

# Wheatley URC

AN OXFORDSHIRE VILLAGE CHURCH IN THE REFORMED TRADITION

MENU 



# Holy Week 2020 – Good Friday prepared by Colin Thompson

## Was there another way?

A Meditation for Good Friday 2020



Was there another way?

There is almost always another way.

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1875-1939) wrote these words about the journey of life:

*'Traveller, there is no path. You make the path as you go along.'*  
*('Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace camino al andar').*



I have sometimes found this a troubling thought, especially when I remember the words of the One who said: 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. Machado seems to suggest that there is no path mapped out for us to follow; the words of Jesus seem to suggest the opposite.

*Thomas said: Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'*

**(John 14.6)**

But Machado knew the truth of what he wrote from his own experience. Born and brought up among the vivid colours and in the hot sunshine of Andalucía, he took up a teaching post in Soria, in the colder and harsher uplands of Old Castile. There he met and married a much younger woman, Leonor Izquierdo, who just three years later died of tuberculosis.



Leonor Izquierdo



River Duero near Soria

At the end of his life he was caught up in the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and died soon after escaping into France. No one could have predicted that path for him. Out of his overwhelming sense of loss came some of the finest poetry of early twentieth-century Spain, a poetry of grief suffused with hope and imbued with a lasting love of the landscapes of his adopted home.

The words of Jesus don't set out a clearly defined path that each of us must follow. 'I am the way', he said: not a set of rules or even principles, but a person. To follow him is to go where he leads us, but that rather begs the question Thomas asked: how do we know the way?

The journey of Jesus is traced through the Gospels, where we read its shape and its direction from the choices he made as he responded to people and events. So it is that at this late hour, as he prays alone in the Garden of Gethsemane after the Last Supper and on the eve of the Crucifixion, the Gospels portray the agony of Jesus as he wrestles with the hardest of all the choices he must make. Will he continue on the path he began to make

when he first attracted attention as a healer and a teacher, and bear the death he knows will come? Or will he walk away?



El Greco 'The Agony in the Garden'

Notice the jagged, asymmetrical shapes and the stormy sky, as nature itself represents the turmoil Christ is experiencing in his soul.

Notice the disciples unaware, asleep in a womb-like cavity in the rocks on the left, and the soldiers on the right-hand edge, on their way with his betrayer to arrest Christ.

And notice the angel bearing the cup which is the subject of the prayer of Jesus,

symbolizing the choice he must make but also the chalice through which Christians participate in his death and resurrection. This detail comes from Luke's account of the agony in the garden (22.43).

Such thoughts must have been going through his head. Why must I go through with this?

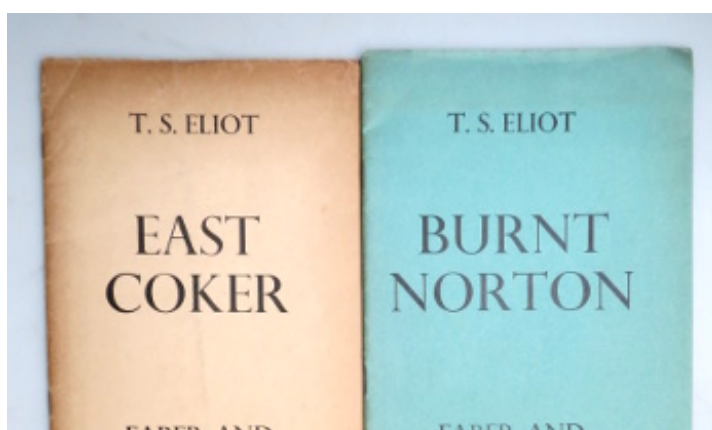
Is it possible that there's another way? There was, of course. Jesus could have decided that enough was enough. He could have gone back to the quiet life in rural Galilee. He could have continued to teach and heal, while making sure to steer clear of controversy and trouble. He could have lived a long life and been remembered and mourned by those who loved him, before disappearing into the mists of history.

Instead, he chose betrayal, mocking, torture and the cruellest of deaths. And for that reason, paradoxically, his story is with us still. A third morning dawned and a woman expecting to visit his tomb encountered him walking in a garden. Others found the tomb empty and were terrified. He came to them through barred doors, as if to say that there is nothing so dark or terrible that humans can do which can kill off the love of God for his children. Because of that Christians remember him, walk with him through the last week of his life, and seek to understand what it might mean to follow him wherever they find themselves.

These are not easy things to grasp. But perhaps our own experience of a world so suddenly changed from the one we thought we knew just a few weeks ago can shed some light.

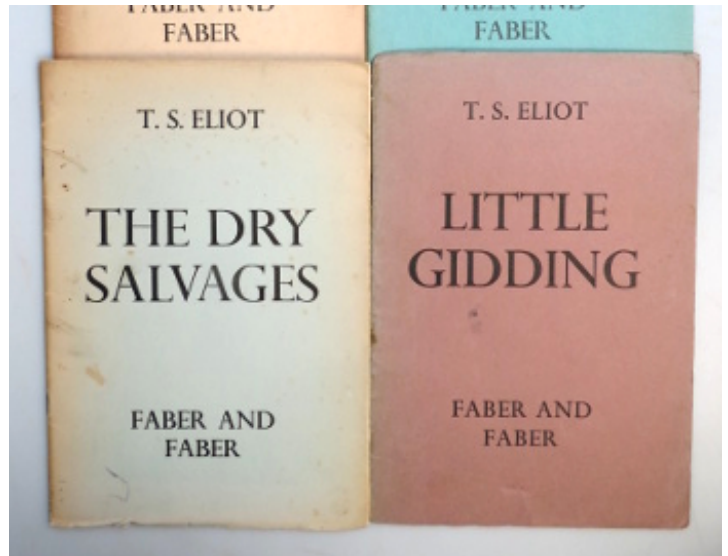
What would happen, for example, if our doctors and nurses and carers and all those who are maintaining the fabric of society at this extraordinarily difficult time in the life of our nation and of the whole world decided that the risks to their own lives were too great and walked away? What would happen if they saw colleagues taken ill and dying and concluded that they were better off staying at home? If they chose their own safety over living true to their vocation to serve? I think you know the answer.

The wounded surgeon plies the steel  
That questions the distempered part;  
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel  
The sharp compassion of the healer's



art  
Resolving the enigma of the fever  
chart.

(T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker', *The Four Quartets*)



I was very puzzled by these words when I first read them. In the operating theatre everything is spotlessly clean. Surgeons can't operate if they're ill or if their hands are bleeding. But my mind was working on too literal a plane. The wounded surgeon is Christ, whose hands bleed on the Cross. He is the healer of our inner sickness, which is the breeding-ground of all the horrors human beings inflict on one another. His cure is a sharp one, because it doesn't just deal with the symptoms on the surface, it reaches down into the very causes of our disease. That is why, though a painful process, it is ultimately compassionate – just as the surgeon must inflict pain in order to effect a cure. But there's a difference: Christ the surgeon of souls has had pain and suffering inflicted on him, because the cure he offers is too radical for comfort. The paradox deepens: the one who us wounded becomes the doctor, nurse and carer of our souls.



I love El Greco's painting of Christ embracing the Cross. Look at those hands, so slender, the fingers so long – hands which will bleed. Look at the compassion in his face, lifted up towards heaven. See how the heavy burden of the wood seems unnaturally light and easy to bear. It reminds me of words by the seventeenth-century Scottish Presbyterian theologian Samuel Rutherford, that the Cross 'is such a burden as wings are to a bird, and sails are to a ship, to carry me forward to my harbour'.

It is a terrible instrument of death but it is also the sharp remedy for the fever which is the root cause of all the harm humans inflict on one another and this earth in their selfish greed and lust for power. And most of all, it is not the end of Christ's story but the revelation of how absolute God's love is for all his erring children, and of how that love will rise from the darkest place we know and shine with a light which no human darkness will ever put out. I invite you to meditate further on the choice Jesus made on Good Friday by listening to or joining in singing one of the greatest hymns in the English language, 'When I survey the wondrous Cross', by Isaac Watts (1674-1748). There are several versions of it online, such as that by Kings College Chapel choir:

**King's College Cambridge 2011 Easter #10 When I survey the Wonderou...**

As you do, you might like to contemplate the scene, as imagined by Diego de Velázquez (1599-1660).

