

another's difference and distinctness in person and presence, but always bearing within one another the whole being of the other two persons. The Trinity is the perfect equilibrium of three persons so *with* that they are *in*, but *in* in such a way that they are still *with*.

Given this perfection of being, this intersection of being *with* and being *in*, the astonishing mystery is why the Trinity's life is not simply self-contained, but becomes open to creation, to fragile existence, to life, to human beings – to you and me. Surely the grasping, mistrustful, anxious and small-minded human spirit would ruin the perfection of the Trinity. Or could it possibly be that God's grace is more infectious than our folly? Could it possibly be that the mutual indwelling love of the Trinity could outlast and ultimately transform our human fragility and perversity? That's the dynamic behind the whole Bible, the whole of history, the whole gospel. If God's life opens up to us, will it destroy God – or transform us? And if it ultimately transforms *us*, how much will it cost *God*?

Today is the day that focuses this question more than any other. For Good Friday is the day we see the very heart of God and the very worst in ourselves. When I was 17 I went to hear a well-known evangelist speak at the big theatre in the town where I lived. I knew my sister had heard him and I remembered she'd said he was quite something. He preached what today we might call a Mel Gibson gospel. In other words he gave us the third-degree, gruesome, vivid, and unforgettable detail of the cross. In sweaty language and wincing imagery he described what the process of crucifixion did to the heart, the lungs, the rib cage, the wind-pipe, the face, the eyes, the cheeks, the hips, the feet, and the hands. When 45 minutes was up and he'd made our nails curl, and our stomachs wail, and our throats dry, and our eyes weep, he invited us all to come to the front and make a commitment. I didn't go. The next day I called my sister. She said, "D'you feel guilty about not going forward?" I said, "Yes." She said, "You shouldn't. You see, it's not the gospel. If you look in the Bible, the gospels tell us almost nothing about the physical details of the crucifixion. Jesus suffered terribly, don't get me wrong, but lots of people suffered then, some even worse than him, and lots of people have suffered since, and still do, some of them probably more so than he did. The gospel isn't about some contest of pain in which Jesus came out the winner. The gospel is not that Jesus physically suffered. It's that he was forsaken."

Forsaken. Jesus' last words, in Mark's gospel, are, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At first sight, this is simply the last in a chain of abandonments. The disciples flee, Peter denies, Judas betrays, now the Father forsakes. It's a litany of desertion. And there's something in this litany. Remember, as we saw at the beginning, if the crucial word in the gospel is *with*, then the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion are a heartless and wholesale dismantling of that *with*. Jesus is left *without* all those he worked so hard to be *with* – the disciples, the authorities, the poor – and all of them have not just disappeared, but actively deserted or betrayed him. Jesus is still *with* us, but we, at this most precious moment of all, are not *with* him.

But these abandonments are nothing compared to the one that really matters. The cross isn't just an extreme version of a generic human experience of being alone and in pain and unjustly punished and cruelly ridiculed. The cross is a unique event. It's not unique because of how much pain Jesus felt or how much love he'd previously expended. It's unique because the Holy Trinity is the utter presence of unalloyed *with*, and at the moment of Jesus' death, that *with* is, for a brief moment, and for the only instant in eternal history, lost.

We've seen that *with* is the very essence of God's being within the life of the Trinity, and the very essence of God's being towards us in Christ. And yet, at this unique moment, that *with* is obscured. Like the clouds coming across the sun, shrouding the earth in shadow, the essence of God, always three persons in perfect relationship, always God's life shaped to be *with* us – that essence is for a moment lost. This is the most poignant and terrifying moment in all history. The two things we think we can know for certain – that God is a Trinity of persons in perfect and eternal relationship, and that God is always present *with* us in Christ through the Spirit – these two certainties are, for a moment, taken away. The universe's deepest realities have become unhinged. The Son is not *with* the Father, even though he desperately wants to be. The Father is not *with* the Son, breaking our whole notion of their eternal presence one with another. This is the most vivid picture of

hell we could imagine: not just our being separated from God, but God being separated from God, God being out of God's own reach.

The cross is Jesus' ultimate demonstration of being *with* us – but in the cruellest irony of all time, it's the instant Jesus finds that neither we, nor the Father, are *with* him. Every aspect of being *not-with*, of being *without*, clusters together at this agonizing moment. Jesus experiences the reality of human sin, because sin is fundamentally living *without* God. Jesus experiences the depth of suffering, because suffering is more than anything the condition of being *without* comfort. Jesus experiences the horror of death, because death is the word we give to being *without* all things – without breath, without connectedness, without consciousness, without a body. Jesus experiences the biggest alienation of all, the state of being *without* the Father, and thus being not-God – being, for this moment, without the *with* that is the essence of God.

And Jesus' words at this most terrifying moment are these. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He's still talking to the Father, even at the moment of naming that the *with* has gone. He's still talking in intimate terms – calling the Father "My God." These words come out of the most profound level of trust, the most fathomless depth of *with* and *in*. It's sometimes pointed out that this is the first line of the Twenty-Second Psalm, and that the psalm as a whole is one of hope. But to suggest that really this cry from the cross is an elaborate word of triumph and trust, and that Jesus' recognition of abandonment is all part of a tidy plan, is simply to shield oneself from the unique horror and wonder of this moment. The most tantalizing thing is that Jesus' last words are a question – a question that doesn't receive an answer. The question should rattle us to our bones.

The question shows us that Jesus has given everything that he is for the cause of being *with* us, for the cause of embracing us within the essence of God's being. He's given so much – even despite our determination to be *without* him. And yet he's given beyond our imagination, because for the sake of our being *with* the Father he has, for this moment, lost his own being *with* the Father. And the Father has longed so much to be *with* us that he has, for this moment, lost his being *with* the Son, which is the essence of his being.

These two astonishing discoveries, the Father's losing the Son for us, and the Son's losing the Father for us, rattle our bones because they make us wonder "Is all then lost?" – not just for us, but even for God. Has the Trinity lost its identity for nothing? If we don't experience a shiver of this greatest of all horrors this night, then we haven't allowed ourselves truly to enter Good Friday. But this deepest of fears is what will find an answer in two days' time, when we find that neither sin, nor suffering, nor death, nor alienation has the last word. *With* is restored at Easter, and, on the day of Ascension, *with* has the last word.

Is our alienation from God really so profound that it pushes God to such lengths to reverse and heal it? We don't want to believe it. But here it is, in front of our eyes. That's what the cross is – our cowardice and cruelty confronted by God's wondrous love. Is being *with* us forever really worth God going to such lengths to secure? Now that is, perhaps, the most awesome question of all. It takes us to the heart of God's identity, and the heart of our own. Can we really believe God thought we were worth it? Are our paltry lives worth the Trinity setting aside the essence of its identity in order that we might be *with* God and incorporated into God's life forever?

Jesus' cry tonight is one of agony that to reach us he had, for a moment, to let go of his Father. What is our cry? Our cry is one of grief, that we were not *with* him. It's a cry of astonishment, that he was, despite everything, still *with* us. And it's a cry of conviction and commitment, that we will be *with* him henceforth, and forevermore.

Can you hear the distant strains of the simple words of the Holy Trinity, singing to you tonight, more passionately and fondly and sacrificially than you can ever have known? "Ah only, ah only, ah only, ah only, ah only wanna be with you...." What are you singing back?