

# AT THE CROSS - JESUS’S SEVEN SAYINGS

## OUTLINE:

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## Introduction

St. Paul wrote

*‘God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.’*

The key word is *glory*.

This article examines Jesus’s seven sayings or ‘Words’ from the Cross. It was originally written as a Good Friday meditation on the Cross, and there are prayers and thoughts at the end of each section if you wish to use it in that way. Some hymns are also suggested in the Appendix.

Our Lord’s seven sayings from the Cross are as follows:

1. *Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.*
2. *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*  
(Spoken to the penitent thief)
3. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*
4. To Mary, and to the Beloved Disciple –  
*Woman, here is your Son* and *Here is your mother.*
5. *I am thirsty.*
6. *It is finished.*
7. *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*

Knowing what you do, they may not surprise you. But if you or I knew only that Christ suffered crucifixion and had to imagine what he might have said during that torture, we would never ever have imagined such remarks! The majority of those crucified cursed and swore, and that is not surprising because we get the word ‘ex-**cruc**-iating’ from torture by ‘**cruc**-ifixion’.

Seen afresh, Christ’s words are almost unbelievable! Peter cursed and swore vehemently when someone merely asked him whether he had been with Jesus! But Jesus’s words are not words of anger, or of physical pain, but comments of love, of prayer and of forgiveness. (Even *I am thirsty* is not, as we shall see later, a request to ease his agony.) In the Words from the Cross we are face-to-face with something, or rather someone, the like of which the world had never before met.

These seven sentences, or ‘Words’ as they are often called, come from the four different Gospel writers. It is helpful to know a little of each.

## THE WRITERS

The writers were, of course, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. [As we are not dealing with questions of authorship I shall use as personal names the titles of their Gospels.]

Mark was the first and shortest Gospel.

About twenty years later, both Luke and Matthew incorporated Mark into their larger Gospels, together with other material that they had gleaned.

John's Gospel is not dependent on Mark, and was written last. The earlier ones by comparison are more concerned with what happened, John is primarily concerned with the *meaning* of what happened. John is, therefore, much deeper in its symbolism than the three earlier ones.

Each Gospel has its own style and characteristics, and it is possible to deduce which of the seven 'Words' of Christ from the Cross came from which Gospel.

- **MARK** is vivid, short and abrupt. He never soft-peddles a difficulty. He recorded for us – ‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*’ - a statement of almost theological embarrassment!
- **MATTHEW** writes for Jews and has a major aim to make every link possible between the New Testament events he is recounting and the Old Testament. So as he is using Mark as a source, he copies this, but apparently knows of nothing else that Jesus said.
- **LUKE** (who wrote Acts as well) is passionately concerned for the outreach of the Gospel to different groups and outsiders. He stresses the love and forgiveness of our Father – God. It is Luke alone who gives us the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, and his loving Father. So it is Luke who records Christ's address to his *Father* both at the beginning and at the end of his time on the Cross: ‘*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*’, and, at the end: ‘*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*’  
It is Luke who, typically, opts to record Jesus's words to the outsider, the Penitent Thief – ‘*...today you will be with me in Paradise*’.
- **JOHN** wants to bring out the really significant sayings. He hands down to us the great theological declaration of victory; ‘*It is finished.*’  
Jesus's preparatory request for water, ‘*I am thirsty*’, is also picked up by John, but passed unnoticed by the other Gospel-writers. It was John, of course, who earlier in his Gospel had given us the story of Jesus and the woman at the well (4:4-30). Jesus had said to her, ‘*Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty*’ (v. 13) and later John explains that Jesus ‘*said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive*’. (7:39)  
That leaves only one of the ‘Words’ from the Cross – ‘*Woman, here is your Son*’ and ‘*Here is your mother*’. Leaving aside whether the Beloved Disciple is John, the use of the word *woman* of a son to a mother is very strange indeed and unknown in ancient literature. But, as we shall see later, John is employing great symbolism here.

Such then are the Gospel-writers' selection of Jesus's Words from the Cross.

## **Part I - The Cross and the Family of Forgiveness.**

The first Word from the Cross is in Luke 23:34;

***'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'***

As I prepared this I was struck by the way that each saying could relate not only to Christ in the past but to Christ's Body, his Family, the Church, today. I want not just to return to the past event of the Cross, but to allow its message to guide us forward. So each section is headed 'The Cross and the Family...'. This first part is **The Cross and the Family of Forgiveness.**

Jesus's words from the Cross begin and end with the words addressed to his Father. This is of *immense* significance.

If we ask ourselves who sent Jesus to the Cross, the answer is not the Jews, but the Father. The sad history of the Jews would have been very different had Christians grasped more fully what the New Testament teaches. Jesus was not taken against his will to die, he offered himself to die for us in obedience to his Father.

This is not some fancy theory of mine. It explains why, at Gethsemane, Christ prays '***Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.***' [Mark 14:36, Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42]

At birth he was told to be given the name ***Jesus*** [Luke 1:31]. Why? Because he would ***save his people from their sins*** [Matthew 1:21]. The moment he was so-named, the Cross was inevitable, because the way God had chosen for Jesus to save his people was along the lines of the Old Testament sacrifices: he was to die for them.

Jesus saved us from sin in the only way that Jews had any hope of understanding. The Good News translation of Hebrews 10:9-10 expresses it clearly –

***So God does away with the old sacrifices and puts the sacrifice of Christ in their place. Because Jesus Christ did what God wanted him to do, we are all purified from sin by the offering that he made of his own body once and for all.***

Early in his ministry Jesus had said to a cripple '***Your sins are forgiven.***' The religious leaders reacted rightly '***Who can forgive sins but God alone?***' [Mark 2:6 ff]. His ministry now virtually over, he asks his Father to forgive. To whom does his heart go out in the midst of this torture? To the very ones who are causing him agony, for in Luke's account this appears to have been after they had just nailed him to the Cross [see 23:33-34].

What a lesson for us!!

Notice that while Jesus knew virtually nothing about his torturers he takes hold of the only thing in their favour – their ignorance of what they are doing – and pleads with his Father for their forgiveness! How different from us! We so often dwell on what is worst among those who hurt us and endlessly complain either to ourselves, others, God, or to all three about them! We all can realise the supernatural nature of the love at work here.

Forgiveness springs from love and the love of Christ excludes no one. If Christ could pray forgiveness for his torturers, we can rest assured he is praying for *us and for our forgiveness* [Hebrews 7:25]. After all he did teach us to pray ‘*but forgive us our sins*’ [Matt. 6:12, Luke 11:4]. But this petition in the Lord’s Prayer has a stipulation – ‘*as we forgive those who sin against us*’.

This is not a harsh qualification to reduce the number of candidates for forgiveness! It is there because Christ assumed that when his Spirit is at work within us with a love given us beyond the natural [Romans 5:5], this will not only reconcile us to the Father [Romans 8:15] but to one another and to those who have hurt us.

*‘Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.’*

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PRAYER:

**Heavenly Father,**

**We marvel at the obedience of your Son and of its cost to him.**

**We marvel at the forgiveness of your Son to those who caused him greatest pain.**

**We marvel at the depth of your Love in giving your Son, and in your Son’s love in offering himself for us, for our sins and for our forgiveness.**

**‘Dearly, dearly he has loved and we must love him too.’**

**Bestow afresh upon us and upon your Church the Holy Spirit of Jesus, that your love may be poured into our hearts so that a new forgiveness overflows us and our homes as it overflowed Calvary.**

**Lord Jesus, you ‘died that we might be forgiven and died to make us good’, touch us, cleanse us, that forgiven we may be instruments of your forgiveness.**

**In your name we ask this.**

**Amen.**

TO PONDER:

**Think of those you have not forgiven. Some today, others a long long time ago. Perhaps you have never forgiven yourself? Open your heart to receive the forgiveness of Christ.**

## PART II - The Cross and the Family of Pilgrimage

*Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Jesus. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.*

*And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one.’*

*The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’*

*There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’*

*One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’*

*But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’*

*Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’*

[Luke 23:32-3, 35-43]

This is a fascinating incident. We do not know what the thieves believed before their encounter with Christ on the nearby Cross. It is wonderful what negative things God can use to bring about his saving work among us. I have included the entire passage because it is quite likely that it was the content of what those *against* Jesus said and did that led to the conversion and salvation of this criminal!

It was from Jesus’s enemies that the seeds of belief may have been implanted.

The religious leaders jeered ‘*He saved others*’ [Luke 23:35]. Were they used by God to implant the thought in the criminal’s mind ‘Perhaps he could save me?’

‘*Let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one*’, the Jewish leaders let slip. ‘Perhaps he is the Messiah of God the chosen one!’ the criminal may have thought to himself.

This thief must have been already stunned by the incredible peace, composure, dignity and silence of Jesus on the Cross alongside him. In addition the offence for which Jesus was condemned was written out above his head (as, probably, were the sentences of the two robbers for it was the custom). But what Pilate had caused to be written was itself more of a testimony than a crime! ‘**THE KING OF THE JEWS**’.

The folk around weren’t ignoring this; the soldiers were repeating it in mockery, saying ‘*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!*’ [Luke 23:37]. The other criminal was obviously impressed as well, he clearly believed that Jesus could rescue him, for he shouted out in anger ‘*Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*’ [Luke 23:39].

In this thief’s recent experience, therefore, there was pointer after pointer to who Christ really was – not coming from his followers (who had mostly deserted) but from Christ’s *enemies*.

Jesus's place on the Cross was originally meant for Barabbas who had caused an uprising in the town and committed murder. [Luke 23:19]

Probably the two criminals were caught at the same time. If so, instead of having their leader, a murderer, at their head, they had the Prince of Life. Such is human nature that we tend to choose evil instead of what is lovely – as most newspapers demonstrate. The poet Samuel Crossman in his hymn expressed it best –

**‘A murderer they save, The Prince of Life they slay’.**

The other thief had enough faith in Jesus to think that he might enable them to escape. This first thief, though, has a strong sense of justice, and knows that God doesn't twist it. He, therefore, takes up what so many of the things around seemed to be saying about Jesus and addresses him as a King. He does this not in mockery like the soldiers, but reverently and humbly:

***‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’***

Some Bible translations use the word ‘*reign*’ for ‘*kingdom*’. A ‘*kingdom*’ speaks to us of something geographical and static, like the Kingdom of Great Britain. But ‘*Kingdom*’ in the New Testament is not a place or a static thing but something personal and something dynamic. God's *Kingdom* is where he is known and seen to be active and at work, ruling. So the ‘*Kingdom*’ is about Jesus reigning, it is not a territory that he might own. The thief's request is more like asking to enlist in the army than choosing a place to visit!

The thief does not question the Kingship of Jesus, or mock the Kingship of Jesus, but entrusts himself to him as *King*. He seems to have been pretty persistent, for the Greek implies that he said this a number of times.

The thief had little to recommend him. It may pull us up with a start to realise that the one whom Jesus welcomed immediately and without question to be with him in Paradise, would by many churches have been refused membership or, perhaps, Communion because of his lack of teaching and preparation!

***‘Truly I tell you’***, says Jesus from the Cross, ***‘today you will be with me in Paradise.’***

I think that the Church, in a right desire not to allow or encourage wrong belief, has reduced, sometimes beyond recognition, the overwhelming love and generosity of God.

While it is desirable that Christians should have orthodox belief about, say, the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, both Jesus and the New Testament itself seem to have had no desire to make a list of beliefs a necessary qualification for adoption, membership and discipleship. The New Testament seems to require little more than the two-word belief – **JESUS (is) LORD** [e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:3] – though, rightly understood, it has quite enormous repercussions in the area of belief. Jesus seems much readier to accept people as they are, once he was aware of a desire to turn to him, than his followers have been. Jesus is more adventurous in being willing to build upon a very fragile faith rather than exclude those in need of him. Today's

Church, by and large, is rather too decent, and is not always good with those who have failed in some way.

Jesus's words of promise to the Penitent Thief are, I believe, a great challenge to us and a warning that Jesus came, as he said, *to call not the righteous but sinners* [Mark 2:17].

Christ knew and experienced the sort of horror that many in the Church today have for those who have failed in their morals or their behaviour. The difference between him and us is that Christ did not direct it at the failures at all! – but to the religious folk who thought themselves righteous! [e.g. Mark 12:37-40, Matthew 23:1-36] It is the *self-righteous* that Jesus attacks with the bitterest words and the sinners whom he most warmly welcomes. Thus to the Penitent Thief he says *‘I assure you, this day you will be with me in Paradise.’* It is a continual challenge to us about the directions of our anger and of our love.

The meaning of ‘*Today*’ and of ‘*Paradise*’ has a number of interpretations, which I shall not dwell on. What I want us to feel is the great undeserved PROMISE of it, and the generosity of it. The following lines express God's generosity so well:

**We, one and all, of him (Christ) possessed.  
Are with exceeding treasures blessed:  
For all he did, and all he bare,  
He gives us as our own to share.  
Eternal glory, rest on high,  
And blessed immortality.  
True peace and gladness and a throne,  
Are all his gifts and all our own.**

This, for me, captured what I wanted us to feel as we heard again Christ's words to the Penitent Thief. I was reminded of the words from the Prayer Book that says of God that – ‘he is more willing to hear than we to pray and more willing to give more than either we desire or deserve’.

Jesus's words to the dying thief must be seen not as a problem but a promise, ‘*with me in Paradise*’. The meaning of the Greek is not simply being in the company of onlookers, but being so with Christ as to be reigning with him. [A thought expounded by St. Paul.]

I have headed this section **The Cross and the Family of Pilgrimage**.

I chose the word **Pilgrimage** because it is one of movement. The thief was promised *Paradise* with Christ, and so are we. The New Testament writers are clear that our citizenship is in heaven [Philippians 3:20]. Here we are just passing through, like migrating birds. This eternal dimension should inevitably colour all our thinking, our assumptions, our view of life, and our view of death. The non-Christian finds his roots in the past and below. The Christian, by comparison is very odd, like the penitent thief, our roots are not in the past but in the **future!** Not downward, but **upward!**



Paul, writing to Timothy, has this to say –

*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David – that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. [2 Timothy 2:8-12].*

*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’*

Jesus says, *‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’*

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PRAYER:

**Heavenly Father,**

**We thank you for sending your Son so that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. [John 3:16]**

**We acknowledge our utter unworthiness, matched only by your utter love for us. Forgive us when we have driven others from you by demanding of them in your Name what you yourself would not demand of them.**

**Give us, by your Holy Spirit, a greater awareness of the saving nature of your Gospel, a greater knowledge of the extent of your love.**

**We give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son, dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace and opened the Gate of Glory.**

**Lord, make us instruments of your peace, use us to welcome others in your Name, to introduce them to yourself and travel with them towards and through the Gate of Glory.**

**In your Name and for your Glory we ask this.**

**Amen.**

TO PONDER:

**Think of where your real ‘home’ is.**

**Think of Jesus’s warning to seek first the Kingdom of God rather than earthly treasures, since our hearts invariably tie us to what we treasure most.**

**[see Matthew 6:21]**

## PART III - The Cross and the Family of Suffering

There may be some of you who are familiar with the Seven words from the Cross, and have noted that I have changed the traditional order of three and four!

In this section are usually the words of Jesus to his Mother and the Beloved Disciple. But, if you read that account in John's Gospel it says ‘...*from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, ...*’ [John 19:27-28] One gets the impression that the last thing Jesus felt it necessary to do was to commend the Beloved Disciple and his Mother to one another. There is a strong hint that the same disciple was back at the Cross when the soldiers pierced Jesus's side [John 19:34].

Those who take *from that hour* to mean from that ‘moment’ believe that John took Mary home, left her there and came back again later – hence the traditionally ‘earlier’ position of this saying. It is more likely that John is using the word ‘*hour*’ in the same way he did in numerous other places to refer to this hour of Christ's glory and that it does not mean 60 minutes (with Mary taken off and left – which I think is unlikely) but simply **from this time**. When we come to later sections, the later placing of this event is important.

But now for the third ‘Word’. It is the only one recorded by Mark and is the first verse of Psalm 22, which many Christians use on Maundy Thursday.

Mark was not one of the disciples, but it was his mother whose house had been used for the Last Supper [Acts 12:12]. Mark's Gospel tells of a strange little incident at Jesus's arrest. A young lad, whom he does not name, is captured but by wriggling out of his robe/nightshirt manages to get away! [Mark 14:51] There would have been little point in including it if it had not meant something special to the writer and it is not fanciful to believe that Mark continued to hover around the events of the next twelve hours with youthful fascination and curiosity.

For Mark in his account not simply records what Jesus said but the actual words he used. As we hear the words in Aramaic we come the closest we shall ever come to hearing the earthly words of Jesus of Nazareth – *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani*. Mark, writing in Greek, recorded them as, I suspect, he actually heard them. He is the only Gospel writer to do so at Calvary. Jesus is not quoting from his ‘Authorised Version’. It is not quoting from the official translation used in synagogue but in his own words and in local dialect. *He had taken the truths of Scripture and made them his own*. Surely this is a great lesson to Christians who think that Christ wants us to be glued to ancient translations of God's Scriptures that speak in a way that is not natural for us.

***Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani.***

If we overheard noises like that on the bus, we'd think ‘*He's a foreigner!*’ These words are a simple but timely reminder that God is not British, nor was his Son Anglo-Saxon. The blonde pale long-haired man that adorns so many books and stained glass windows says more about us than about the historical Jesus.

Jesus was neither ‘white-skinned, white-collared, nor wealthy’ and this ought to shake some of the thinking and assumption among Churches that are so. Jesus is not one of **us** whose guidance we need in dealing with other races: He is one of **them**. Jesus was Third World. He had *nowhere to lay his head* [Matthew 8:20, Luke 9:58]. He was rejected in his home town [Mark 6:4]. Christ was of ‘no fixed address’. His country was one under foreign occupation.

It comes as something of a shock to realise that this so-called Christian country might well turn back Jesus of Nazareth if he applied for citizenship, or attempted to come through customs! It is true that Jesus came to be ‘one of us’ and that the white will always think of him as white and the black think of him as black. Both are theologically true to the meaning of the Incarnation. But we have to safeguard against wrapping Jesus up in the grave clothes of our culture and crushing all the life out of him.

We are always tempted to make God in our own image, because our own image is the only one we ever really feel comfortable with!

‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.*’ Mark gives us the translation [as does Matthew when he copied it, 27:46]. This has traditionally been termed ‘The Cry of Dereliction’. I am not at all sure that it is only that. It is easy for Westerners with little knowledge of the Old Testament to bring to such a phrase what Jesus and his contemporaries would never bring to it.

If, say, at the bedside of a dying friend, he murmurs ‘*The Lord is my Shepherd*’, those words and their context are so familiar to us that we would automatically invest them with the content of Psalm 23. We would assume that our friend was, in the minimum number of words, telling us that Psalm 23 summed it all up and we would be comforted as we remembered that it included the affirmation ‘*in death’s dark vale I’ll fear no ill.*’.

So here, I believe, being unable to say more than a few words at a time, Jesus, in physical agony, communicates to those around him that Psalm 22 *sums it all up*. All those around would have been fools not to know what he was saying.

Interestingly the writer of John’s Gospel actually quoted verse 19 of this same Psalm – ‘*They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.*’ [John 19:24].

I cannot quote here Psalm 22 in full. In the most remarkable way it is fulfilled by Christ on the Cross:

- The mocking, verses 6-7, 13-14
- The physical agony, verses 14-15
- The piercing of his hands and feet, verse 17
- The casting lots for his garments, verse 18

While not wishing at all to minimise the spiritual agony Christ endured on the Cross I feel that the amazing content of this Psalm must lead us to the Psalm itself as being part of Jesus’s message rather than just to the first verse that tells of being forsaken.

The Psalmist's experience of God in it is not just one of dereliction but of continued trust in him and in his deliverance –

*Do not be far from me, for trouble is near, and there is no one to help (v.11)  
You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!  
For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him. (v. 23-24)*

Even if I am wrong, I think you will understand my eagerness to take verse one in the context of the whole. For I cannot envisage either Jesus or those Jewish leaders around him, or his disciples – all of whom will have known the Psalms better than anything else written – mentally restricting themselves to verse one, when right before them the entire Psalm was being fulfilled.

What of ourselves? The experience of God's absence is something that many of the Saints have encountered at one time or another. It is often called the 'Dark Night of the Soul' or the 'Cloud of Unknowing'. In this experience God withdraws our awareness of his Presence. When this happens in the life of a Christian it is not a punishment for being bad but a growth experience perhaps even for being good! It is given to stop the Christian from relying on his / her feelings of God's nearness. The feelings of God's nearness are not God HIMSELF and must not be confused with him.

It is a bit like the dog-handler and his dog. For a long, long time the dog related to his Master and the Master to the dog through a **lead**. Over a long period the dog begins to know the mind of his Master and begins to respond without the Master telling him because they are becoming close and becoming one. One day, when the relationship has grown to this degree of trust and unity, the Master will venture to stop using the lead – and perhaps never use it again. With the removal of the lead, the dog cannot feel his Master and has to rely instead not on what the lead enabled him to **sense**, but on his deep knowledge and love of his Master. If the Master times this moment right, the relationship between him and his dog will have made a quantum leap forward in love and trust and obedience. A Benedictine monk who was my spiritual director for many years told me once 'I have been in the Dark Night of the Soul for the last twenty five years.' He had walked by his Master without a lead for twenty-five years. He was internationally known as a wise and very special man of God.

We are called to share Christ's suffering. We are the Body of Christ today and much that he went through we, as a Body, go through. That is why it is so important to have a world-wide view of the Church. For our Church Family is suffering, there have been more Christian martyrs this century than any other – they are not 'them' but 'us'.

The Christian position in relation to suffering must be careful to avoid the extremes of all gloom and doom on the one hand and a totally unrealistic assumption that we will not in some way share the sufferings of our Lord.

Jesus got it exactly right (as we might expect!) –

*‘In the world you face persecution. But take courage, I have conquered the world!’* [John 16:33] The route to Victory is not usually by by-passing pain, but by going through it. The Easter glory is not reached by any other route than that of Calvary. But the two cannot be separated. If the shadows of the Cross fall upon your life they are there because the Easter Dawn has broken.

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PRAYER:

**Heavenly Father,**

**We pray for those who know you not and who are unaware of your presence and your love.**

**We pray for those of different races and cultures. We pray in thanksgiving for your chosen people, the Jews, for Peter, for Paul and for our Gospel writers.**

**We pray for ourselves recognising the areas in our lives that are forsaken by you because we have locked the doors and stopped you entering. We thank you that you stand patiently knocking, waiting for us to hear, waiting for us to open.**

[Revelations 3:20]

**Lord, you gave all for us, give us grace to give more to you, so that every department of our living is ablaze with your Presence and your Glory. ‘Keep, O keep us, Saviour dear, ever constant by thy side, that with you we may appear at the eternal Eastertide.’**

**Amen.**

TO PONDER:

**Bring to God the persecutions upon your life.**

**Maybe there is a wrong absence of persecution through your failure to be a witness?**

**Allow Christ to speak to you on the thoughts that arise.**

## PART IV - The Cross and the Family of Unity

We come in this section to Jesus's words addressed first to his Mother and then to the disciple whom Jesus loved. John 19:25-28 reads –

*Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.*

*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.'*

*Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother'.*

*And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, ...*

We're now in John's Gospel and have to readjust ourselves accordingly!

You'll know well enough that while Matthew and Luke deal with the Christmas event by telling us stories about the manger, the shepherds and the Magi, John's Gospel begins quite differently. John begins with a deliberate echo of Genesis – *In the beginning was the Word* [John 1:1, compare Genesis 1:1 '*In the beginning God*']. John's writing is full of deliberate echoes of other things and deep in symbolism.

There are a number of unexpected things about this. The first is that the Mother of Jesus appears in two major incidents in John's Gospel, but in neither case does Jesus call her '*Mother*'! Also rather unexpectedly, Jesus addressed his mother here as '*Woman*'. (John is not allergic to the name since there are fifteen other references in his Gospel to Mary's.) This sounds harsh in English, and such usage was unheard of in the ancient world. No record has survived of a son addressing his mother just as 'woman'. (Some modern translations try to soft-peddle this, the New International Version has 'dear woman', but that is just meddling with the text. If the Gospel writer had intended 'dear woman' he was quite capable of making it clear!)

John introduces Mary right at the **beginning** and right at the **end** of Jesus's ministry: at Cana, and at Calvary. He obviously sees significance in this. It is no surprise therefore, that when we turn to the first appearance of Jesus's Mother at the Wedding in Cana it throws considerable light on her last appearance (in John's Gospel that is) at Calvary.

At Cana she tells Jesus of the need of those around – a good picture of intercession which is for many Christians so strongly linked with Mary. Jesus, almost abruptly turns to her and, guess what? – doesn't call her 'Mother' but, as here, 'Woman'. He says, '*Woman what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.*' [John 2:4]

In John's Gospel the term '*hour*' has a very special meaning. It is the time when Jesus will be glorified. By this John means the Passion-Death-Resurrection-Ascension of Jesus. This occupies the second part of the Gospel which divides into two parts at chapter 13. The second section begins –

*Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father* (13:1). Earlier, Jesus knew of this and so prays to the Father – *And what should I say – “Father, save me from this hour?” No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.* (12:27)

At Cana Mary is almost rebuked for expecting too early a sign from Jesus (for Jesus acted only at the Father’s bidding and in the Father’s good time).

What would John want us to have in mind when we read of Jesus calling his mother ‘*Woman*’?

You remember that John began his Gospel of the New Creation by deliberately echoing Genesis and the Old Creation? The ‘*woman*’ in the Old Testament is the partner of the first man. (‘Adam’ is not a name, it is simply the Hebrew word ‘man’, and the *woman* was not named until later.)

We meet this in one of the famous Christmas readings –

Because of the woman’s disobedience the Lord says to the Serpent / Devil:

*‘I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
And between your offspring and hers;  
he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.’* [Genesis 3:15]

In simple language this means that the Devil and the human race are at loggerheads; but while they will fight one another, there will come from the human race one who will strike a mortal blow at evil. The serpent will only strike us on the heel (i.e. he can harm us but not kill us) but it will be one of *us*, i.e. one of the descendants of the first *woman*, who will strike him that fatal blow on the head.

Of course the one who dealt the Devil a fatal blow is **Christ**, and it was on the Cross that the **mortal blow was given**. Jesus is, as St. Paul teaches, another *Adam* [see e.g. Romans 5:12 ff.]. We use this thought when we sing Newman’s words:

‘the second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came’

In 1 Corinthians 15:22 Paul writes ‘*for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.*’

Probably because of the wording in St. John’s Gospel and Jesus’s use of the term *woman* with its deep and close links with Creation, the early Christians picked up quickly the parallels and contrasts between the two **women** – Eve and Mary.

In simple terms: Eve’s disobedience caused Adam to wreck the human race; Mary’s obedience enabled Christ to redeem it. Just as Jesus is Adam in-reverse, not the Wrecker but the Saviour, [see 1 Corinthians 15:20-22, 45-49], so Mary is Eve in reverse.

What I have written about the **woman** in the Old and the New Creations helps us understand better John's account of Jesus's word to his mother from the Cross.

John is dealing deeply in symbols and not only does not name Mary but does not name the disciple either, preferring to call him simply the **Disciple** [18:15, 16, 19:26, 27]. The author is not wanting us to focus on historical individuals so much as on great symbolic figures. The second **woman** whose offspring will crush the serpent's head [Genesis 3:15] and the **disciple** whom Jesus loved are depicted not so much as historical personalities but as models for us. We are, each of us, in some sense to be identified both as loving disciples and as Jesus's closest relations [Mark 3:31-35].

The **woman**, Mary, **stood** at the Cross. The swooning Virgin so prominent in Christian art is not Scriptural, but the product of Christian sentiment or piety. Jesus had repeatedly taught his followers that his real relations were not of blood but of the Spirit. ***'Whoever does the will of God is my mother and brother and sister and mother'***. [Mark 3:35]

The **Jesus-Woman-Disciple** group at the Cross becomes therefore a symbolic picture of the Church. Christ, the Cross, the many women who do his Father's will and are therefore his spiritual family and the many disciples, standing together, facing Christ, at the Cross, related in the Family of Faith and committed to one another in unity.

Here is the 'conception' (if you like) of the Church Family. This is the epitome of the Church, this is the simplest picture we can have of it.

Jesus does not, as it is so easy to assume, first and foremost give the **disciple** to the **woman** as a comfort to Mary in her bereavement. No, it is the other way about! He offers the **mother** to the **disciple**. It was the disciples (most of whom had fled) who needed the Mother of Jesus. It is interesting that what is the final historical glimpse of Mary in the new Testament comes after the Resurrection and we see her as a very central figure in the Church Family.

Luke tells us, in Acts, that after the Ascension the Infant Church awaited the Promise of the Father [Acts 1:4-5], the Holy Spirit.

***Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet,... When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying. Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*** [Acts 1:12-14]

'The Cross and the Family of Unity'. The Cross draws together all those of Christ's spiritual family-relations. When we allow divisions between Christ's relations we are denying and undermining Christ's work on the Cross. Christians are a family not because we like every other member but because Christ Our Lord gave his life for each single one of us. That is our unity. It is not optional, and we sin if we appear to deny it.



St. Paul wrote *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;* [2 Corinthians 5:18].

‘Woman, here is your son.’ ‘Here is your mother’

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PRAYER:

Heavenly Father,

We thank you that in the life and person of Christ you reconciled us again to yourself, bridging the gap caused by our sin.

*‘As in Adam all die even so in Christ shall all be made alive.’*

We thank you that we are of the New Covenant, not expelled from earthly Paradise but inheritors of the Paradise that is eternal.

We thank you for Mary, the first to say ‘Yes’ to Jesus; we are challenged by her obedience and her humility, we pray that we too would be so overshadowed by the Holy Spirit that our lives too would be those in which Jesus is born anew, and that we – like Mary – may present Christ to the World as its only hope and only Saviour.

As we ponder your commendation of Mary and the Beloved Disciple to each other, we hear you commend to us as mothers and sons and brothers and sisters all Christians everywhere: those who doubt and those who are certain, the traditional and the modern, the hesitant and the dogmatic, the rigid and the relaxed, those who share our views and those who differ from them. Those who find change abhorrent and those who are addicted to it, yet who are one with us in acknowledging and serving Jesus as Lord.

Father we hear again that we are one Family, not of our own creating, but of your loving and your calling.

Commit us afresh to one another. May we endeavour *to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* [Ephesians 4:3]

Amen.

TO PONDER:

Think of your relationships to your own family and to your ‘spiritual’ Family (the Church).

Ask yourself whether you have brought division or perpetuated it in either, or whether – as God has called you – you are a minister of reconciliation.

## PART V - The Cross and the Family of Victory

I have combined in this fifth section the final two ‘Words’ of Christ from the Cross. Both

*‘I am thirsty’*

and

*‘It is finished.’*

They are closely linked, let us read below the context from John, chapter nineteen.

*After this, [i.e. the commendation of his mother to the disciple] when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), ‘I am thirsty’. A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.*

*When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished’.* [John 19:28-30]

This comes from St. John’s Gospel, so we’re dealing once again not simply with descriptions of events but with the significance of them. We tend to think that if someone does not capture exactly what happens then they are not telling the ‘truth’. But a writer may well treat lightly what happened in order to convey the truth better! (This is why drama is often more ‘true’ to us than news-reel.)

A minute description of how a ring of gold is pushed over the flesh of a woman’s fourth finger doesn’t actually tell us much ‘truth’ about the couple, the wedding or the marriage! In many TV sports programmes for every minute spent telling us what happened there are five minutes spent telling us the *significance* of what happened or its repercussions. The meaning of things has always been important.

Earlier I commented on John’s reporting of Jesus’s words to his mother. You may wish to believe that Jesus himself said ‘woman’, or that the writer of John’s Gospel was Spirit-inspired to change ‘mother’ to ‘woman’ because it would lead us into more truth. This is nothing unexpected.

The Gospel writer John moved more than the occasional word! For example – Mark, Matthew and Luke have the Last Supper take place at one time, but John shifts it a bit, and makes it coincide with the slaying of the Passover Lambs. John the Baptist had greeted Christ with the words – *‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’* [John 1:29] We learn more about the significance of Jesus, more about the ‘truth’ of Jesus by the shift that John makes, than we do from the earlier Gospels’ probably more chronologically accurate description. John is not telling lies about Jesus, he is writing to convey the maximum truth about Jesus.

*‘I am thirsty.’* As I wrote above in the first section, one would expect John to have been the one to pick up and hand on this particular saying. Earlier in his Gospel he, alone of the Gospel writers, had recorded the conversation between Jesus and the Woman at the Well. Jesus says then – *‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a*

*spring of water gushing up to eternal life.*’ [John 4:13-14]. Since no water can literally provide *eternal life* we are alerted to the fact that Jesus is not speaking literally, but figuratively. In chapter seven we read of Jesus’s teaching in the Temple area. John tells us –

*On the last of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.* [John 7:37-39]

If, as the Gospel-writer would expect, you would sit down and read his Gospel more or less straight through like any other book, ‘I thirst’ would, here, strike you with painful irony. Here, the Giver of the Water of Life begs his torturers for a drink.

Earlier Jesus had refused drugged wine which the women of Jerusalem offered criminals as an act of mercy to deaden their pain. Jesus refused this because he was called to bear the weight of our sin to the full. But now his ministry is finished, he has nothing more to do. He asks for water – in Greek he croaks just one word ‘*Duxo*’. His pain is about to end, he asked this not for his comfort but in order to shout out in triumph! Mark and Matthew record that Christ made an enormous shout, but do not tell us the words.

The soldiers were only allowed to drink a vinegar-wine when on duty and it was this that was offered to Jesus on, of all unlikely things, a reed of hyssop. Hyssop was, as you may recall, that which was used by the Jews during their great Deliverance from Egypt to smear the doorposts with blood so that the Angel of the Lord would ‘Pass-over’ their homes without slaughter [Exodus 12:22].

The most natural and accurate translation is ***Jesus YELLED!*** (Mark 15:37, Matthew 27:50, Luke 23:46) What he had to say he wanted to be heard by all.

***‘IT IS FINISHED!’***

It might equally well be translated ‘**it is accomplished**’ or even ‘**The Task is done**’ (E.V. Rieu)

Earlier Jesus’s disciples had begged him not to go to Jerusalem, but he had ‘set his face as a flint’ to go there. He knew, and predicated what would happen, Mark tells us –

*Jesus took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, [he had warned them twice before, Mark 8:31-33, 9:30-32] saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”* [Mark 10:32-34]

The first time Jesus had warned them, Simon Peter had tried to divert Christ from obeying the Father. In so doing he was momentarily an instrument of Satan. ***‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’*** [Mark 8:33]

Jesus, as we saw in Part I, was not put to death against his will by the Jews, but in obedience to his heavenly Father, he offered to lay down his life for us. The Father sent him to the Cross, the Jewish leaders and Pilate were used by God for what we might call literally ‘the execution of his will’.

At birth Christ was, as we have already seen, given the name Jesus, ***‘for he will save his people from their sins’***. The Cross was inevitable the moment that was spoken. Jesus’s greatest battle was perhaps not on the Cross but at Gethsemane, (as Dr. Luke alone points out) he literally sweated blood [Luke 22:44].

Three times Jesus asks the Father if this cup would pass from him, and received no reply, for his Father’s orders remained unchanged. [Matthew 26:44, Mark 14:41]. He did not sweat blood on the Cross and my guess is that the spiritual torture took place and the spiritual battle was won at Gethsemane. (It is an interesting fact of the spiritual life that very often the winning of a battle takes place before it starts!)

After Gethsemane there is a complete change in Jesus. He hardly does anything else; he remains passive – almost everything is done by others to him. He is silent in front of Pilate, in front of Herod and before the soldiers.

The Father has not changed his mind. Christ must now go with what he knew was inevitable. He resigns himself to all that happens to him.

‘We may not know we cannot tell what pains he had to bear.’

But now the pains are nearly over, his task is done, his work accomplished. He has paid the price [1 Corinthians 7:23]. He has given his all. After about eighteen hours during which he had deliberately placed himself at the mercy of us, the end is in sight and with his dry mouth now moistened, all the pain and energy stifled since the day before, Jesus bursts forth in a great cry of Victory. [The cry in Greek is just one word.]

***‘FINISHED!’***

The Victory is won. It would be clinched and announced by the Father raising him from the dead on Easter morning.

The Early Church did not divide Good Friday from Easter Day as we now do, because like John’s Gospel they put meaning and truth first; theology before chronology! They felt it was more appropriate to celebrate the two together because they are inseparable. I agree with them, and indeed every Eucharist we celebrate shows how right they were! Cross and Resurrection cannot be separated, each only makes sense in the light of the other.

*He is Risen*, depends on *it is finished*.  
*It is finished* is guaranteed by *He is Risen*.

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PRAYER:

Heavenly Father,  
We give thanks that Christ completed to the full the work for which you sent him.  
Death where is your sting? Grave, where is your victory?  
We rejoice that death's reign has been overthrown and the bondage of sin broken.  
The Cross it takes our guilt away.  
Teach us daily to enter more fully into this victory.  
Lead us not into temptation, particularly that of denying what your Son has done,  
and our allowing Sin and Death total Lordship.  
'Dying and living you declared your love, gave us grace and opened the Gate of  
Glory...  
Keep us firm in this hope you have set before us so that we and all your children  
shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your Name, through Christ our  
Lord.'  
Amen.

TO PONDER:

Realise afresh that there is much in our lives that we have not fully opened to the  
Holy Spirit of Christ and that he promises us the living water.  
Ask him to satisfy your spiritual thirst.

## **PART VI - The Cross and the Family of Commitment**

We come now to the last ‘Word’ of Jesus from the Cross. As we look back we are amazed not only at what Jesus, under these terrible conditions, said and his attitude, but the attitude of the Gospel writers. Christian history – and Hollywood movies! - have sometimes covered up the attitude of the Gospel writers, none of whom dwells on the agony, the pain, or the torture. They each used just two words in Greek, (three in translation) – *‘they crucified him’* [Mark 15:24, Matthew 27:35, Luke 23:33]. Of course all their readers knew well enough what crucifixion was and didn’t need it described. But I think their restraint derived from the restraint of Jesus. If Jesus had allowed himself to writhe in agony and shout and scream, that would have been the ‘flavour’ of the story as it was handed down. But there is none of this! Jesus, knowing it is the Father’s will, allows events to run their course and says from the Cross just what needs to be said and no more.

The various writers, as I noted at the start, latched onto and passed on that which particularly grabbed their attention.

Luke, who alone of the Gospel writers gives us the story of the Prodigal Son and the Loving Father [15:11-32], preserves for us the two Father-sayings and the conversion of the sinner.

The Father-sayings are like verbal bookends to Jesus’s period on the Cross. *‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’* set the tone for all of Jesus’s behaviour and all of his remarks during this time. His forgiveness flowed from its only possible source, *love*; love for those who pierced his hands and his feet. It was this amazing attitude and bearing of Christ on the Cross that so impressed the two robbers and led one to faith (See Part II above).

Of the seven ‘Words’ from the Cross Jesus addressed four to God and four to those around. I haven’t made a slip, for surely the yell *‘It is finished!’* was addressed both to God and those around! I expect that it was not proclaimed without that certain sense of glee that every child has who in obedience to a parent achieves the near-impossible!

Luke records for us Jesus’s final address to God when he is again addressed as *Father*, that unique relationship that Christ had with the God who sent him and of whom he was truly part. *‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’* It was the evening prayer of the Jewish child from Psalm 31:5. *Into your hand I commit my spirit: you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.*

Each of the Seven Words of Christ from the Cross I have linked to ourselves and have therefore headed this section **The Cross and the Family of Commitment**. Commitment is in the most literal sense essential for the Christian Faith, for the whole concept of a New Covenant, or ‘New Testament’ is one of a binding agreement.

When Christians break bread together they will often use words based on 1 Corinthians 11:25 - *‘This is my blood of the new Covenant which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins.’*



Jesus we know *bowed his head*. The word in Greek is ‘kline’ from which we get ‘in-cline’. So as we put the verse together the meaning might well include not something that happened to Christ but a deliberate act:

*he inclined his head and handed-on the Holy Spirit.*

Then the immediate question is – to whom?

Were the *mother* and the *disciple* still present? John records how the *disciple* had taken the *woman* to his home *from that hour*. This can be taken very narrowly and literally to mean within sixty minutes, or more generally from that *time* (N.I.V. translation). But John has a very special meaning to the word *hour*, and repeatedly uses it for the climax of Jesus's life and work – the Cross and Resurrection.

The main point in telling his readers that the *disciple* took the *woman* to his home was the fact that he obeyed Jesus – the essence of discipleship.

If the *woman* and the *disciple* were there – and it seems psychologically unlikely that those who loved Jesus would have walked away while he was still alive – then we have a verbal tableau of the Infant Church.

Above us and at the centre is Jesus, around him are those who love him - men and women, young and old, bound together not as *blood* relations, but as the family of Jesus in their relationship to *him* – *spiritual* relations if you like. This family is held together by Jesus's love for it, and its love for Jesus, and they are supernaturally enlivened and empowered by the very breath, the very life, the very Spirit of Jesus himself. This spirit is given by Jesus.

John would shortly be telling his readers how the Risen Jesus came to the fearful disciples in the Upper Room and imparted his Spirit by *breathing* upon them. Here at the Cross, Jesus gives up his breath not just in a negative sense, but in a positive sense – his life is now handed-on. So that his followers may do what he did, enabled by the divine life that enabled him. The Acts of Jesus are about to become the Acts of the Apostles.

Pentecost derives from the Passion. The writer of John's Gospel with a true theological instinct, wants to keep together what belongs together. Just as, in its earliest years the Church celebrated Cross and Resurrection together, not apart as we do, so the work of Christ on the Cross, in the Resurrection and at Pentecost is one. Each depends on the Cross. No Cross – no Resurrection. No Cross – no Pentecost.

This last section might well be entitled:

**The Cross and the Family of the Holy Spirit**

The Cross is not the place where we reside. The Cross is the place to which we have to come, and from which we are invariably sent.



**LORD, SEND US OUT IN THE POWER OF YOUR SPIRIT  
to live and work to your praise and glory.**

**O Breath of Life, come sweeping through us.  
Revive thy church with life and power.  
O Breath of Life, come, cleanse, renew us.  
And fit thy church to meet this hour.**

(Mrs. B.P. Head)

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PRAYER:

**Heavenly Father,**

**We give thanks for showing us on the Cross yet more of your love, more of your faithfulness, and more of your forgiveness in and through Jesus Christ our Lord. We stand with your Mother, your disciples and with Christians of every age at the foot of your Cross and, with the Centurion know that truly ‘You are the Son of God!’**

**Lord Jesus, we thank you**

**For all the benefits you have won for us,**

**For all the pains and insults you have borne for us**

**Of all the benefits won, we thirst most for your Holy Spirit. Breathe afresh your Holy Spirit upon us, upon your Church, that in the light of the Resurrection and in the Power of Pentecost we may bring your Cross of Glory to the darkness of the world.**

**Lord Christ use us for the completion of that which you have already accomplished.**

**‘Most merciful redeemer, friend and brother**

**may we know you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly, day by day.’**

**Amen.**

TO PONDER:

**Recommit your entire life to God, especially the areas of weakness and defeat. Recommit yourself daily to the care of the Father, in service to his Son, and to the refilling by the Holy Spirit.**

## APPENDIX – Suggested Hymns

- Part I -        ‘**There is a green hill ....**’  
                  A&M (Revised) 214, verses 2-5
- Part II -        ‘**Again the Lord’s own day is here**’  
                  A&M (Revised) 40, verses 3-5
- Part III -       ‘**Forty days and forty nights**’  
                  A&M (revised) 92, verses 3-6
- Part IV -        ‘**Hark my soul it is the Lord**’  
                  A&M (Revised) 344, verses 1-4
- Part V -         ‘**We sing the praise of him who died...**’  
                  A&M (revised) 215, verses 1-4
- Part VI -        ‘**When I survey the wondrous Cross...**’  
                  A&M (Revised) 108