

Easter Triduum 2025

Holy Saturday Conference 19 April 2025

“Suffering; a doorway to Hope”

In 2001 I spent a year in Dublin on a course for Leadership & Formation, where I was introduced to a poem, written by a Presentation Sister, Sr Raphael Considine, called “Trasna! ; I have used it many times since then in my retreat work, & by coincidence or the Holy Spirit, Sr Jane Livesey of the Companions of Jesus used it with our Community last week as we begin to prepare for our Visitation in September. “trasna” a Gaelic term meaning “threshold” close to doorway, a crossing place, physically relationally & spiritually..a derivative from it is “barra trasna” [ cross bar ] which in terms of football connects two uprights in shaping the goal area, & in terms of our Holy Week, “barra trasna” the crossbar/crossbeam of the Cross of Crucifixion on which Our Lord suffered & was cruelly crucified..a Cross on which he suffered & in doing so offered us the choice “why be a pilgrim still?” ..in this Jubilee Year as we are invited to take up our Cross as “pilgrims of hope” his suffering, & our choice, to follow in his footsteps & his sufferings, shapes the size & parameters of our lifetimes journey into the goal we seek, & God chooses to invite us into..becoming fully in God ..no longer “God-is-with-us” Emmanuel..& not just “God-is-in-us” but “we-are-in-God”..

I want to return to that amazing possibility..or is it a reality?..later

..the poem..

“the pilgrims paused on the ancient stone in the mountain gap.  
behind them stretched to roadway they had travelled  
already a far journey..was it a lifetime?  
ahead, mist hid the track  
unspoken the question hovered  
why go on? is life not short enough?  
why seek to pierce its mystery?  
why venture further on strange paths, risking all?  
surely that is a gamble for fools..or lovers  
why not return by a known road?  
why be a pilgrim still?

a voice they knew called to them saying:  
this is Trasna, the crossing place..  
choose..go back if you must,  
you will find your life easily by yesterday’s road  
you can pitch your tent by yesterday’s fires  
there may be life in the embers yet

if that is not your deepest desire, stand still  
lay down your load  
take your life in your two hands  
[ gently..you are trusted with something precious ]  
while you search your hearts yearnings;  
what am I seeking? what is my quest?  
when your star rises deep within  
you will have light for your step  
..this is Trasná, the crossing place. Choose!  
..this is Trasná, the crossing place. Come!

Trasná the crossing place , the threshold, the doorway between the Crucifixion of yesterday & the Resurrection of tomorrow..this is Holy Saturday..  
..a day of extinction, of grief, of culpability, of sadness at what could have been, & thereby a temptation into unreality, to revisit the embers, of “what I could have done differently”..the classic post-mortem which forensically trawls the past, itemising the mistakes & regrets, & leaves us not just beached but sinking in a spiritual quicksand

..every six weeks I visit a Community of Religious Sisters, Canonesses of St Augustine at Grange over Sands in Cumbria, to hear their confessions..until recently a man lived nearby called Cedric Robinson, the Queens Guide to Morecambe Bay..he had a grace & favour cottage overlooking Bay & would guide walkers & pilgrims across sands to Morecambe itself..he knew it man & boy for over 80yrs..  
if he was to guide us over today at 11am he would be up & out at 5am to walk across the sands, 9 miles, & under his arm a bundle of birch twigs..as he walked, he worked out firm sand from quicksand & put in a birch twig to mark the safe route..once he got to Morecambe, an easy return leg following his own twigs..he would then lead us across safely enjoyably..he knew each day the tides currents winds were different, which meant he had to journey first everyday to mark out the safe new route..  
..our guide across the sands, across the threshold & the doorway to Hope is Jesus Christ..”pilgrims of hope” on a journey of opportunities, of joy, of sufferings, & of hazards which are different each day..& today..his title on his pilgrimage to Calvary “the Suffering Servant” foretold generations earlier & personified in his lifetime..& now in his footsteps, with our quicksands & firm sands, in our lifetime, we now, his fellow suffering servants..

St Augustine writes in one of his sermons [ Sermon Guelf 3 ] “the passion of our Lord & Saviour Jesus Christ gives us the confidence of glory & a lesson in the endurance of suffering. Is there anything which the hearts of the faithful may not promise themselves from the grace of God? It was not enough that the only Son of God, co-eternal with the Father, should be born as man from man for them- he even died for them at the hands of men, who he had created.

What God promises us for the future is great, but what we recall as already done for us is much greater. When Christ died for the wicked, where were they & what were they? who can doubt that he will give the saints his life, since he has already given them his death? why is human weakness slow to believe that men will one day live with God?

A much more incredible thing has already happened: God died for men. Accordingly he carried out a wonderful transaction with us through our mutual sharing: he died from what was ours, we will live from what is his.”

In 2010 BBC asked Tony Jordan, producer of East Enders, to fill three “God-slots” on its BBC2 late autumn network; 1040pm Thursday eve three programmes; he chose to produce them on the Nativity; a “lapsed Catholic” he opened his bible & read infancy narrative for first time for years, & he wept..first programme received typical Thursday late eve audience; second viewing figures soared; third went through roof; phenomenal ratings; by far largest audience..84% were young people 18-30yr olds.. I would like to share with you two instances where Jesus’ humanity was put to test when a potential doorway to hope went sour & closed..in both instances he was still in Mary’s womb; the heavily pregnant Mary, having returned from helping Elizabeth at birth of John the Baptist, is viewed with shame & disappointment, particularly by Joseph; she is walking with her mother through Nazareth when a stone is hurled in their direction, then another & another; under threat, they make for synagogue seeking sanctuary, & close door behind them; a startled Rabbi sees them & anxiously tells them “you can’t stay here!”..as he ushers them through holy space & out through back door..& weeks later, a reluctant bereft Joseph leads Mary on donkey down narrow bustling street in Bethlehem, teeming with people returning for census; half way down street Joseph knocks at a door..it opens & the woman who answers looks straight at Joseph & with a beamer of a smile exclaims “Joseph!”..it is his cousin..she gives him hug of lifetime, & in doing so, looks over his shoulder to see the pregnant Mary on donkey; she pulls out of hug, looks darkly at Joseph, & says dismissively “not with her”..

“the stone which the builders rejected has become the key stone, the cornerstone..”

..& Christ the suffering servant is born into suffering in a stable..behind a stable door. A stable door we are all familiar with; two halves,,the top half which allows us to see into stable to feed animal & check on its wellbeing..only rarely do we open bottom half to gain full entry & to enjoy its real presence, to groom it & to check over its condition its wellbeing..& later today, a stable door opportunity with Confessions in the Crypt; for those who have yet to take the courage, like the pilgrims of Morcambe Bay, to step onto the sands & trust in priest, the moment, & the birch twigs, & open the full stable door..your usual top half of the sacrament with your usual list of faults & mistakes, & now today, a trasna moment, to choose to open the bottom half & enter into fullness of opportunity & its divine grace..to have a real conversation with Jesus for first time perhaps for almost a lifetime..& with tears..of sorrow regret remorse, & far more importantly, of homecoming..after years & years of suffering alone, now to be released from your invisible prison & find freedom & good grace, as we each share now your sufferings & invite you to share ours..vicariously..”vicar”..on behalf of others..”ours were the sufferings he bore ours, ours the sufferings he carried; he bears a punishment that brings us peace, & through his wounds, we are healed.”

..& for those of you who may well have gone to the sacrament last night & opened the top half of the stable door, a moment now, the sacrament of the present moment, to consider perhaps going again to fully open the door..& cross the threshold..”trasna”..

..some years ago hearing Confessions in a College house late into night one boy came & we spoke of forgiveness..if he/we came to the sacrament with six things to confess

& we remembered five but momentarily forgot sixth, then the sixth, albeit not spoken, is forgiven..if I withhold the sixth out of fear or embarrassment it can't be forgiven..at end of confessions, the last boy always told to tell me he is last one, & I was about to leave..a knock at door & boy I'd seen earlier came again..he sat down & explained he had a sixth sin he now wanted to share..I feared the worst..he explained some weeks ago he had taken a book from College library to read but hadn't recorded it in his name..he wanted to take it back but feared the consequences..there was clear suffering there & genuine remorse, so I said his penance was to put book into an envelope, send it in internal post to me, & I would get it back to librarian with no questions asked..he beamed..a prodigal son moment for him..& for me, an inspiration in my own five out of six disclosures in the sacrament, if I too risk the fullness of disclosure, which then restores full flavour, nourishment, & efficacy of the Eucharist & the fullness of belonging..all because he took courage risk to knock at confessional door twice..& second time to open it fully.."a doorway to hope"..

St Augustine in his discourses on the Psalms..

"accordingly, when we behold his exaltation [ on Cross of suffering & eventual triumph ] & his divinity, when we hear the words: "in the beginning was the Word, & the Word was with God, & the Word was God. All things were made through him, & without him nothing was made" when we behold this supreme divinity of the Son, we hear him also in some parts of the scriptures as it were sighing, praying, confessing. We hesitate to attribute these words to him, because our reflection has been contemplating him in his divinity & is reluctant to descend to his lowliness. It directed its words to him when it was praying to God, & now it wavers generally, as if it would be doing him a wrong to acknowledge his words as man, & it tries to change their meaning: & yet it means nothing in scripture except what always reverts to him, & does not allow it to turn away from him.

Let it wake up then & keep watch in its faith. [ it could almost be the call of Mary Magdalen to each of us this morning ] let it see that he whom it was contemplating a little earlier in the form of God, took on the form of a servant; made in the likeness of man & found in human form, he humbled himself, made obedient to death; & he wished to mke his own the words of the psalm, as he hung on the Cross & said:

"my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"..

He is prayed to in the form of God, he prays in the form of a servant: in the first case as creator, in the latter as created, the unchanged taking on the creature, that the creature may be changed, & making us with himself one man, head & body. We pray to him, through him, in him: we speak with him, he speaks with us."

His suffering throughout his life among us was real, culminating in the despair desolation & hopelessness of Gethsemane.."Father take this cup of suffering from me"..he had had enough, spent exhausted, given everything & had nothing left..his kenosis moment..self-emptied..he could no longer pray think decide choose..a void of nothingness of absence..& at that moment, the Holy Spirit got inside him like never before, free of self-fulness, plans expectations, even fears anxieties where there is still a final glimmer of hope..all had gone, & Holy Spirit entered then unimpeded..& he was then, only then, able to say "but let it be as you not I would have it" a prayer of self-surrender into whatever was to come..suffering death even Resurrection.. whatever..

so close to Mary's own "yes" response in which she knew there would be suffering.. vicarious suffering..& in her humanity she said "let it be done to me according to your word"..

..& how is our response in our own moments of Incarnation & of Gethsemane?..are we prepared to follow the birch twigs caringly placed by Our Lord, Mary of Nazareth & especially today by Mary of Magdalen..& knock at the door..twice?..& live..live for first time for many years, live with the consequences..a life & a journey no longer through quicksands but on the route of "pilgrims of hope"..with the door you have been entering into Abbey Church since you came on Maundy Thursday designated by our Bishop a Holy Door..did you know?..& what makes it holy?..it is your walking through it & making it holy by your holiness, your divinity as well as your humanity.. & now you know that, wouldn't it be great if, when you go to walk through it again later today & tomorrow, you turn to person behind you & invite them to walk through alongside you..person to person..heart to heart..Christ to Christ..will you think about it?..but will you do it?..

Some years ago, our then Bishop John Crowley confirmed 25 young people from parish of Our Lady & St Edward at Drifffield, who'd been here for a Confirmation retreat which I had led; they invited me to their Confirmation & the Abbot agreed I should go..in homily Bishop John opened both top & bottom of his stable door..told youngsters he found prayer difficult, sometimes impossible, & when he couldn't pray he said this to himself: "I can't..but we can"..a suffering servant of a Bishop who hit the rocks & quicksand sometime afterwards & resigned as our Bishop "I can't.." bless him..happy now in gentle ministry in London..still connected in love prayer & birch twigs with God's own county Yorkshire!..

..& for some of you..some of us..there may not yet be a full stable door moment..it will come believe me, perhaps not in chronos time, when we can time it & shape it but in kairos time, a Holy Spirit moment we can only wait patiently courageously hopefully for..like fathers wait for return of his beloved sons..both prodigal sons..one to come home down road, who'd never lost relationship with his father..the other to come home from his addiction to work, cohabiting with his father with daily benefits in kind, but no relationship from the heart..biding his chronos time for his fathers death & his rightful inheritance..three suffering servants, one farmhouse door..with hope for all three.."I can't..but we can"..

..shared with many of you before story of Rev Julie Nicholson Anglican Priest who lost her daughter Jenny in 7 July 2005 bombings in London; of the doors of hope she went through & is still going through 20yrs later..door to holiday cottage in Lake District where she was staying with her parents her husband & younger children..how her father brought news of bombings into kitchen as she cooked holiday breakfast.. how she rang Jenny's mobile & eventually her office for news of her safety..& she wasn't in office..news came later that night she was a victim..closing & locking door of holiday cottage & driving home..entering her own home in Bristol for first time, a different person, a different priest..3days later meeting Jenny's fiancé in London to go to memorial service in Trafalgar Square..on way a kairos moment..they went "ridiculously" she said into St Pauls Cathedral & asked to see a priest..she a priest..he came he listened & he took her hand & Jenny's fiances hand & said "I am an old man

now but I promise you I will pray for you both & for Jenny each day for the rest of my life”..

After memorial service she left Jenny’s fiancé to travel to her sisters in Reading..she tried to hail a taxi..taxi after taxi sped by..suddenly one stopped in front of her & a passenger got out..Julie stepped forward to get in door; taxi driver barked at her “sorry that’s my last fare of day I am finished” her anxious look elicited a question from him “where were you going?” “to Paddington Stn” he scoffed at her “that’s the last place you’d be wanting to get to at this time of night!”..& a kairos moment, he looked at her & said “get in”..on journey he spoke to her through rear view mirror; had she been shopping? no to the memorial service..did she know anyone & she explained the loss of Jenny..when he got close to Paddington, he told her to stay in & he drove her to her sisters in Reading..deeply grateful she asked what she owed him he said “nothing..I just wanted you to know there are still lots of good people around who care”..

“I can’t but we can..”

after Funeral Julie went back to ministry in Bristol..she celebrated the Eucharist each morning for her flock..she began, as we begin, with the words of reconciliation, & she felt herself a hypocrite, asking her flock to forgive those who had hurt them, when she couldn’t bring herself to forgive the suicide bomber who had killed her daughter..& she resigned her priesthood; she now works with young people in Bristol..her words on her resignation still inspire me, & I hope, through me, you..she said

“I can’t forgive Saddiq..for the time being”

she wasn’t going to say never..it would need time chronos time before a kairos moment might emerge..for which she then, & still, holds out hope..a doorway to hope..

..please pray for her today..as you leave or enter by our Holy Door, for a Trasn moment for her, a crossing place, a kairos moment where she can at last voice her beloved fellow suffering servants words in His kenosis moment, now & always alongside her in her Gethsemane moment..& alongside us in our Gethsemane moments..“let it be as you not I would have it”..

..my final two doors of this morning centre on a story from scripture & then a story from a classroom..

Our saint of the day for Holy Saturday must be Mary Magdalen..St Mary Magdalen named now in our liturgical calendar as “Apostle to the Apostles” what a woman & what a fitting title..she went to tomb to weep & to pray..nothing more..& to remember ..she found stone had been rolled away she met the gardener “tell me where you have put him” she asked, despairingly, as if things couldn’t get any worse..& he said one word “Mary” & she recognised voice & person..

..she ran as quickly as she could to upper room to where disciples were hiding..afraid of Jews & more importantly afraid of themselves..what’s next?..she battered on door ..one of them looked through spy hole to see who it was..they began to unlock door of hopelessness..four barrel bolts, two mortice bolts, three yale locks on it “just in case”.. she falls into room, gets eye contact with Peter, takes him by scruff of his tunic & with eyes like saucers, she exclaims full frontally “we have seen him..he is alive!”..& he looks back at her with a cold glazed look of disbelief..”he wouldn’t would he?..if it was true he would surely appear to us, to me, first, wouldn’t he?..wouldn’t he?” ..a cell door of an invisible prison..with real prospect of solitary confinement for life..when a simple profound expression of remorse & love would set them..us..& me..free..his

two closest followers by some distance Mary of Nazareth & Mary Magdalen..  
doorways of hope & of promise..

..& lastly, a teacher here on a day retreat with her colleagues explained over coffee she was about to retire from teaching after 25yrs..she had a Yr 11 class who were impossible, constantly misbehaving, rude unruly..she was terrified by them..reminded herself she was a good proven teacher..yet couldn't sleep Sun Tues & Thurs nights, dreading Yr 11 class next day..more she tried worse they got, so she had decided to retire..I told her story of Canaanite woman desperate for cure for her dying daughter, who met a tired exhausted spent & suffering Jesus, who'd nothing left when she pleaded with him.."he answered her not a word"..she persisted..he wouldn't budge, he insulted her calling her a "house-dog"..she got down on her knees in front of him & voiced her own Gethsamane prayer in suffering; "Lord help me".. he melted & cured her daughter..& she cured Jesus be sure of his infirmity.. so I suggested to my teacher, each time she crossed threshold into Yr 11 classroom.. a trasna moment..she should voice the woman's prayer "Lord help me" & 6 wks later an email, a resurrection moment, telling me how they had changed been transformed & all through a simple prayer..

"I can't but we can"

..let that be our mission statement for these last few precious hours of this Triduum.. here on this holy ground you have made holy by your real presence among us..& as a reminder of this encounter, please find & take home with you a small birch twig..& with it the code words for use at the doorway of hope in your next emergency moment .."Lord help me"

[ Easter Triduum; Holy Saturday Conference; 19 April 2025 ]

..supporting stories

- ..Noah & closing doors of the Ark in Must know stories Scripture Union
- ..Sieger Koder "return of prodigal " elder son opposite side of wall no door
- ..Gareth Southgate Dimbleby Lecture 19 March 2025 bbc iplayer
- ..St Bede's PS Marske Yr 4 & 5 retreat believe/achieve/send
- ..God Christ & us; Fr Herbert Mc Cabe OP

Let's think a bit more about gratitude & gifts. To be grateful for a gift is not just to value it, to find it good. It is also to see it & treat it as an expression of the value & goodness of the giver. The words "thank" & "think" come from the same root. To say "thank you" is to say "I think" of you in this gift. I see it as also a gift of yourself to me, as a communication of yourself to me.

Of course there is a lot of difference between seeing yourself as a gift from God & seeing other things as gifts. And there is one most important one. If someone gives you, let us say, a bottle of excellent wine, there are separate ways in which you could value it. You could value it for its price, for what it would fetch if you sold it. You could also value it precisely as a gift, as coming from the giver, as an expression of his or her love & friendship. Now the curious & mysterious thing about your self, the thing that makes you different from a bottle of wine [ & after all, one isn't simply a wine-container ] is this: you can value & enjoy the wine just for its own excellence, for its own sake, without considering either its price or who gave it to you. But if you try to value your self, your being for its own sake, you will find that you always slip into one of the other two ways of valuing. You will find that you are being smug & self-satisfied & valuing yourself for your possessions or achievements, which is like valuing the wine for its price. Or you will find that you are valuing yourself as a gift from God, as an expression of his love. There isn't any middle way. It doesn't seem possible to value yourself for what you are in yourself regardless of who gave you. In fact you are really rather more like a letter than a bottle of wine. Suppose that I happen to know a famous poet or novelist who writes me a letter with news about his family & what he is doing [ the poem or the novel he is working at ]. When I got the letter one thing I could think is how I could one day sell it so as to make money. I hope this would not be my first thought. I hope I would value the letter for what it is in itself. But when I do that I am immediately seeing it as coming from my friend. To value the letter for its own sake is to be grateful for it, to say "thank you", to think of my friend through it. Thinking of a bottle of wine as a gift is different from thinking of it in itself, but thinking of a letter as a gift is the same of thinking of it in itself.

Now it is this way with ourselves. To see ourselves as gift from God is just to look deeply into ourselves, to see ourselves for what we really are. You cannot love yourself, your real self [ as distinct from valuing your price or what you will fetch ] without being grateful to God, without thanking him, thinking him through yourself. And it is only when you do this, when you thank God for yourself, for the gift of existence, that you are released from the prison of self-seeking to value others for their own sake, which is to value them too as gifts of God. That is why Jesus tells us to love our neighbour as ourselves. He is asking us to love our neighbour in the way we love ourselves- in gratitude to God.

But there is much more to it than this. For when you do it, when you actually thank God for your being & for others [ not just when you think about it but when you do it ], you discover a further truth: that the thing you are most grateful for, the greatest gift of God, is the gratitude itself. The greatest gift of God to you is not just that he made you, but that you love him. The greatest gift of God to you is that you can speak with him & say "thank you" to him as a friend-that you are on intimate speaking terms with God. God has made us not just his creatures, but his lovers; he has given us not just our existence, our life, but a share in his life. We converse familiarly with God on equal terms as the Son does with the Father. We love God with the same love that

Jesus had for him, the love we call the Holy Spirit. And we love ourselves not only because we came forth from God but because our life is God's life, the life of the Spirit. That means that whatever you do from love for anyone is not just a sign of human goodness, not just a sign of the goodness God has given you, but a manifestation of God. In our everyday acts of friendship, forbearance, forgiveness, we reveal the eternal love of God to the world. We bring the world to the presence of God. And we do this because we love ourselves as gift of God, as filled with the Holy Spirit, the eternal life of God. And this life is one which we shall have & enjoy in eternity, when all the masks have perished & there is no more striving for importance, achievements, or even for goodness. This life is one in which we shall live as God himself lives in the eternal exchange of love.

[ God, Christ & Us by Fr Herbert McCabe OP ]