Towards an Understanding of the Cross, March 10th 2021 prepared by Sr Marie

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer providing video resources every week but may continue to create these important seasons of the year. We have attached some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate in our homes at 7.30pm on Wednesday. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: *Eternal God,* through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction:
If Jesus and his disciples after him did not water down the scandal of the Cross, it is because a hidden mystery gives it meaning. That is why the Church chose it as a Christian "sign". What is it a sign of? From the death of Christ and right up to the year 1000, the cross was represented without an image of the crucified body of Jesus Christ. It was a symbol of relationship of every kind: → Vertical relationships: Tree of life; Link between the underworld, earth and heaven; → Horizontal relationships – relationships with creation; reconciliation; union with one another; generosity and the universality of Wisdom's embrace.
From the year 1000 to the present day, in the Catholic Church, the cross is mostly represented with the figure of Jesus crucified. Why the dramatic change from the bare cross to the cross with the corpus? Many historians believe that the main reason was the arrival of the Bubonic plague in Europe. Several different times, the plague decimated Europe's population. It was during these years that the popular devotion as The Stations of the Cross developed. Basically, it was a deep connection felt between Christ's sufferings and those of the medieval world.
The first response which is asked of us is to contemplate the sufferings of Jesus so as to be able to plunge ourselves into the sufferings of our own contemporary world. St Louis Marie de Montfort, who developed a Wisdom spirituality, himself showed the link: *"All that we suffer, Jesus has already suffered before us. His cross was composed of: the loss of all his earthly possessions (being reduced to beg, unemployment); humiliations, scorn (being loaded with abuse, calumnies); pain, illness and spiritual pain (being stretched out on a bed, unable to breathe, or being subject to temptations, dryness, rejection, and other sufferings of the spirit); hard and bitter treatment from friends, public servants and relatives; prolonged suffering, sometimes extended over days or months…"*

The cross is mostly seen as the centre and source of our compassion. The cross is the supreme expression of the love of God for humankind. It went as far as that by love. It puts us in solidarity with the suffering of humankind to be able "to love like God".

The description of the fall of Adam and Eve plunges us right into a theological question that is crucial because it touches the very foundation of the mystery of the Cross. Why did Christ have to suffer? Why was the

crucifixion necessary? In his preaching and in many of his writings, Montfort expresses a few ideas that come from two famous arguments of St Anselm. We need to bear in mind, however, that in Montfort's day, Anselm's teaching completely dominated all preaching about redemption. In fact, unfortunately, it does so even today.

St Anselm's 1st theory of Redemption Theology was that Christ offered Himself as a payment, a ransom, or money required for bail. Which envisages humanity bent under the devil's yoke. The reasoning behind this is that only Christ, as Son of God, was capable of paying a big enough ransom to set us free from Satan's domination. Do we have an Eternal Father who has less power than Satan? In the context of war or slavery, the emphasis is placed on the necessity of 'paying back' or 'buying back'. Anselm's 2nd theory was that Christ offers himself as satisfaction, reparation, and penitential sacrifice, envisaging humankind separated and alienated by a non-negotiable decision of the Father. The reasoning behind this is that only Christ, as Son of God, was capable of softening the Father's heart and calming His fury. Do we have an Eternal Father who prefers His own honor to the very life of his Son? According to the medieval mentality of honor and shame – an insult required a duel to restore the honor of the offended person; often one of the duelists was killed or wounded; and the accent placed on the Father's furious anger.

Even though Montfort could hardly avoid speaking of this theory that was so well known to his listeners, he nevertheless, transcended it by placing so much stress on the **relationship of love between Father and Son** and His vision of the Cross as the **ultimate expression of Divine Wisdom's love for us**. Basically, Montfort chose to use a theological explanation put forth by several mystics and theologians, for example that of Peter Abelard's whose argument was that Christ embraces, shares, and heals the sufferings of humankind envisaging humankind wounded, suffering, and open to God's mercy. The reasoning behind this is that Christ is the divine Lover who plunges wholly into human suffering, to help us understand the utmost divine love for each and every one of us. The advantages of this point of view are that an Eternal Father takes part in the loving decision of His Son and suffers with the Son and the emphasis is on God's mercy given freely with no payment required.

In reflecting on the Book of Job and the Suffering Servant Songs of the Old Testament (Is 42: 1-7; Is 49: 1-6, 8-9a; Is 50: 4-9; Is 52: 13-53:12) together with the teaching of St Louis Marie de Montfort we can identify the elements to be used in a definition of the cross and its meaning. **The Cross is the love, the presence, and the saving action of Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom in the midst of the suffering of humankind and of the universe.** Which is to ***console***, heal, and uphold us in times of sorrow; ***draw good from evil;*** enlighten, guide, challenge and heal us in the process of ***transformation*** to which each one of us is called; create ***compassion*** in us towards other people's sufferings and to enter into solidarity with them to lighten their pain; to become light and our strength in the ***mission*** to which we are called; to ***confront the false wisdoms*** of our world, source of so much suffering for the deprived and abandoned; ***to support us in persecution*** when we suffer the consequences of our commitment to justice; to ***reconcile*** us to God, to each other, and to all of creation.

In the light of the mystery of the Cross in the new testament, a mystery that is central to the gospel and also to our Wisdom spirituality, we are invited to reconsider these themes again: The Cross that consoles; that transforms; that is centre and source of our compassion; the Cross that is at the core of our mission; light and strength in contesting false wisdoms; instrument and sign of reconciliation. These themes echo strongly in Montfort's proclamation in *Love of Eternal Wisdom* #154: "*Of all the reasons I can think of that move us to the love of Jesus Christ, Incarnate Wisdom, the strongest, in my opinion, lies in the sorrows he was willing to undergo to show his love for us. "There is one motive," says St Bernard, "that takes precedence over all others and moves me most deeply to the love of Jesus Christ: that is, O Jesus, the chalice of bitterness that you drank for us, and the work of our redemption that so touches our hearts. Indeed, this supreme gift of your love and the incredible evidence of it that you gave us, easily wins our response." "*

The mystery of the Cross: Wisdom Crucified and Resurrected

The Cross, as such, existed *before Jesus*. Long before His passion, death, and resurrection, the term 'cross' referred to an ancient instrument of torture used for those condemned to death, and to this device Jesus freely submitted. In the gospel, Jesus himself referred to an atrocity that happened around the time of his birth. After the death of Herod the Great, violent insurrections began against the Romans. In revenge, Varus, a Roman general, ordered the crucifixion of 2000 rebel Jews.

But with the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the cross takes on a new and completely different meaning and significance. Instead of being an instrument of torture associated with suffering, the Cross becomes the glory and pride of every Christian. I remember once, during a parish retreat, one man testified to the power of an illuminated cross on top of a church which he saw from a nearby bridge from where he was going to take his own life. The illuminated cross made him think again and instead visit that church where he found help. Through faith, the cross actually gives birth to a sense of joyful certainty and profound thanksgiving that moves us to say with the Apostle Paul: "*But as for me, God forbid that I should boast of anything at all, except the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ…"* (Gal 6:14) Nevertheless, we should never lose sight of the fact that in the gospels the passion and death of Christ form the central teaching toward which everything else is oriented for the whole gospel has to be reread in the light of Easter. It is precisely from this perspective, with our eyes fixed on the horizon of the Resurrection that we speak of the cross even today.

Br Jean Bulteau SG writes "However, although the Easter alleluia is a shout of the victory of life prevailing over the suffering and death of Good Friday, suffering and death remain no less present and necessary. Death and Resurrection are mutually inclusive terms like two faces of the same paschal mystery. To present one without the other or to favour one over the other is very damaging both to theology and to spirituality." "Nevertheless, the Cross remains unfathomable because it is a mystery of excess. The excess of love on God's part demands an insane response of love on ours."

The Cross Widens the Space of our Hearts…Br Jean continues "Even during His extreme agony on the Cross, whenever Jesus became aware of the other people around him, his reactions were extremely touching. How tenderly he looked at his mother and his disciple John at the foot of the cross, hearts broken by suffering. Here, as in the past, He enters fully into their pain. He entrusts his mother to John, and his disciple to his mother. *Mother, behold your son*… (Jn 19,26) After forgiving his enemies, Jesus turns his attention to a thief being crucified at his side. Unable to do anything at all to save himself, this thief repents of his sin and cries out: "*Remember me*…" How marvellous is Jesus' compassion when he replies: "*I am telling you the truth: today you will be with me in Paradise*." (Lk 23,43) Devotion to the Cross is transformed in the end into the loving service of people who are suffering because this is what Jesus did. These are the ones he identifies with: "*I was hungry; I was naked; I was in prison; I was a foreigner*. (Mt 25, 44-5 ff.) When someone's Cross is too heavy, only a loving and compassionate, often silent presence, in the strongest sense of that term, can help the one who is suffering to start living again, to sift out what he or she wants to say to God, to separate the non-essential from the essential, to rediscover hope, and to persevere in faith. In the midst of insupportable pain, the cry of the believer becomes the cry of Christ on the Cross; slowly it is transformed into love and a salvific offering for all of humankind."

The Cross cannot be understood in isolation but has to be grasped in the dynamism expressed in the hymn from the epistle to the Philippians (Ph 2, 6-11). Here is the double movement of self-emptying (2, 6-8) and exaltation (2, 9-11) that Montfort translates by the adjectives '*humiliated*' and 'glorious and triumphant'.

Beginning Meditation: As I come to meditate, I take a few moments to reflect on my mood. What has happened today, yesterday? Have I been able to feel the Lord's presence close to me, or has he seemed a long way away? Whatever I feel, I am here now, hoping to hear him speak to me through the words I have read. To help me be more receptive, I take a couple of deep breaths, then breathe normally. I may like to focus my

attention on a favourite object, or perhaps a favourite refrain or perhaps the flickering of a candle or indeed on the image of a cross.

25-minute meditation

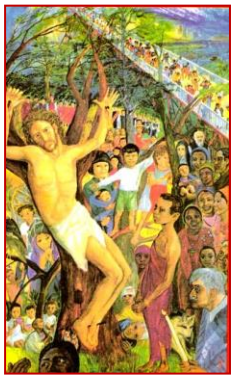
Post Meditation reading:
To understand better why suffering is an indispensable aspect of the Cross, let us listen to some famous mystics and martyrs from some of the major religions.

Transformative suffering is a distinctive trait of the human race. Mahatma Gandhi
Every suffering I have ever had, God has already suffered before me. **Meister Eckhard**
When Jesus endured his sufferings, the whole of creation suffered with him… we suffered with him.
Julian of Norwich
And so you must expect to be shaped, cut, and chiselled under the hammer of the cross otherwise, you would remain rough stones, good for nothing but to be cast aside. Be careful that you do not cause the hammer to recoil when it strikes you; respect the chisel that is carving you and the hand that is shaping you. It may be that this skilful and loving craftsman wants you to have an important place in his eternal edifice or to be one of the most beautiful works of art in his heavenly kingdom. So let him do what he pleases; he loves you, he knows what he is doing, he has had experience. His strokes are skilful and directed by love… (Montfort Letter to the Friends of the Cross, 28)

Closing prayer: Lord, Father of our human family, you created all human beings equal in dignity: pour forth into our hearts a community spirit and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter, dialogue, justice and peace. Move us to create healthier societies and a more dignified world, a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war. May our hearts be open to all the peoples and nations of the earth. May we recognise the goodness and beauty you have sown in each of us, and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects, and shared dreams. Amen

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon. Stay well and stay safe.

Resources: Image from Pixabay
La Croix Jean Bulteau Dictionnaire, pp 327, 341
Love of Eternal Wisdom, Letter to the Friends of the Cross, Montfort publications
Wisdom and the Cross, an internal publication of the Daughters of Wisdom




Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.