

I Will Sing As

I Journey...

*Meditations for the Three Hour Watch by the Cross
Good Friday, April 2, 2010 – 12:00 NOON – 3:00 P.M.*

Canon Jim Irvine

*Christ Church (Parish) Church
Westmorland Street, Fredericton
The Reverend Anthony A. Kwaw
Rector*

Thanks so much for sharing your work. What a blessing. You've taken a usually boring rendition of the last words and made it relevant, inspiring, and personal. One might say, "you stopped preachin' and started meddlin'". To tie the sacramental life, everyday life and that Friday 2000 years ago was great.

The Reverend Dr. Sam McClain, *Diocese of Fort Worth*

Thanks so much for sharing this with me. I would like to be in the congregation when you deliver this and what I really appreciate are the personal stories. For me, it gives a totally new focus for the seven last words. Rather than getting theological etc., etc., etc., you allowed each one to begin a personal journey and allows the hearer to take each step remembering where they might have been when a similar situation took place.

The Reverend Canon Ian Bockus, *Diocese of Maine*

I felt a comforting tranquility pour out upon me as I read of your ministry through the years to those in deep need. God is definitely with us...even as the thief on the cross would experience. Your journey has been one of tender love and care, and I thank God for your willingness to enter the time and space of another's darkness, letting the light of Christ be present in you.

Paula Hamby, *Diocese of Western Tennessee*

LORD JESUS, OF YOU I WILL SING AS I JOURNEY.

*Lord Jesus, of you I will sing as I journey.
I'll tell all my neighbours about you wherever I go.
You alone give us life, give us peace, give us love.
Lord Jesus, of you I will sing as I journey.*

*Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey.
May all of my joy be a faithful reflection of you.
May the earth and the sea and the sky join my song.
Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey.*

*As long as I live, Jesus, make me your servant,
To carry your cross and to share all your burdens and tears;
For you save us by giving your body and blood.
As long as I live, Jesus, make me your servant.*

*I fear in the dark and the doubt of my journey,
But courage will come with the sound of your steps by my side,
And with all of the people you saved by your love,
We'll sing to the dawn at the end of our journey.*

Introduction – A Journey Begun

Lord Jesus, of you I will sing as I journey. / I'll tell all my neighbours about you wherever I go.

From midday a darkness fell over the whole land, which lasted until three in the afternoon. Each year every effort is made to replicate the scene. The familiar accounts are retold and the faithful and sceptical, the curious and the cautious gather. In large city churches or small country chapels distant pews are occupied.

Nothing has changed, and inasmuch as Jesus' expiation remains singular, the perennial duplication has touched generations that have preceded ours. The story touches us again today.

Some will have their favourite story. Matthew and Luke provide different accounts. Mark and John tell the story differently as well. For all of their differences, they each lead us to a Cross on the heights of a hill outside the city walls of Jerusalem. The gospels arrive together at Golgotha.

For Mark the journey has been brief. Jesus set out at the Jordan and his steps led from the river's edge where he was baptized to Golgotha. Matthew and Luke had Jesus begin his journey from Bethlehem. John, on the other hand, established his point of departure at the foundation of creation.

Jesus' journey was seen differently.

And it was most certainly different from our own experience. For the most part, few of us have undertaken a journey.

Several years ago now, I found myself at the local bus depot in the city. I was waiting for the arrival of the bus from Saint John. My son was on the bus and he was coming for a visit. I arrived at the depot waiting room early and found it almost deserted. Two or three people were sitting waiting and as they were without luggage, I thought that they were waiting for arrivals, as I was. One was at the ticket counter purchasing a fare. I stood by the plate glass doors and waited. Over a space of time taxis arrived and dropped off fares who carried back packs and wheeled suitcases in past where I was standing.

Some were going to Woodstock, Edmundston perhaps. Possibly Montreal. The bus would soon arrive. For some this was a point of departure, while for others it was their destination. But in the growing crowd some were like me, and I wasn't going anywhere. I was staying where I was.

Those arriving climbed off the bus and retrieved their luggage, while those departing placed their bags near the yawning doors and boarded the vehicle. Arrivals and departures might anticipate a laundry and a resettling, and, after a short period, a return trip.

The routine is familiar to most of us. While I was not embarking on a trip that evening, like you I have undertaken trips before – and since. But only recently have I begun to recognize the journey that I have been on.

Good Friday and the words attributed to Jesus on this solemn day have served to help me recognize a journey that I have been on – and continue to make. For all that the evangelists committed for posterity, we have taken liberties. And for the liberties taken, I have placed the Cross at a comfortable distance where I have prevented Jesus' words from engaging me in a transformative way.

Yann Martel, writing in *The Life of Pi*, has Pi express with disarming clarity, "I know what you want. You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality." For far too long words attributed to Jesus have been just that, flat, immobile, without leaven.

This afternoon, in the darkness that embraces us over the course of the next few hours I will share glimpses of my journey with you. I hope that in the course of these meditations we shall begin to see higher, or further or differently from how we have in the past. My hope is that we will begin to glimpse a journey that we have undertaken from the time of our baptism, without ticket or luggage.

For it seems clear to me that while I was not present on Golgotha to witness these words for myself, they are far from a dry, yeastless factuality placed at the distance of two millennium. These are words that I have heard – and you have too – if we but pause in our frantic rush of arrivals and departures and listen.

*Lord Jesus, of you I will sing as I journey.
I'll tell all my neighbours about you wherever I go.*

Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing. LUKE 23:33-34

You alone give us life, give us peace, give us love. / Lord Jesus, of you I will sing as I journey.

Jesus' procession to Golgotha has many depictions. Father Seiger Köder in a tableau entitled *Unison*, pictures Jesus struggling under the weight of his cross beam, and with him on either side, others bearing the weight of their cross beams. These men were on the final leg of a journey that had begun at various corners of the Empire. Unsavory characters, thieves and murderers, terrorists and highwaymen joined ranks and the Palestinian dust under their feet rose in the air as they advanced. Jesus was numbered among them. Jesus' place was not simply found in that Day or on that Hill but among those men, the refuse of society. In *Unison* with them, he carried the weight of the price of life and peace and love.

Placed on the cross beam, Jesus' arms were pinned to the rough wood. Others' cries of pain drown out all pleas for mercy and vain claims of innocence. Vile blasphemies fill the air from the lips of men sentenced to death as well as the Roman soldiers. The God of Israel and the gods of Rome are invoked in Hebrew and Aramaic and Latin.

In the very midst of that cacophony I am sure was heard, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing." In the confusion it was quickly lost. The soldier wielding the hammer may have caught it. Another holding the iron spike may have heard it. Perhaps, as a soldier's ear came close to Jesus' lips – as they hoisted the cross beam to the post anchored in the hard ground of Golgotha – the words were caught.

Some years ago, I had the privilege of assisting Archdeacon Harry Quinn in the Chaplaincy at Ridgewood Veterans' Wing in South Bay – on the West Side of Saint John. One week a month I would cover for him and extend pastoral care to the men who served in the Great Wars of the last century. Residents came to live at the Veterans' Wing when they could no longer make it on their own. Some suffered from physical disability as amputees while others were less obvious in their disability. All were scared.

On Tuesday evenings, after supper, a Service was held in the Craft Room and five or six ladies of the Church of the Good Shepherd provided a choir. They had faithfully done so for nearly four decades. Having begun as young women, they knew the residents well, and by name.

The Holy Communion was celebrated on alternating Tuesdays and when it was the attendance at the Service was always higher. As Anglican priests, Harry and I presided with the Book of Common Prayer. Residents filled the Craft Room. The staff would bring the wheel chair residents in and placed them around the walls of the room. There were some who could not be brought to the Service. In those cases we would take the Sacrament to the residents in their rooms. After communicating those in the Craft Room, a chorister would join me and carry the Chalice as we made a tour of the rooms. The choir and residents continued to sing until our return.

In the dusk of an early April evening I remember entering Fred's room. Fred was in his late nineties and a faithful Baptist who never missed the evening Service – and never missed making his Communion. I had not taken Communion to Fred in his room before. It was out of character for Fred to be absent in the Craft Room. Perhaps Fred was ill.

As I entered his room Fred was lying on his side, facing the window by his bed. A thin blanket – too short for his height – covered him from his ankles to his shoulder. His left hand, fingers long and bony, held the edge of the blanket at his shoulder and as I walked around the end of his bed I saw that he was gazing out the window into the early spring sky of evening.

I greeted him, and he recognized me and called me by name without moving on his bed. "I have brought you Communion, Fred," I said, leaning over him with my left hand on his shoulder and speaking directly into his ear.

"I cannot take it tonight... or ever again," Fred replied. "My family was in earlier today. They told me that they would not come to visit me again if I were to take Communion from you." A tear escaped an eye and ran down to his pillow that was already moistened.

As Fred looked at me and then past me into the impenetrable sky that Jesus looked into, I am sure I heard familiar words, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

I nodded my head in understanding. Transferring the Paten to the night table I knelt and asked if I could then give him a blessing. Fred nodded in silence and closed his eyes as I reached out my arm and placed my hand on his head and blessed him.

*Jesus, you alone give us life give us peace, give us love.
Lord Jesus, of you I will sing as I journey.*

The din of Golgotha was confusion enough. Only on prosaic Easter cards is the hill top so thinly populated by crosses. The sentenced were there, of course, as were the men that were required to carry out the sentences – the Centurions who had to keep order, such as it was. Those attracted by public executions ventured out, as they have in every generation. And then there were others whose presence was demanded by their insistence that the sentence was carried out. Jesus' accusers would have been numbered among them.

Least of all there would have been disciples. Peter had been accused as being an associate of the Nazarene. Worse, he was suspected as being a Galilean. Fear made them cautious.

Witnesses would have found the evangelists by a referential route. And what was reported as having been said would have been reported with a grain of salt and probably not much more. Certainly comprehension would have been scarce. And the greater our distance from the Place of the Skull, the greater our claim that these attributed words are true.

We are confident that Jesus conveyed words of assurance to a man crucified near by. From what we know the man nearby was close to death, perhaps closer to death than he was to Jesus. And all the men were going to die.

"You will be with me in Paradise," Jesus told him. Not as some unmerited reward for his crimes. Neither does Jesus absolve him as he did so many times before in the Gospels where forgiveness is never implied. In this instance Jesus' voice born on the wind is carried to another's ear and in the darkened afternoon hope is expressed... not of the geography of heaven but of the torment of the moment: "You will be *with* me ... I will be *with* you." You are not alone. As abandoned as you may feel from family, friends and colleagues, I am with you and you are not alone.

Almost two decades ago I was called to the Regional Hospital in Saint John to the bedside of a friend and former parishioner who had asked for me. John had been 57 when he came to me for catechesis. He had undertaken his spiritual formation as seriously as he had his career as a policeman and Staff Sergeant. John had an uncomplicated faith and recognized the need to read the Scriptures and attend the Eucharist. Shortly after his Confirmation I was stopped by his wife in a local nursing home where she was on staff. She asked what I had done to her dear John. When he is through with his soup and sandwich at lunch he goes into the living room and reads his Bible, she told me. She was not complaining, she went on to add. It's just that John had changed. He had been transformed. And the change had been for the better.

John's wife predeceased him by several years and he had no family except for a sister. His sister had called me and asked me to visit John.

As I entered his room, John asked if I remembered to bring the Oils. I assured him that I had. His voice was harsh and I learned that he had oesophageal cancer. I encouraged him not to speak, but that we would have Communion and that I would anoint him with the Oil I brought with me. And that I would sit and visit. He made a suitable gruff response and went and sat on the side of his bed.

I opened my Communion Box and set out the Cross and Candles and the Chalice and Paten. I placed the Oil Stock next to the Chalice. The prayers we would say together he mimed with his lips, his mouth dry and throat raw. I placed a portion of a host on the Communion Spoon having first dipped the Spoon in the Cup. He took the Sacrament reverently and said something appropriate like, "Thank you Lord" as I communicated myself.

I then moistened my thumb in the cotton wad in the Oil Stock and touched his forehead. As I outlined the Cross that had been placed there years before by Canon Ed Lane I gave voice to a prayer of blessing... and healing.

As I put the utensils back in the Box John raised his legs and positioned himself in bed. He sat, a pillow supporting his head.

I took a seat, beside his bed. John's arms lay beside him and he rested as I placed my left hand on top of his. While John sat there serene and at the threshold of death I am sure Jesus' words sounded in that room... "Today you will be *with* me ... I will be *with* you."

Three days later it was my privilege to preside at John's requiem mass.

Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey.

May all of my joy be a faithful reflection of you.

Woman, here is your son! ... Here is your mother! JOHN: 19:26-27

May the earth and the sea and the sky join my song. / Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey.

Mary would have averted her eyes, perhaps finding shelter in the folds of John's tallit. The wind, blowing eddies of dust on the heights of Golgotha seemed incessant and loose garments and soldiers capes whipped. Eyelids closing in agony assured that the darkness continued. Clouds overhead brought another darkness, chilling the air. Men struggled to find some respite from the pain that assaulted their bodies and pressed upon their minds. While some continued to cry out into the darkness in defiance, others had begun to collapse under their own weight. Voices began to fail.

Jesus was lost among the throng, and like those near him in this chilling afternoon, his strength was waning. All creation was sharing in the labour pains of this dawning era. The earth cried out as the blood of Jesus – and others – fell to the ground and the earth absorbed life as it ebbed. Not since Abel had the earth cried so loud.

To the West the Mediterranean resonated with all creation as redemption incrementally advanced outside the Walled City. Waves clapped and fishes cleared the water and the sky overhead joined their song. But on Golgotha nothing seemed out of place. Nothing extraordinary was unfolding. Men were dying. The efficiencies of the Empire were not in jeopardy.

In this terrifying hour Jesus catches the visage of his Mother and with her, John. Their fear cannot be contained, hidden. They stood as one, and Jesus gathered the strength to speak. John records his words. Others failed to hear them. "Behold you son," he says. "Behold your mother."

Jesus extends compassion by ensuring the relationship that will remind both mother and son of him. Their relationship is nothing apart from him. Neither one is anything apart from him, and now apart from each other – a part of each other.

What had been a close association, each bearing up the other in their grief, has now attained the intimacy of relationship. And in that they were indivisible and supported.

Fifteen years ago I visited a large nursing home in Saint John. The purpose of my visit was to take the Sacrament to a parishioner who was a resident in the institution. Because of her diminished capacity, Norma was restrained in her bed. And naturally the terror of the restraints aggravated her. She found the bands about her wrists upsetting and she spent hour after hour confused and upset.

My custom was to take her sister with me when I visited. The two spinster sisters had been inseparable for their seven decades. They comforted each other.

I greeted Norma, clasping her hand and telling her that I had brought Connie with me and that the three of us were going to have Communion. Norma seemed pleased – that I had brought Connie with me, and that I had brought the Communion as well. I cleared a space on the bedside table and placed the Cross and Candlesticks, the Chalice and Paten.

Norma was calm as I proceeded through the brief liturgy at the bedside, and she joined her thin voice with her sister Connie's voice in the familiar prayers they had said together Sunday by Sunday hundreds and hundreds of times.

I placed the Host on one sister's palm and then the other. I gently supported Norma's head with my hand as I guided the Chalice to her lips. Lowering her head to her pillow, she gently closed her eyes, savouring the Bread of Heaven, the Cup of Salvation.

When all three of us had communicated, I placed the Cross and Candlesticks in my Communion Box, along with the Chalice and Paten. I closed the Box, clasped Norma's hand and said my good bye. I then went to the door. Turning and looking back toward the bed I was privileged to share a familial moment...

Connie approached Norma's bedside. Standing on her toes, the diminutive sister reached over the rail of the hospital bed. She was able to cradle Norma's head, careful not to disturb her hair. She drew herself as close as she could to her sister and carefully, lovingly kissed Norma on her forehead. Gently resting Norma on her pillow and straightening her nightie, she whispered, "Good-bye."

"Behold your sister." I saw those words of relationship expressed... and Jesus' comfort and consolation echoed again, as it has so many times since first it was thought he uttered such sweet compassion.

*May the earth and the sea and the sky join my song.
Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey.*

As long as I live, Jesus, make me your servant, / To carry your cross and to share all your burdens and tears...

I can hardly imagine the anguish of homesickness. A sense of abandonment can overwhelm even the most independent of us. The feeling goes beyond loneliness and stirs deep within. Anxiety wells up both to our own surprise as well as the surprise of others.

Jesus, for all his resolve to turn his face towards Jerusalem found himself in this world of uncertainty. “Why have you forsaken me?” he asks to the air around him. He was not alone on this hill top. Others shared his fate. It was the feeling of abandonment that covered him in waves.

Confident that he was about his Father’s business, there was no hint of Jesus feeling abandoned when Mary and Joseph left him behind in Jerusalem as a youth. That confidence continued in life and even when he was in the wilderness – and all alone – following his baptism. He never felt abandoned. The Gospel accounts give ample evidence of Jesus’ sense of well-being and he speaks confidently of his public ministry that made up so much of his journey.

In moments of lucidity he cast his face toward the darkened, oppressive sky. His gaze tried to penetrate the terror and confusion that filled the air. His fears found prayerful expression the night before in the Garden. His fear returned in his sense of abandonment. Fear built on fear and in desperation those nearby caught a sound... perhaps his voice, shallow and thin... perhaps the wind. “Why have you forsaken me...?”

Those that heard it, shook it off. It was the wind, some thought.

Nearly four decades have passed since I visited Jack. Stricken with Alzheimer’s disease, this Christian gentleman was committed to the Provincial Hospital in Saint John. No longer able to live with his wife of over forty years, Jack required the sort of attention that was only to be found in a locked ward.

In earlier days Jack had been an astute professional with a wonderful wit and disarming charm. As his dementia progressed he began to lose his faculties, in small ways in the beginning, but in more serious ways as the disease advanced. He got so that his wife could no longer care for him and she became a stranger to him.

In Easter week I arranged to pick up his wife so that I might give them both Communion, as I regularly did on Sundays before his committal. Led to the locked ward, the grey painted brick hallway echoed as the attendant knocked on the metal door of the ward. Unlocked from inside by another attendant, the door was opened to allow our entry. We were in a desolate place. Patients scuffed across the floor in aimless directions, never alighting on a chair, never stopping to look out a window. Standing in their midst was Jack.

We were taken to Jack and while introductions were made, as they had been in the past, no sense of recognition passed across Jack’s face. His affect did not hint at even the slightest recollection of a memory of his wife – or me. As always, he was amiable and accompanied us to a side room where the attendant had arranged chairs and a small table.

As I busied myself setting up the Communion vessels, Jack’s wife tried to make conversation with her husband, admiring his hair, commenting on how good he looked that day, observing how spring had finally begun, and almost in desperation, how the weather was that afternoon.

The brief Communion Service began and I was surprised how lucid Jack became, at least for the moment. He followed the prayers and knew when to make the appropriate responses. He joined us in the General Confession as well as the Prayer of Humble Access – prayers he would have known from his youth. He received the Sacrament reverently and as he did, his wife looked on him with pride and admiration.

As I pronounced the Benediction, Jack clasped his hands by his knees as he sat in his chair and said, “Amen!” And as he did, he lapsed into the inner terrors of his abandonment and we beheld Jack as we had met him a half hour earlier.

The metal door clanked shut behind us as we left the Ward and I took a moment to look back – through the small glass window in the door, reinforced with wire mesh. I saw Jack standing in the midst of a sea of agony and confusion. He looked at me. And I am sure I heard Jesus’ words – if not uttered on the heights of Golgotha then in the locked Ward I had just visited: “Why have you forsaken me?”

*As long as I live, Jesus, make me your servant,
To carry your cross and to share all your burdens and tears...*

I am thirsty. JOHN: 19:28-29

For you save us by giving your body and blood. / As long as I live, Jesus, make me your servant.

Darkness persisted and the hours passed. The Centuries inspected the men hanging on the crosses. Some had died. They had not been strong enough to endure. Others had fallen silent. The atmosphere surrounding the hilltop had changed. Some still cried out but their breathing was laboured and their blasphemies had weakened.

One guard was sure that he had heard Jesus say, “I am thirsty.”

He reached for the cheap wine the soldiers had brought with them for their personal refreshment. Finding a sponge, he poured a libation and pressed it to Jesus’ lips.

Was it then that Jesus remembered that he had told his disciples that he would not drink wine again until he came into his Kingdom? This is no throne. No hand was free to hold a sceptre. Had Luke been wrong? Pledge or not the guard was sure that he had heard Jesus clearly, “I am thirsty.”

Few of us have ever experienced thirst. Oh, we have our morning coffee, but I have never arrived at breakfast thirsty. We might have a glass of water when we take our medication. We might even let the water run so that it will be cold. But thirst eludes us. Pausing for a cup of tea midday may be a well established pattern. However thirst has little to do with it.

I encountered thirst for the first time six years ago. And it wasn’t mine.

My son was returning to Saint John after a weekend visit and I drove him to the bus depot here in the city. We arrived in time to purchase his fare and have a light supper in the adjacent sandwich restaurant.

Jamie placed his order and went and found a table as I told the clerk what I wanted. I poured two cups of soda as the sandwiches were being prepared and then paid the clerk.

I placed the tray on the table, took off my overcoat and sat opposite my son. He took off his cap as I said grace, and then we began to unwrap the sandwiches. No one else was in the restaurant and we had the place to ourselves.

It was nice – we weren’t rushed and we had an opportunity to talk – about the visit and about the week that lie ahead. As we talked, a woman entered the shop and went to a table and sat down. She had a small over night bag that she rested on the floor. She was alone. She was in her 50’s although she looked weary and older.

After a short time she spoke in our direction. “May I have a cup of tea, please?” she said. Startled, I turned to look in her direction, “Pardon me?” I said. She repeated her request. “May I have a cup of tea?” And she went on, “I have been travelling all day and I am going to Saint John on the bus. I haven’t had anything to eat. May I have a cup of tea?” “Of course you may,” I replied as I stood up and went to her table. “I’ll get you a cup of tea. I’m not sure how good it’ll be – they only have paper cups.” “That’s okay,” she said. “Tea in a paper cup would be fine. I just got in from Chatham.” She held her hands together, rubbing them nervously.

As I stood at the counter I ordered her cup of tea, and a sandwich. The bus wasn’t going to arrive in Saint John until late and if she was thirsty now, her hunger would be unbearable in another three hour’s time. While the clerk prepared the sandwich I took the paper cup and the tea bag and went and poured hot water into the cup from the spout by the coffee machine.

The transaction completed, I carried the tray with the fresh sandwich and steaming cup of tea to the woman’s table and placed it in front of her. “Enjoy this,” I said and returned to my son and my sandwich.

I may be mistaken, but I am sure that I heard Jesus’ cry of thirst that Sunday night in a small sandwich restaurant waiting for a bus to Saint John. And I suspect that we have all heard that cry at other times and in other places.

But I have not always acted with the perception that brought Golgotha close to me that night. Like you, I have found myself asking, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and did nothing for you?”

And he will answer, “I tell you this, anything you did not do for one of the least of these, however humble, you did not do for me.”

*For you save us by giving your body and blood.
As long as I live, Jesus, make me your servant.*

It is finished. JOHN: 19: 30

I fear in the dark and the doubt of my journey, But courage will come with the sound of your steps by my side...

Jesus' doubts enabled him to explore the unfolding mystery of redemption. A journey begun at the foundation of the world – according to John's estimate – now finds itself in the darkened afternoon of a Passover Friday with a Pascal Moon illuminating the scene. Is this what it was for? As voices were silenced haphazardly across the hilltop, Jesus is left with the resignation, "It is finished."

His voice wouldn't have been robust. Distant ears would have missed it. Few ears would have caught it. "It is finished."

Lips barely move. A tongue cloying to the roof of a mouth diminishes the clarity. But the resolution is there: "It is finished."

And so much of what is accomplished in this unfolding drama of redemption is missed on us. We confine his thin utterance to a distant time and place. We do not allow Jesus' words to find us where we are. Golgotha is a time out of synch with our time and a place that is so far removed from us.

"It is finished."

What is accomplished is the cutting of a New Covenant that we have failed to recognize. Our preference is for cliché and slogan and our preoccupation is with Jesus having died on the cross for us. We prefer an observation to a promise, and forgetting a Covenant, we are ignorant of the Promise.

"The time is coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. Although they broken my covenant, I was patient with them," says the Lord. "But this is the covenant that I will make with Israel after those days," says the Lord. "I will set my law within them and write it on their hearts; I will become their God and they shall become my people. No longer need they teach one another to know the Lord; all of them, high and low alike, shall know me," says the Lord, "for I will forgive their wrong-doing and remember their sin no more."

Prophesied by Jeremiah, Jesus at last says, "It is finished." It is accomplished. Forgiveness has been promised. A Promise has been made. A Covenant has been cut.

During my pastoral ministry as a parish priest the Burial of a Christian was typically and characteristically observed with the Table Sacrament that gives us the assurance of our relationship with God. Grief is addressed and hope assured in light of an evangelical Promise first realized on the heights of Golgotha.

Thirteen years ago I led a father with preschool children to the open grave of a wife and mother. In the church where we had met at Jesus' Table only moments earlier, we had been fed with the Bread of Heaven, the Cup of Salvation. A widower knelt and was fed, and his young children kneeling beside him, wide-eyed, confused, distracted and alarmed, looked into my face as I knelt on one knee and extended my hand in blessing. Neighbours, and friends and co-workers joined them in this simple act of nurturing. They entered into a Promise and claimed the Promise as their own.

As we stood around the grave, the casket rested on the straps waiting to be lowered and covered.

The forgiven assembly gathered close to Don and his children and in that gathering Jesus was present. Earth was cast on the bier and the final blessing said.

Returning to the church, the wind caught my funeral cape. I turned and looked back at Don. He held one child in his arms and two hugged his legs. Friends drew close and shook his hand while others stretched to give him a kiss. As I looked, I am sure that the wind that filled my cloak brought to my hearing: "It is finished."

Finished indeed – and only just begun.

*I fear in the dark and the doubt of my journey,
But courage will come with the sound of your steps by my side...*

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. LUKE 23:44-46

And with all of the people you saved by your love, / We'll sing to the dawn at the end of our journey.

A great heaviness set in as Jesus breathed his last. The time has passed slowly and we are weary. You have stayed. Others found the waiting intolerable. Jesus endured the pain and humility of the Day. Deprived of sleep and food, hours merged and the passage of time stretched from hours to an eternity. Redemption of God's creation demands nothing less.

In the company of the Father, the Son climbed Moriah. The thicket yielded no ram and no angel withheld the blade. Isaac was let loose and Abraham found his way down the hillside by a different route.

The Son, the Father's only Son remained, and was heard to say, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

And he breathed his last.

Breathing our last brings us our own terror.

I remember, over a decade ago now, a rainy afternoon that found me at home in my last parish. The phone rang and I answered it on the third ring. I recognized the voice on the line. It was Ann. She had been crying. It took a moment for her to compose herself, and when she had, she asked if I could come by. This was something that couldn't wait.

I picked up my car keys and drove the short distance to Ann's home. Her children were at home, playing. The weather prevented them from playing outdoors. The living room looked like a war zone. Ann led me into the kitchen and we sat down at the kitchen table.

Earlier that day she had visited her doctor, an oncologist. She had had tests the previous week and she had been given the report. The report was not good and the prognosis was no better. She was diagnosed with an aggressive malignancy that would not be responsive to surgery or treatment.

She fought back tears. The future held its own terrors. She was concerned about her husband and how he would manage during the illness and after her death. She was concerned about her children and how they would adjust to her absence. There was so much left to be done and there was not sufficient time to do it.

She felt angry and she felt guilty. Angry at God for denying her the opportunity to fulfil what she had undertaken; guilty for failing to complete what she had in good faith begun. But for all of her anger and guilt she honoured God and wanted to see this new stage in her life through to its end.

As I sat at the table with her, I drew on my pastoral skills to the sick and dying. I listened carefully to what she said and how she said it. It didn't take me long to realize that my presence was more assuring than anything I might say. I didn't say much. I only listened.

As the children jumped from sofa to chair in the living room, as one wounded sibling rushed for maternal comfort as others screeched in glee, as Ann rose above her immediate self-preoccupation and met the demanding needs of each child, I saw the unfolding of God's presence in the very midst of domestic chaos. Ann distributed juice boxes and Rice Crispie Squares and healing kisses to bumped heads and scraped knees.

As she returned to the kitchen she sat, and exhaled slowly, placing her hand in mine. She looked through the archway and saw her children sitting on the floor, sipping their juice boxes and watching a favourite video.

She turned back to the table and squeezed tears of sorrow from swollen eyes, allowing them to stream down her cheeks.

Her hand remained cradled in mine for some time in a kitchen filled with crayon drawings and fridge magnet names and Easter cards and children's laughter and our silence. And in that silence I heard words attributed to Jesus at an earlier date and in a distant place: "Into your hands I commend my spirit." The earlier commendation I did not hear. This latter day commendation brought Jesus' Passion close by – closer by far than I may ever have been on Golgotha.

*And with all of the people you saved by your love,
We'll sing to the dawn at the end of our journey.*