

HANDS



Stations of the Cross
at the Cherwell Centre, Oxford

carved by
Sister Joanna Moore

with poems by
Joanna Tulloch

One World

He held it in the palm of his hand,
a little jewel,
glowing green and aquamarine,
sparkling with life and beauty.
Compared with his greatness
it was a tiny thing,
this jewel,
no more than a marble
thrown into the sky.
Yet every speck of colour
opened a gate of glory,
his glory
spread out on the land.
It held his power,
awful and wonderful,
mysterious and dangerous,
contained in the throbbing ball.
There were many worlds
within it,
worlds of plants and fishes,
people, animals, birds.
Each world itself was many,
millions of each species,
no two made the same.
Yet at its heart
was a silver secret
holding it all together,
making it truly one.
Love was its unity—
One Word, one World.
Love made it precious.
A tear fell on his jewel—
would they ever understand?



I *Jesus is condemned to death*

'My hands are tied':
normally a lame excuse
for doing absolutely nothing,
but in this case—not,
most definitely not.
It is the point at which
action is turned to Passion,
compassion to humiliation,
but letting it all happen
is how God saves the world.
Those fine-carved hands,
delicate and sensitive,
that fed and taught
and touched away all hurt,
are crossed now, thumbs reversed,
and the rope (perhaps
too beautifully beaded?)
chafes against the wrists.

His hands are tied,
but do not say he can do nothing.
The thing that he will do
now, after his hands are tied,
will break all bonds,
all fetters,
and set all people free.



II *Jesus takes up his cross*

As now he reaches out
to grasp the beam,
one finger points
to the symbol of the cross.
Remember how he mentioned
another beam
comically filling up an eye,
how he used it
to ridicule *our* finger-pointing?
'Look at that mote
floating in your eye, brother,
how it blinds your vision!'
(All of this is said
while trying to peer round
our beam's obstruction.)
But, as now he reaches out
to grasp the beam, the one
they'll stretch him out on,
one finger points
to the cross he'll die on.
Fingers are pointed
as the scapegoat
is finally cornered,
blind people claiming
that they see the culprit
all too clearly.

Yet willingly he takes upon himself
the weight of all our sins,
this beam blocking out all light,
and makes of it
our ladder into heaven.



III *Jesus falls for the first time*

The fingers are foreshortened here,
more crabbed and clawing at rough ground
as Christ first falls on cruel cobbles.
The cuticles, could we but see them,
would be scraped and bleeding,
the heavy beam falling and forcing
them down, crushed against the stone.
The groundwork is like flint, unyielding,
material of prehistoric weapons
still honed enough to cut Christ's flesh.
Can this be God faltering and falling?
Can he be stumbling on the trip-stone we've created?
Yes, it is Immanuel, truly God-with-us
who breathes the dust of which he made us;
slippery with sweat and tasting bitter tears
he's on his knees, and joins us at rock-bottom.



IV *Jesus meets his mother*

Praying hands, and once more finely tapered—
the hands that bore and nurtured those before,
that rocked and soothed and smoothed a baby's troubles
and placed him on the breast—are carved in wood.

But just in case we haven't got the message
that this is Mary praying for her son,
we have a heart pierced by a Roman halberd,
reminding us of Simeon's prophecy.

What can it be to lose your cherished baby,
how hard to meet him climbing his final hill?

Mercifully most will never know this
and even Scripture spares us a detailed view.

And so this meeting's framed by imagination,
calling to mind our own most tragic loss:

seeing these hands, this heart, this fractured story
we pray, like Mary, just to endure the grief.



V *Simon of Cyrene helps to carry the cross*

For the first time now
we have three hands—
two right and a left—
and I am reminded
of the icon of the Virgin
who seems to have
grown an extra one.
Apparently it had been
severed from a saint,
who prayed to her
for its return, promising
to use it in upholding
the honouring of icons.

But now we must return
to a story and a journey
much more painfully familiar:
back to the bleeding hands
of Christ, stumbling and straining
to rise and take his load,
his left hand crushed still
under the cross, and caught
in the angle of the V
that marks this station fifth.
But which of the two right hands
belongs to our struggling Saviour
and which to Simon of Cyrene,
conscripted to carry the cross?

The nails of one are trapped
below, and it is threatened
by the sharp thorn of the V—
this tenser hand must be
the one another kind
of nail will thrust through,
this arm connect to the man
whose crown already
bristles with thorns.
Simon's hand looks severed
yet serene, Cyrene so far
untainted by his toll.
Reach out then, Simon,
and lend a hand—
your sainthood weighs
a feather beside his.



VI *Veronica wipes the face of Jesus*

In heart-shaped fluid folds
the veil is held
as if its contours could be crushed
to nothing in the hands
of this nameless woman
we have come to call Veronica.
Yet all this softness
is an illusion skilfully sustained
by another woman,
Joanna, working with solid wood.
And where is the true likeness,
the face of Christ
imprinted on the cloth
in blood and sweat and tears,
this icon of the Son of God
by which Veronica is named?
It is on the far side of the veil,
hidden from us. But look,
is not his face carved
by the shadows of the cross?
Make no mistake,
for this is no illusion:
this true image
of the living, dying God
will save us all.



VII *Jesus falls for the second time*

He is more exhausted now:
there is no energy or tension
in the hands splayed on the stone;
they lie lifeless, and suggest
that this time he has fallen
not to his knees, but prone,
flat on his face.

The jagged cobbles now contrast
with hands that look
curiously smooth and clean,
though the wrists are ridged
and roughened by the rope
that earlier restrained them.
As the crowd's jeers
echo from the stony ground,
this man who has done nothing wrong,
committed no crime deserving such a fate,
uses his smooth clean hands
to raise himself and carry on
stumbling towards the cross,
victim of our rough justice
and the dirty work
of his fellow human beings.



VIII *Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem*

It is the first time we have seen his palm
as he raises his left hand to greet
the women who, unlike the disciples,
haven't run away, but followed
grieving on the Via Dolorosa.

This palm is deeply creased,
the lines of head and heart bisected,
cut across by the line of fate
in such a way that a two-barred cross
truly appears to be engraved there.

The other line that shows up strong,
curving round the thumb unbroken,
is the line of life. For he will drown
his own death, coming up to life eternal,
so throwing a lifeline to all those who founder.



IX *Jesus falls for the third time*

Once again he falters, stumbles,
and suddenly is down,
one hand—the left—inert
while the right
claws at the cobbles,
trying to get a purchase
but, failing to find one,
bunches to a fist.

For what could buy
his freedom now,
and even if something could,
how then would the debt
be paid, and how
would the debtor
be released?

This man sprawled
exhausted on the ground
now has nothing
but a tattered gown
to call his own,
and even that
will be taken from him.

All he has to give now
is his life,
and he has no riches
but God's love to spend;
but as, with his right hand,
he finally finds a purchase,
he accepts this deal
as an all-time bargain.



X *Jesus is stripped of his garments*

So finally we reach
the place of execution,
a rubbish dump
outside the city walls,
which becomes the scene
of ultimate humiliation
for Jesus, as he's stripped
of his garments, and left
naked but for his loincloth.

This time the folds of cloth
don't look as fluid
as when Veronica
held up her towel.
There is a rigidity to them,
resisting the intrusive hand
entering from the right
that tries to tear
the clothing from him.

And the longer-than-life
left hand of Jesus,
lying beside the legionary's
and trying to keep
the cloth in place,
even longer with wrist
and arm, languishes
along the whole length,
lopping this tableau into two.

To the left the last vestiges
of dignity remain,
to the right the worst
the world can do to him
is really getting going.
Golgotha, place of the skull,
what skulduggery you'll see
before the day is out!
Yet when he is lifted up

what will be exposed
is not his nakedness,
but his Father's glory.



XI *Jesus is nailed to the cross*

Now the mallet does its work,
wielded by that same right hand
that stripped Jesus of his garments,
and casting its shadow on the cross.

The left hand is Christ's palm again—
no longer waving but impaled, transfixed,
pain crabbing and clawing the fingers
as the iron nail sinks obliquely between sinews.

The line of fate's engraved more deeply now,
extending through the wrist,
while head- and heart-lines appear fainter
as action fades and Passion becomes paramount.

And the lifeline—do you see?—so strong before
is feathered, fragmenting, very nearly broken.

The mallet has done its cruel work
and as if to underline the fact
its shadow forms a tick—job done and dusted!
But the real work is only just beginning.

Despite the suffering, Jesus points
with his only finger still unbent
straight at the impaler's shadow,
showing where he'll start to save us.

The cross will soon be raised,
bearing its burden,
tearing the flesh further
as the nail takes his weight.

His body is fragmenting, very nearly broken,
yet out of death he weaves for us a lifeline.



XII *Jesus dies on the cross*

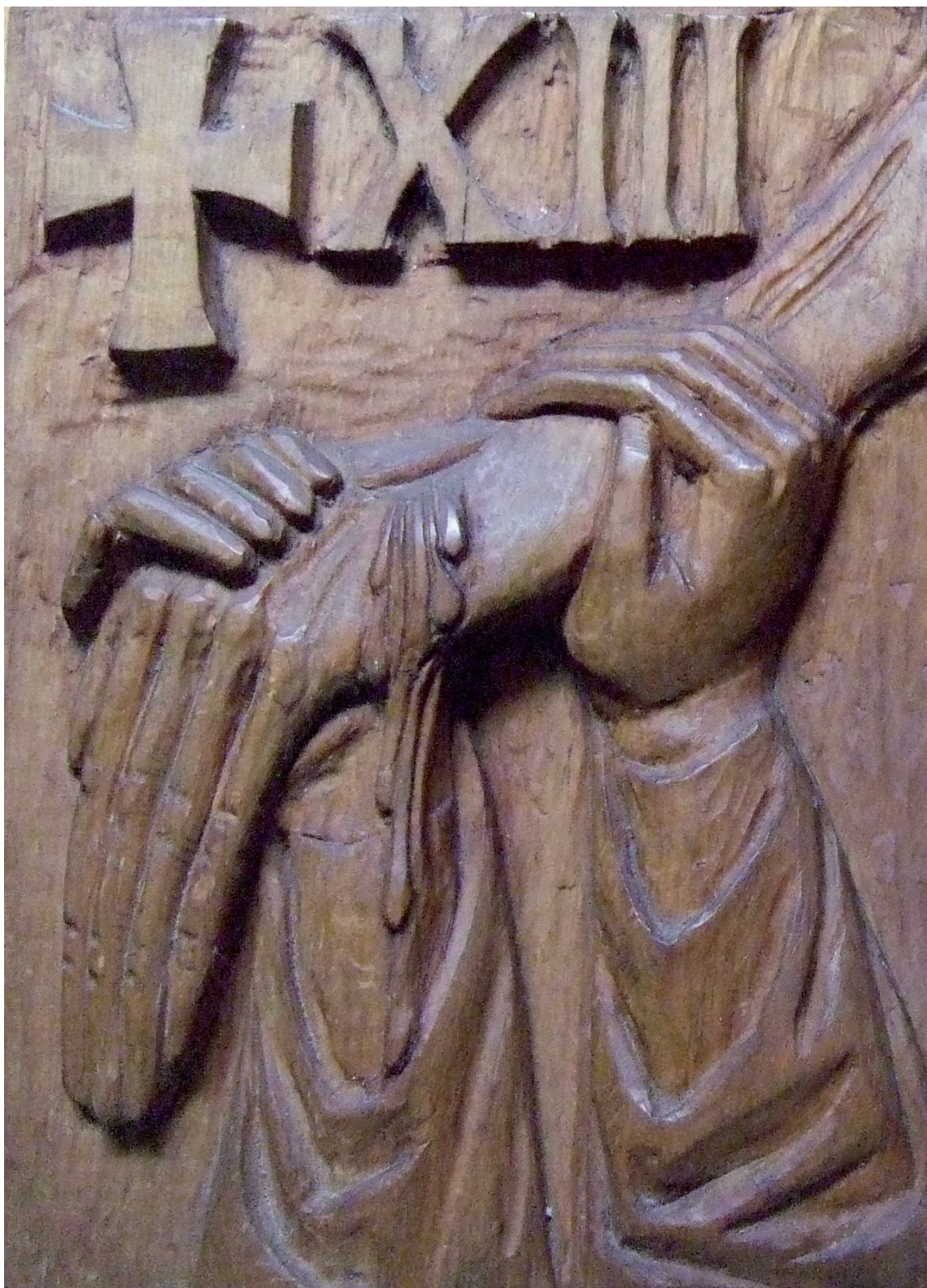
The lifeblood of our Lord is falling,
draining from the nail-wound in his palm,
and already no lifeline can be seen there.

This is his doing hand, the right,
and all that he is doing now is dying,
yet in the dying sums up all he's done.

'This is my body, this is my blood,' he said,
but another pair of hands now holds the chalice,
collecting those precious drops that fuel our souls.

His mortal human hands will move no more now
to break the bread and offer up the wine,
only their risen reminders at Emmaus.

All that is left of breath and life now in him
he will expend upon the handing over,
letting his spirit rest in his Father's hands.



XIII *Jesus is taken down from the cross*

Lifeless now his long left hand
although the wound's still flowing,
lifeless too his lower arm—
gashed, gouged, and yet unbleeding.

Whose are these hands that take him down,
so tenderly supporting?
Who wraps him in his winding-sheet
and weeps for his departing?

Many the women gathered there,
with only John lamenting
of all the twelve good men and true
Christ chose, the others fleeing.

Joseph of Arimathea comes,
the Roman guards allowing,
to bear him to the garden tomb
and leave him there unmoving.

But he will go down to harrow hell,
his wounded hands uplifting
all those imprisoned by the grave,
or who have hell while living.



XIV *Jesus is laid in the tomb*

We come to the end, and return to the beginning:
once again the hands are crossed,
though no rope ties them but the winding-sheet,
and no one could say now this is nothing he has done.

For his hands are no longer smooth and clean
but diamonded with the wounds
that he makes our treasure, hard enough
to engrave God's love even on the stoniest hearts.

Once again the shadows of the cross make a face
looking down, but though he looks God does not speak:
God is dead and buried, as silent as the grave.
Cold stone is rolled across, replacing our warmer wood.

Outside, the gardener goes about his business quietly.
He prunes, he tidies with hushed hands,
treading softly so as not to disturb the sleeping earth.
And he has no idea that soon he will be redundant.

For just as you cannot hear a leaf appearing from the bud,
just as you cannot see the earthworms at their work,
just as you cannot witness the tarmac cracking and yielding
to a mere bramble, so already change is happening behind the stone.

God is stirring, waking Christ to plough the furrow,
go down and harrow hell, to rescue patriarchs and prophets
and to bring Adam and Eve back into the garden.

And tomorrow we shall have a new gardener
as life breaks forth, stronger than any stone.

Conveyancing

The invitation is to a new home,
a renewed body,
and a rising, rising up
out of the harrowing of hell.
The door to this new house
will open
in its own time,
in God's own time,
and it's no good
trying to short-circuit the process.
The train that takes us there
stops at every station,
all those crowded platforms
of shouting people
at first waving palms
but later their fists.
And the last stop, on Friday,
is deserted.
It comes in the night-time
of the day-time,
when the curtain is torn in two
and there seems to be
no protection, just abandonment.
All will seem lost
as God pays the price of love,
but in that very moment
we have redemption,
we have completion,
and something is conveyed
that the world has never seen before.
The key to the new life
is forged from iron nails,
placed in the lock by the One they mock,

and turned three times.
After that, no more looking
through the keyhole,
for the invitation is to a new body,
a new life—
come in, and make yourself at home.

These Stations of the Cross belong to the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and currently hang in the chapel of their convent, The Cherwell Centre, 14 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6QB. Prior to this they hung for some years in the Catholic Church in Newtown, Mid Wales.

SISTER JOANNA MOORE, who carved these stations, was a gifted artist who often worked in wood. She was a Holy Child sister for many years and taught art at Layton Hill Convent School, Blackpool. In later life she felt called to live and work in Nigeria, and eventually transferred to the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, a religious congregation that had been founded in Nigeria.

JOANNA TULLOCH is a Methodist Local Preacher, poet, and artist who has had close links with other Christian traditions throughout her life. She encountered these stations when on retreat at the Cherwell Centre in 2012. Joanna has developed a methodology that she calls 'Wisdom' (Word, Image, and Story, Doors Of Mystery), combining scripture, art, and personal story, as expressed through poetry, in response to her faith; this booklet is an example of this approach as applied to the Passion of Christ.

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