

## **Matthias**

### **Meditation and Prayers for Good Friday**

Matthias is the apostle who was chosen to take the place of Judas Iscariot, He was selected because: *He was a follower of Jesus from the beginning of his ministry: He was a witness to the resurrection of Jesus: He was probably one of the seventy Jesus sent out on a mission.*

*It is believed that Matthias became an apostle to Ethiopia and eventually became a martyr there. Before he became a follower of Jesus it is possible that he was one of the many skilled potters in Jericho and may have been a friend of Zacchaeus – the chief taxman there*

In these readings Matthias has returned to Jerusalem to support the church there at a time of persecution under Herod when James, was martyred. Matthias has visited the Christians in Jericho and his old friend Zacchaeus who leads a very different life-style these days, supporting the followers of Jesus' Way with an open house for all-comers. Now he has brought Zacchaeus to visit the scene of the Cross. They stand outside the Gennath Gate where the road from Joppa and the West meet the great North South highway. The little rise at the junction is called Skull Hill. It is the place of public execution and there, three uprights of crosses stand waiting for new victims ...

### **The All-embracing Love of God**

Matthias had been silent from the moment they passed through the gate to face Skull Hill. It was late afternoon. The sky was heavy with thunder. He spoke without taking his eyes from the hollow in the hill where the three beams stood on end.

*It was like this then. Standing here now it all comes to life again. There were crowds then. Not just to see the crucifixion. Festival pilgrims were still arriving, looking for places to pitch their tents. We came through the gate following the soldiers as they hustled the crowd to clear a way while at the same time whipping the prisoners on. The crowds stopped to stare. It was an extra Passover spectacle for them. That was the worst – the humiliation – even worse than the pain. For all they knew, Jesus was a criminal like the other two – scourged, bleeding – soon to be stripped naked for all the world to see.*

*See the path turning into the hillside? Joseph's tomb is on the other side. Resurrection! Resurrection on the other side of the cross - that's what makes it all bearable. It did for Jesus. He told us it would happen, and it was all part of one great, divine event - but how could we understand?*

*Mary from Magdala wept uncontrollably, but his mother just stood and watched. She had a look of one in another world - just one with her son, feeling every atom of the pain.*

*The memory still wakes me at night, but I have stood here in my dreams and given thanks - in a strange, almost guilty way. I have stood here and committed myself to him again and again. He said that to follow him would be like taking up a cross. It could be for real the way things are shaping up now. I sometimes wonder if my turn will come on this hill - though I don't think I could bear it here - where he died.*

*I was here, Zacchaeus. I saw it all. I stood just here, near to the gate. Not so close as John and Mary and the others. Jesus' words were hard to hear over the noise of the crowd and every word was an effort for him in the end. John told us all the details. John could stay close. He had a few privileges, having family connections among the priests. The other ten had not ventured out, but I was not so well known. It was not such a risk for me. I felt so helpless, so desperate. I stood rooted to this spot, hoping still for the miracle beyond all miracles. You could feel his pain - and the heartache of those who watched him. It seemed to be in the air - enveloping us.*

*I still see him in my prayers every day - his arms stretched out. That awful gasping for breath as he struggled to speak, sinking down and then pulling himself up against the nails to suck air. I see those tortured arms and hands and I think - God's hands! But stretched out just as they used to be when he welcomed the crowds who flocked to hear him. I believe that gesture spoke volumes about who the Master is and why he died. He wanted to embrace the whole world with his Father's love - whatever it cost. I've learned that there is no real love without sacrifice and pain.*

*Jesus said, 'No-one has greater love than giving their life for a friend.' But you know, Zacchaeus, GOD'S love IS greater than any human love. Love was the theme of his whole life. He showed us God is love, even there with his head twisted with searing pain. I believe that in that eternal moment, he showed us all God's love for all people for all time. We didn't only see it, we felt it. We knew it.*

*I wasn't there when he rode into the city like the King – on his borrowed donkey. It's strange how for centuries the religious have quoted that prophecy of Zechariah, yet when it happened they wouldn't believe it! There's a lot of scripture we've to re-read and re-learn. They told me how on that day Jesus stopped and wept over the city. He said he felt like a mother hen wanting to gather her chicks under her wings. It made me think of home, and how children loved to be in his arms. He reached out to them whatever state they were in - and that went for the big children too! You'll know that Zacchaeus. He loved the unloved and the unlovely – no-one was excluded. I believe that's the reason they murdered him. His love didn't fit in with their ideas of God and religion. He showed us that God is so much bigger than all that. God IS love, and I believe that if everything else we know passed away there would still be love – God can't cease. Jesus' death, whatever else it means, it says God loves you all, from the greatest to the least – from the holiest to the worst sinner.*

*I like to pray early in the morning; to look into the sunrise and stretch out my arms like I was on his cross. I want to share his Spirit – to love the world as he does – like God does. I think that's what he meant when he said 'Take up your cross'.*

## **Reconciliation**

Matthias led his friend Zacchaeus uphill to Joseph's tomb. It was set in a small garden still vibrant with colours of hope.

*It's still empty. They say Joseph has had another tomb made for himself. He says he would feel unworthy of being placed where the Son of God had laid.*

*I'm not sure about that. I would love to be as he is and be sure of rising with him.*

*It must have been an amazing experience for Mary Magdala. I'm glad for her that she was first to see him alive again. She had so much to lose – and so much to be grateful for. I think she was first because she loved him so deeply. She had a disciple's love, like John, but far bigger than ours. She knew what it is to be forgiven and start a whole new life with the past behind her. They say the more you are forgiven, the greater your love.*

*You'll know that Zacchaeus, and there are so many others whose lives have been transformed because they heard him say 'You're forgiven. God has forgiven you. Now forgive yourself and forgive others – live a forgiven life.' We lost count of how many times he said 'Go, and sin no more'. We don't, of course, but it hurts more and more each time we let him down. I still find it hard to take in how he showed us there is no limit to the number of times God will forgive when we turn back to him, really wanting to change.*

*Peter has discovered that, but slowly. He went through hell between Jesus dying here and seeing this tomb empty. It was the folded grave clothes which convinced him John said. But his agony went on for weeks until Jesus met him out by the lake and proved to him that love is stronger for being forgiven.*

Matthias took Zacchaeus' arm and turned back towards the standing cross-beams.

*John tried to comfort Peter during those days. I was there when he told him how Jesus had prayed for forgiveness from the Cross – even for his executioners. I heard the words from where I stood. They sounded out like a defiant scream as the nails went home. John said that if Jesus could forgive that, he would surely forgive Peter. Of course Peter argued that his sin was far greater. He had to hear the word of forgiveness from the Lord for himself. John said something which has stayed with me. He said when Jesus prayed, 'Father, forgive them', it was a though he prayed it not just for the soldiers but for all the world – for everyone.*

*I'm still not sure of how all that works out. When Jesus was stretched out here on the cross the priests were still in the Temple killing the sacrificial lambs – thousands of them. The scriptures say how the sacrifice pleases God and then God forgives us – like the animal taking our place. I can't really grasp that. God loves and forgives. Why does he want all that bloodshed? I'll have to be careful what I say here in the city, but at home we wrestle with those questions.*

*I saw another crucifixion once. They put the man on a diagonal cross. That's a different sort of suffering, though no less horrific and painful. I sometimes imagine Jesus on a diagonal cross because we use that sign to obliterate words and documents. When you put a cross through something, it says the words or accusation no longer stands. In that last week before the Master died, the scribes and Pharisees tried all means to catch him out and accuse him of blasphemy – a charge which would condemn him to death.*

*One morning they dragged an adulterous woman into the Temple and challenged him to condemn her - that would mean stoning her to death of course. Jesus never looked at her. Instead he bent down and wrote something on the ground. Then he looked up at her accusers and said 'What about you? Have you done no wrong? Let the one who is perfect throw the first stone at her.'*

*It was a brilliant answer. He was not breaking the law but applying the higher law of love.*

*The crowd walked away slowly, one by one. Some of our disciples gloated openly, but Jesus looked down again and wrote on the ground before telling the woman to go and put things right. You know, Zacchaeus, I think the first time, what he wrote was the accusation against the woman, and the second time he drew a cross - he crossed out the sin!*

*No, I don't understand how it all works out, but I do know, like you my friend, that the moment we trust his love and promise of forgiveness, everything changes - the past is crossed out and it's all because he loves us - loves us enough to hang here .. What we have to do is believe it - accept it.*

## **Heaven and earth combined**

All the while Matthias had been speaking - musing aloud - Zacchaeus had been strangely, unusually silent. Overawed by the place itself, from time to time he shivered - cold in the sultry evening air, and Matthias saw tears in the little man's eyes. He took his friend's arm again and led him further down Skull Hill towards the Gennath gate. It was time to leave. They would cross the city to reach the Jericho road. Zacchaeus turned to look back at the three upright beams suddenly bright in a momentary flash of sunlight.

*They're always there. Ready, waiting for the next victim, criminal or rebel. Although I said about the diagonal cross I saw once, I think I prefer to remember Jesus on the 'immissa' - with arms stretched out. They say the simplex - this single post is the worst way to die - with you arms stretched above your head. For the Romans the more painful the better! I would rather think about the Lord alive though. But he is! And we believe now, like he always said, he had to die - to die for love, but death is not the end.*

*Of course, his cross had it's upright, one of these I suppose. It would be that one in the middle. We have many different ideas about how he died. It helps us understand. He was in the middle between two robbers – at least that was the charge against them. John thinks it was as though Jesus wanted to say 'Your God is among you.' The one robber accepted the Master's offer of forgiveness and heaven, but I don't think the other did. John says it's like that when God is among us – he brings a judgement.*

*They made Jesus carry the transverse piece. They always take those away after the crucifixion - before they disappear for firewood. It was heavy and Jesus stumbled with it. That meant more cursing and whipping from the execution party. They do the nailing on the ground and then, the worst bit of all is when they lift the smaller beam and drop it into its socket. It makes me shudder just to think about it.*

*Nathaniel comes out here often, and he tells us to think about the beam that's standing here. Nathaniel always was the deepest thinker among us. He says the beam standing upright reminds him that Jesus brings heaven and earth together. He came to bring God to us and us to God. The upright beam is a symbol of heaven dropped into our world. I like that because it fits in with everything that has happened since Jesus died. We all saw him the day he went back to the Father. Up on the hillside. We passed it, remember on our way in. It was so simple, yet awesome. He just walked away and was gone in the clouds. And then, even more amazing, his Spirit was back with us when were all together for Pentecost.*

*The upright beam. I can look at it now. It was what Jesus' life here was all about. God humbled. Us raised to life with Jesus. I wish we could have known more of that in the days of his ministry. When we think back we realise how often he would say 'It's me!' and we felt God was around. We felt it in the authority with which he spoke, even in his simplest stories. And then the miracles. Sometime they just happened. No fuss. Then other times you could really feel God's power at work. I remember Peter telling me about the time Jesus calmed a storm on the lake. I would like to have been there. Well, in one way. I'm not a fisherman and boats don't agree with me, but he said it was such a powerful moment, they all wanted to just kneel down and worship in the calm.*

*I could go on and on with stories, but you probably know them as well as I do now. Nathaniel was at a wedding over in Cana. You know, when Jesus changed water into wine. I haven't any idea how he did it – but that's what makes it a miracle. Nathaniel said the whole atmosphere was charged with power, and when Jesus brought Lazarus out of his tomb the whole of Bethany was locked into the miracle and for days was engulfed in a sense of another world.*

*It was that same other world that I sensed about Jesus' mother when she stood here close to his Cross. Another world where everything made sense. It didn't lessen the pain, but it gave you faith – made you one with him and what he was doing. Since his Spirit came into my life I'm learning what that's like.*

Matthias began to walk towards the city gate, but it seemed Zacchaeus could not tear himself away. He turned back once more and with a look of wondrous recognition, said..

*'Look!. 'That beam is cut from sycamore! Jesus and I both had our sycamore tree. We both climbed. That day we first met it was like I died too..... and I came alive again .... with his life!'*

## **Thank you for the Cross**

### **(three prayers)**

#### **All-embracing love**

Lord, our God, thank you for the Cross  
Here we see your love  
in the arms of Jesus stretched out in costly sacrifice,

embracing the whole world.  
Here is mystery;  
Here is wisdom we barely understand but grasp by faith;  
Here is truth at the heart of all life  
- that love is invincible - everlasting  
- victorious over all evil  
- that love will always have the last word.

In Christ's embrace  
We see love greater than any human love;  
We see light - hope in the world's darkness;  
We know forgiveness and peace  
for all the world's brokenness  
and ours  
Lord, in our love for you, give us grace and strength  
to live the way of the Cross for the sake of your Kingdom.  
Thank you Lord, for the Cross of Jesus.

## **Reconciliation**

Lord, our God, thank you for the Cross  
The sign of the Cross is the message of sin and evil crossed out.  
In the sacrificial love of Jesus,  
dying for all creation and humankind,  
our earth-bound minds hold on to the promise  
that the hope of all the world  
is in the sign of the Cross.

Let the shadow of the Cross  
fall on all our personal failures to love you  
and to love one another;  
on the falsehood and strife which makes us poor in a world of plenty;  
on the selfish greed which dominates human thinking and ambition  
Give us faith to believe  
that what you did by the Cross  
is a finished and complete work,  
and by your grace,  
through your people,  
all the world's evil will be crossed out  
in the day of your final glory.



## **Heaven and Earth Combined**

Lord our God, we thank you for the Cross.  
With all its cruelty and shame,  
you have made it a sign of heaven on the earth.  
We thank you for Jesus who carried his Cross and suffered on it  
for us and for all people of all time.  
We thank you that in Christ, you came among us,  
rooting the eternal in the present  
- God in humanity  
- and brought the Kingdom into our daily life.

Lord, as you suffer still in our pains,  
As you hurt with all humanity  
- with the starving child and the despairing world leader  
- with the broken-hearted mother and the bewildered youth ..  
we believe your kingdom is coming  
through billions of sacrificial, loving kindnesses.  
Show us how we may share in its coming  
as we live heaven-bound lives,  
in the way of Jesus and his Cross.