cocoon – a shape that has been discernible in other stations, notably when Jesus has fallen under the weight of the cross – waiting to slough off the old, waiting for something new and almost unimaginable to emerge. The tomb is also a womb, pregnant with life. Not all is at it seems. Life will burst forth on the first Easter morning.
PRAYER

Heavenly Father, as we walk the Way of the Cross, still our hearts and minds, that we may be willing to take time, to look, and to be drawn into the depths of your love, made known in the one who loved everyone and everything more than he loved his own life, and who on the first Easter morning was raised from death to life by your Holy Spirit of love, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.