



## Holy Week Reflection By Bishop David Oakley

During these days of Holy Week, we hear again the familiar story of what happened to Jesus of Nazareth in the final days of his life.

We might have many reactions to these events; it was a great injustice, why did it have to happen, what does it say about God, wanting his own Son to die in such a brutal way?

So why did it all happen, why did Jesus die on the cross?

To understand the answers to these questions we must go back to primeval history, to what happened to the first human beings in the garden of Eden. You will find this in Genesis 3 and it's the story of the first or original sin. Sometimes it's called the story of the Fall.

For sure, we hear this in the language of ancient myth and it all seems a very long time ago now.

But the more we reflect on this biblical moment, the more we realise, this is not just ancient history, it's our story here and now. And the fundamental elements of all this are really quite shocking.

God made us in his own image and likeness, there is a very real reflection of the divine within us. We were made to live with God for ever.

One thing God told our first parents not to do, was to eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. And then the whispering campaign began. The voice of one known as the serpent began to distract us, to challenge

God's word. We often know him today as the enemy. He is no friend of God, and he is not our friend too.

But you know the story, and our first parents listened to the voice of the serpent rather than the word of God.

Our first parents disobeyed God and everything fell apart from that moment onwards. Our relationship with God was broken, we fell out with each other too, greed, envy, violence and selfishness became part of our experience. We could no longer stay in the garden and of course, we experienced death.

One of the most painful features of all this, we began to think this was our default position. This is how life is meant to be, and we just have to do our best with it all.

And of course, that loss of intimacy with God, means we struggle to hear the true word of God, we can even begin to think, God does not love us anymore and we have to find some way to earn his love.

But let's go back to the story. I have already started to use words to talk about ideas and theories. Lately, I have come to see the scriptures in a different way, I have tried to see them as an unfolding drama with a choreography. And so, the truth is there in Genesis 3, the first human beings 'heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, where are you?'

How often I have heard it said, God is hiding from me, he doesn't love me because of what I have done. This is one of the fruits of the Fall. We begin to think, we are the ones seeking God, whilst he plays hide and seek with us.

The truth is, that God has always been searching for us, that question is ringing in our hearts and souls today, where are you?

We need to fast forward things now, the unfolding story of salvation history, how from that first moment of discovering Adam and Eve in their shame,

God was making plans, seeking a way to mend the brokenness, to bring life to where there is death and hopelessness.

There is one thing I want to remind you of at this point, one thing which explains so much about our human condition and nature. Deep down within each human soul, we want to get back to that garden, there is a longing and a yearning for the love of God. It becomes a thirsting and a hungering which is expressed in so many different ways, usually ways which miss the mark. But it's there, a sign that I want to live again, at peace with the Lord.

For sure, I try to scratch that itch in so many ways, a new car, a new house, the latest something else, addictions of different kinds, all these ways I try to deal with that yearning, but nothing really hits the spot.

Everything is leading up to that moment when God sent his only begotten Son, born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. And of course, there is so much we can share about those days when Jesus was amongst us. At the heart of everything he said and did, was God's deep down desire to restore the relationship between each one of his beloved children and himself.

Jesus is the way back to the Father's house. He speaks the truth about our broken relationship with the Trinity God. He offers each human being a new living relationship with his Father. He feeds our deepest hungers with his own Body and Blood. His Father cries out in the garden of Eden, where are you? Jesus cries out, come to me all you who are thirsty.

And when we allow Jesus to meet with us, when we begin to have a personal relationship with him, when we begin to taste the life he offers us, then we begin to appreciate the meaning of mercy.

The Catholic Christian life is not a self-help programme. It is a pure gracious gift from God. For each one of us, the Christian life is our personal gift of mercy from a God who loves us.

This is a very personal matter. I don't have to compare myself with those around me, well I will never be as holy or worthy as she is, mind you, on the other hand I will never be as bad as that one. This is about you and the heavenly Father who is coming looking for you, right now, here in this Holy Week 2020.

And so, if it is possible, you might want to kneel down right now, wherever you are watching this. Don't worry if your kneeling days are over, or if it's not possible. But sometimes, the physical gesture of humbling ourselves before God, intensifies the sense of mercy as pure gift from his hands. Maybe you have been carrying so many burdens of sin and brokenness, failure and pain, for so long now. Maybe you have been taking in the lies, that you are not worthy, that you are not capable of knowing peace and joy anymore.

I want you to quietly but firmly, bid those voices to be gone. They do not serve us well. Let's turn to Jesus and his voice instead, Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Maybe you are feeling something deep down within you, or maybe you are feeling nothing at all. Either way, the powers of heaven are rejoicing around the throne of God. A mighty crowd of witnesses are clapping and cheering in the courts of paradise, because like the prodigal son, you are about to come home. The shepherd is carrying you on his shoulders even now. And believe me, there will be every cynical and critical voice of the enemy shouting inside you at this moment too, who do you think you? This is not really happening, just relax and come back to what is familiar and has got you by so well in your life so far.

Do not listen to those voices, they are not speaking the truth to you. Instead, listen to the voice of Jesus. He wants to tell you that his journey to Calvary was not cold and filled with harsh judgment. Every step was taken with love for each one of us. God found the ultimate answer to our teacher, our disobedience, our sin. His beloved Son took it all on his shoulders and carried it to a place where it would be destroyed with his body on the cross. And then, to the great distress of the enemy, God raised his Son from death, and in the resurrection, all that sin and death was destroyed.

This is the grace we are going to reach out for here and now. This is the power we are going to invite into our lives, the power of the Spirit who raised Jesus' dead body from the tomb, and is now at work within us, to raise us from our guilt and shame.

And so we make our perfect act of contrition,

An Act of Contrition

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Saviour Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy.