

STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Author: [Nicholas King SJ](#)

Introduction

The Stations of the Cross is a very old devotion; it may well originate in the desire of Christians to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and be in the place where Jesus went to his death. Most Catholic churches nowadays will have ‘stations’ (the name means ‘stopping-places’), in the form of fourteen pictures or sculptures or engravings, or sometimes simple crosses, to allow Christians to pause (‘stop’) and enter reflectively into those last moments of Jesus’s journey of love, and to pray by imagining themselves in Jerusalem with him.

Over the centuries the number and format of this devotion has changed a good deal, but it has had its present form since the 15th Century.

How to pray the Stations

1. At each ‘station’ we very often begin by naming the station,
2. ‘We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you’, to which others present may respond. ‘Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world’.

3. At the end of the station it is quite common to say a prayer such as the following:

I love you, Jesus, my love above all things,

And I repent with my whole heart of having offended you.

Never permit me to separate myself from you again,

Grant that I may love you always, and then do with me what you will.

Only use these prayers if they speak to you. What matters is that it should be a moment where your life meets with the unfailing love of God.

Not all of the stations are recorded in the scriptures; they owe much to the creative imagination of Christians who wanted to follow Jesus in this last journey of love. Nevertheless, I have suggested a suitable gospel passage for each station, taken from the recent [translation of the New Testament](#), published by Kevin Mayhew. I suggest that you allow the passage to do two things: first, use your imagination to remain lovingly and attentively with Jesus in his passion. Secondly, try to link this with whatever is going on in your own life at present. Like Jesus, you are engaged on a loving journey towards the Father; like Jesus, you may well find yourself enduring terrible suffering. Or you may have in mind others who are suffering, perhaps people in your own circle. Or again you may want to pray, as you watch Jesus going to his unjust death, for the millions throughout the world who also lack their basic human rights, or who do not have enough to eat or drink.

Whatever you do, it is important to be honest in your prayer: as you watch Jesus going through this journey of love, tell him exactly how you feel (and how you would like to feel). Reach out to him, and let him reach out to you; and then allow his love to transform your life.

First Station: Jesus is condemned to death

And so they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the Praetorium. It was early in the morning. And they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium, so that they should not be defiled’ but [be able to] eat the Passover. And so Pilate came outside to them, and says, ‘What accusation do you bring against this man?’ They replied and said to him, ‘If this fellow were not an evil-doer, we

would not have handed him over to you'. And so Pilate said to them, '*You* people take him – and according to *your* law judge him'. And so the Judaeans said to him, 'It is not permissible for us to kill anybody'. [This was in order] that Jesus' word might be fulfilled, signalling by what kind of a death he was about to die. And so Pilate went back into the Praetorium, and he called Jesus and said to him, 'Are you the King of the Judaeans?'

Jesus replied, 'On your own account do you say this, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate answered, 'Do you think that *I* am a Judaeans? Your nation, and the High Priests, handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus replied, 'My Kingdom is not of this World. If my Kingdom were of this World, my servants would have struggled so that I should not be handed over to the Judaeans. As it is, my Kingdom is not from here.' And so Pilate said to him, 'Then you are a king, are you not?' Jesus replied, 'You say that I am a king. *I* was born for this, and for this I came into the world, that I might bear witness to the Truth. Everyone who is of the Truth listens to my voice.' Pilate says to him, 'What is Truth?' (John 18:28-38)

Watch Jesus, and contrast him with the behaviour of all those around him. The religious authorities do not want to go into the Praetorium, so as not to 'be defiled'; but planning murder might be considered sufficient defilement. Meanwhile Pilate scurries between the outside, where the noisy crowds are baying for blood, and the inside, where Jesus is all serenity and calm control. Pilate shows his inability to make anything of Jesus with the four rather despairing questions that he asks.

Does this episode echo in any way what is going on in your life at present?

Whose side are you on?

Second Station: Jesus accepts the cross

And he began to teach them that it was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer many things, and to be rejected by the elders and the high priests and the scribes, and to be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said the message openly. And Peter, taking him aside, began to scold him. And he turned, and, seeing his disciples, scolded Peter and says, 'Get behind me, Satan. Because you are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts.' And summoning the crowd with his disciples he said to them, 'If someone wants to follow after me, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will destroy it. And whoever destroys their life, for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what use is it for a person to gain the entire world and suffer the loss of their life? (Mark 8:31-36).

And so they accepted Jesus. And carrying his cross for himself, he went out to the [place] known as Skull Place, which in Aramaic is known as Golgotha, where they crucified him, (John 19:17) These two passages can be taken together. The first of them has Jesus, at Caesarea Philippi, after Simon Peter has correctly identified him as 'the Messiah', explaining that this Messiah has to suffer and to die. Peter objects to this (as we all object to it, if we are honest), and there is quite a tart little exchange between the leader of the apostles and his master. But we should notice that not only the Messiah has to go this way; so also have his disciples.

The second passage is from John's gospel, and it shows an almost regal Jesus, carrying his own cross to the place of execution.

Do you find it difficult to accept that Jesus is a Messiah who must suffer and die?

Do you find it difficult to accept that Jesus's disciples must also go that road?
What is there in your life at the moment that involves carrying the cross?

Third Station: Jesus falls the first time

The Stations of the Cross include three falls. None of them is found in any of the gospel narratives, so they have emerged from the creative imagination of Christians devoutly meditating on Jesus's last hours. Certainly it would not be surprising if Jesus were to fall after the flogging he has received.

If Jesus is not described as falling in any of the scripture accounts, his disciples frequently do. They may not fall physically, but they certainly 'fall from grace', and we may be able to identify with them.

And Judas Iscariot (one of the Twelve) went off to the High Priests to betray him to them. And when they heard they rejoiced; and they promised to give him money. And he started to look to see how he might betray him at an appropriate time. (Mark 14:10-11)

At the very time when an unknown woman is anointing Jesus as Messiah, and Jesus is explaining that she is anointing him for burial (so it is a dying Messiah), one of his disciples falls, according to Mark, and hands Jesus over to the religious leaders for money. It is a very sad story.

Can you identify with this fall?

Do you feel the sadness in the story?

Fourth Station: Jesus meets his mother

This is another episode that is not related in the gospel story. However, John's gospel does have Jesus's mother standing by the cross, so we can properly give our prayerful attention to the possibility that Mary was there in the crowds, that they encountered one another on the journey to Golgotha, and that she had the dreadful experience of watching her son die.

There stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary of Clopas and Mary the Magdalene. And so Jesus, seeing his mother, and the disciple standing by whom he loved says to [his] mother, 'Woman, look – your son'. Then he says to the disciple, 'Look – your mother'. And from that hour the disciple took her to his own. (John 19:26-27)

There are two possible ways of looking at this episode. The first is to rejoice that Jesus, even in his last moments was able to look lovingly on others, and to set up his mother and his beloved disciple as the start of a new dynasty. The second is to recognise the appalling sadness that his mother is feeling.

Can you recall a situation in your life where someone (perhaps you yourself?) acted with generosity of this sort?

Can you identify with the pain of Jesus' mother?

Fifth Station: Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry his cross

And they conscript a certain passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenean coming in from the countryside, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they take him to the place Golgotha, which when it is translated is 'Place of the Skull'. And they tried to give him wine flavoured with myrrh – but he didn't take it. And they crucify him. And they 'divide his garments, casting a lot over them [to see] who would get something'. (Mark 15:21-24)

This is a strange story. Notice that Simon is an African (he comes from Cyrene, which is in Libya). He also just happens to be around; he has no apparent interest in Jesus, but is just

‘coming in from the fields’. Nor did he volunteer to help this convicted criminal go to his fate. Mark uses a rather rare word that means ‘conscripted’. So he had to be forced into it. Nevertheless it seems that something may have happened to that African on that Friday afternoon, for Mark tells us that he Simon was ‘the father of Alexander and Rufus’. Now Mark is not one to waste words, and presumably the reason that he shares this information with us is that Rufus and Alexander were known to his church. This in turn means (we may assume without making too much of a leap) that on that Friday afternoon their father came to faith in this unlikely Messiah.

Has it ever happened to you that you found yourself forced into doing a kindness to someone against your will, and were very glad to have done so?
Have you known situations where someone very unexpected was kind to you, possibly for rather mixed motives? Was God at work in that situation, do you think?

Sixth Station: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus

As Pilate sat on his judgement-seat, his wife sent to him, saying, ‘have nothing to do with that righteous person; for I have suffered a great deal in a dream today on his account’. (Matthew 27:19)

The story of Veronica is not told in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ passion. But there is a very charming legend about a woman of that name who performed the kindness of wiping Jesus’s face as he walked to his death, and was rewarded by having the image of Jesus’s face printed on the cloth that she has used. And if you press it ‘Veronica’ could be Latin-Greek for ‘true likeness’. Another charming element in the legend is that ‘Veronica’ was actually Pilate’s wife, which is why I offer you this particular gospel text. Matthew tells us the story of a woman (it is so often women who do this sort of thing) who had the courage to stand out against the trend, and urge Jesus’s acquittal.

Have you ever been brave enough to stand out against the crowd?
Do you know people who have had that sort of courage, and been rewarded with seeing the likeness of Christ?

Seventh Station: Jesus falls the second time

Once again, there is no scriptural warrant for this station, however probable the story may be in itself; so here is another story of a disciple who falls.

And Peter was still below in the courtyard. And there comes a single little slave-girl of the High Priest. And seeing Peter warming himself she had a good look at him and says, ‘You were also with the Nazarene, [that] Jesus’. And he denied it, saying, ‘I neither know nor understand what you are saying’. And he went out into the forecourt. And the little slave girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, ‘This [fellow] is from that lot’. And he again denied [it]. And again after a little the bystanders started to say to Peter, ‘You must certainly be [one] of them: you’re a Galilean’. And he began to curse and swear, ‘I don’t know this fellow you’re talking about’.

And immediately for the second time a cock crowed. And Peter remembered the word, how Jesus had told him, ‘Before the cock crows twice, three times you will deny me’. And he thought of it and wept. (Mark 14:66-72)

Not very long ago, Peter had been boasting ‘even if I have to die with you, no way will I ever deny you’. This had been in response to Jesus’s quiet prediction: ‘Amen I tell you, you, today, on this very night, before the cock crows twice, will deny me three times’, and we rather wish that Peter had not spoken, for here is his first opportunity to put his money where his mouth is, and see what happens.

Jesus is on trial in an adjacent room, and is saying almost nothing; Peter says far too much. When Jesus does speak, he tells the truth; Peter lies. Jesus stands up to the High Priest, Peter is terrified by one whom Mark describes as ‘a single little slave-girl of the High Priest’ (and you can hardly be more insignificant than that). Why is Peter ‘warming himself’? Because the chill of treachery is upon him.

Can you identify with Peter’s cowardice? Have you ever behaved in that way? Has anyone ever denied knowledge of you in that way? How did you react? How do you think Jesus might react to Peter’s fall?

Eighth Station: Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

A great crowd of the populace was following him, and also [a crowd] of women, who were mourning him and weeping for him. Jesus turned to the women and said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, don’t be weeping over me. No – weep for yourselves and for your children. Because, look! Days are coming when they will be saying, “Congratulations to the women who are barren, and the wombs that have not given birth, and the breasts that have not suckled”. Then they will start saying to the mountains, “Fall on us”, and to the hills, “Cover us”. Because if they do these things when the wood is green – what might happen when it’s dry?’

And two other criminals were led out with him to be executed. (Luke 23:27-32)

Once again, it is the women in this situation who show great courage. It is they, and not the men, who are prepared to stand out against the crowd and show their sadness (and presumably disapproval) at what is happening to Jesus. Notice also Jesus’s ability to see the needs of others in this lethal situation in which he finds himself. He also delivers a very challenging prediction of the days that will come upon Jerusalem and its population.

Meanwhile he is identified with the criminal classes.

Have you ever seen people with this sort of courage that the women show? Have you ever been privileged to show this sort of courage yourself?

Have you ever known suffering people who had the vision to see the sufferings of others? Have you ever found yourself behaving in this way?

Ninth Station: Jesus falls a third time

Once again, we have to find a fall that afflicts disciples, rather than anything that is recounted about Jesus himself. But we may remember that in Mark’s Gospel there is a certain identification between Jesus and his disciples. Here the fall affects *all* the disciples.

And they abandoned him; and every one of them fled.

And a certain young man was following along with him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And they arrest him. But he cast aside the linen cloth and fled naked. (Mark 14:50-52)

This takes place at the moment when Jesus is arrested by the party that Judas brought. The ones who ran away in such disorder are the very men who were joining in with Peter in saying that they would never, ever betray him. What a fall is here! And it gets worse, for one of them did not

even have the dignity to remain clothed; rather than share Jesus's fate, he runs away naked, a terrible disgrace for a Jew.

There is no evidence, alas, for the relatively modern legend that the young man was the evangelist Mark. But it is a strange story.
Could this be your story?

Tenth Station: Jesus is stripped of his garments

And they tried to give him wine flavoured with myrrh – but he didn't take it. And they crucify him. And they 'divide his garments, casting a lot over them [to see] who would get something'. Now it was the third hour, and they crucified him. And the inscription of his charge was inscribed 'the King of the Jews'. (Mark 15:23-26)

If nakedness was a terrible disgrace for a Jew, we notice that unlike the young man in the previous 'station', Jesus had no choice in the matter; his clothes, and with them what is left of his dignity, are simply taken from him. He did exercise his choice with regard to the wine flavoured with myrrh, and refused to take it. There is some evidence that a drink of this kind was given to condemned criminals to reduce their pain. Perhaps we are to understand that Jesus was determined to keep his sense from being dulled, or, in the words in Gethsemane, to 'drink the cup' of suffering that his father had given him. The reference to dividing garments and casting lots is an echo of Psalm 22, which is the Church often prays over while contemplating Jesus's passion.

The inscription 'King of the Jews' is presumably meant as a joke on the part of the Roman soldiers. For Christians, it is very nearly the truth.

Have you ever felt utterly bereft of all dignity in this way?

Have you been the subject of a commercial transaction of this sort?

Do you know anyone who has had to endure the kind of insulting treatment that Jesus is given?

Eleventh Station: Jesus is nailed to the cross

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium; and they gathered the whole cohort round him. They undressed him and put a scarlet cloak on him; and they plaited a crown made of thorns and put it on his head, and a reed in his right hand. Then they genuflected before him and had fun with him, saying 'Hail – King of the Jews!', and they spat on him, and took the reed and beat him on his head. And when they'd had their fun with him, they took the scarlet cloak off him, and took him out to crucify him.

As they went out, they found a Cyrenean man called Simon; and they conscripted this fellow to carry his cross.

And they came to a place called Golgotha, which means 'Skull Place'. They gave him a drink of wine mixed with gall. When he tasted it, he refused to drink it. They crucified him, 'dividing his garments', and 'casting lots'. And they sat down and kept watch on him there. And above his head, they put the indictment against him:

'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews'

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. The passers-by abused him, and shook their heads, and said, 'You are [the one] who destroys the Temple and

rebuilds it in three days – save yourself, if you are Son of God, and come down from the cross!’

Similarly the Chief Priests had fun with the scribes and elders and said, ‘he saved others – he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we’ll believe in him. “He trusted in God; let [God] deliver him now, if he wants him”. Because he said, “I am Son of God”.’

Similarly the bandits who had been crucified with him reviled him. (Matthew 27:33-44)

We have seen much of this material before, though not in Matthew’s version. It is worth going over it all again, watching Jesus at this last, and (literally) crucial moment. See once more the soldiers’ mockery. It is true that the laugh was on them, because for Christians really is our King; but what did it feel like for Jesus, as they dress him up in royal clothes and give him an imitation crown (but with thorns) and an imitation sceptre (but it was a breakable reed), and played games as though he were a real king, spitting and genuflecting and hitting him with his own sceptre. Then there is the grim arrival at ‘Skull Place’; and in Matthew the drink that he is given is poison rather than anaesthetic. And they watch, which somehow increases the indignity.

Then there is more mockery: from the indictment above his head (because he is not really ‘King’ – or is he?), from the passers-by, from the Chief Priests, scribes and elders (who just might be hoping that, even now, he might come down from the cross), and even from those who are in the same situation, who might have been expected to have some more fellow-feeling.

What does Jesus say, in response to all this mockery, this nailing to the cross?

Can you identify with Jesus in this situation?

Do you know of other people who have been treated in this way? How did they cope?

Twelfth Station: Jesus dies on the cross

And when it came to the sixth hour, darkness came on the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus shouted in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, eloi, lema sabachtani?’ which when it is translated is, ‘My God, my God, for what purpose did you abandon me?’ And some of the bystanders hearing [this] started to say, ‘Look – he is calling on Elijah.’ And someone ran and filled a sponge with vinegar and put it round a stick and gave it to him to drink, saying, ‘Wait – let’s see if Elijah is coming to take him down. But Jesus, letting out a great shout, expired. (Mark 15:33-35)

After this, Jesus, knowing that already everything was brought to perfection, in order that the Scripture might be perfected, says, ‘I thirst’. A vessel lay there, full of wine vinegar. And so, wrapping a sponge full of the vinegar on a piece of hyssop offered it to his mouth. And when he had taken the vinegar, Jesus said, ‘It is perfected’. And inclining his head, he handed over the Spirit. (John 19:28-30)

Here we have two separate views of Jesus’s death, from Mark and from the Gospel of John. For Mark, the death is much bleaker, God’s view of it indicated by the ‘darkness...on the whole land’. Jesus’s view seems to be that God has utterly abandoned him (except that we have three times heard him predict that after his death he would be raised again). Even at the end he is misunderstood, and when he was calling on God they thought he was summoning Elijah!

John's gospel offers us a much more regal death. Jesus is in total charge: 'knowing' is a favourite word of the fourth evangelist. He announces his thirst, as he had, long ago in chapter 4, to the Samaritan woman whom he asked for a drink (which he never received). Jesus announces that all is 'accomplished' (or 'perfected'), and graciously bows his head and 'handed over the Spirit'. Does it matter to you that there are two different views of Jesus's death in the gospels? Have you ever known two different accounts of people's death? And how will it be at your own death?

Thirteenth Station: The body of Jesus is taken down from the cross and laid in his mother's arms

There is nothing in the gospels about Jesus being laid in his mother's arms, but since John has his mother standing at the foot of the cross, it is far from unlikely; and it was 'women's work' in that culture to deal with the corpses. For our gospel text, here is another moment when Jesus was in his mother's arms.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judaea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be registered along with Mary, his betrothed – who was pregnant. It came to pass while they were there that the days were fulfilled for her to give birth and she brought forth her son, the first-born; and she wrapped him round with swathing-bands, and laid him down in a feeding-trough, because there was no room for them in the lodging-house. (Luke 2:4-7)

This episode comes, of course, from the beginning of Jesus's life. Then it had been a Roman emperor whose faraway decision had driven Joseph and his fiancée out of Nazareth down to Bethlehem. It is a shock to us to read that Joseph's fiancée was pregnant, and it was shocking in that culture also. Nevertheless, we know that this is a shock that comes from God. But from confused beginning to sad ending this has been a shocking story, symbolised here by the fact that the baby has to be put into a 'feeding-trough', and that there is 'no room in the lodging-house'. Watch Mary as she touches her child for the first time and places him in this unpromising place. Then stand by her as she receives that same body from the cross, after his death, and ask what is going on inside her.

Can you put yourself in Mary's place here, at either end of Jesus's life?

What goes on in you as you watch these two moments, birth and dreadful death?

Fourteenth Station: Jesus is laid in the tomb

And when it had already become late, since it was Preparation Day, which is the day before the Sabbath, there came Joseph, the one from Arimathea. He was a reputable Councillor; and he was also waiting for the Kingdom of God. He was daring enough to go to Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus. And Pilate wondered if he was already dead (*or*: was surprised that he should be already dead). And he summoned the centurion and asked if he was long dead. And when he had confirmation from the centurion, he gifted the corpse to Joseph. And he bought a linen cloth and took him down and wrapped him in the linen cloth and placed him in a tomb which was hewn out of rock. And he rolled a stone onto the door of the tomb. (Mark 15:42-47)

Now the story comes to an end. The body has to be got rid of, because of the holiness of the Passover feast that is about to start. We are grateful for and surprised at the courage of this Joseph from Arimathea, a Councillor who had presumably been involved in the debates about whether Jesus should be murdered. It is brave of him to go to Pilate and demand the body

(though some may feel that he would have done better to be brave during the discussions in the Sanhedrin). Once the death certificate is given, by the same centurion who had announced that Jesus was 'truly the Son of God', then Jesus is given an honourable burial, and a stone is put in place, to prevent his decomposing body being eaten by dogs or vultures.

And that is the end of the story: for a time it seemed that the Kingdom of God had arrived in the person of this rabbi who had power over disease and demons, who had such a magnetic influence on the crowds, and could even persuade people to leave everything and follow him. But he is dead now, an impostor like so many others, and his story is over.

Or is it? Is that death the end of everything? Is it the end of all your hopes as well? Or is it true what Christians have been saying ever since, that God raised Jesus from the dead, and that he is still with us? Because if that is true, then all our suffering and all the world's pain finds its answer in the power of God's love.

But is it true?

What do you think?

Concluding Prayer

Lord thank you for helping me to journey with you at this crucial time of global crisis. The world is shaken by just as it was shaken up when you died. The world needs you. We want you to come again to redeem the world and liberate us so that we live in love and love one another as God's beloved children and thus make this world a world of fraternity, universe of peace and globe of goodness and earth of equality where you live and reign forever and ever. Amen.

Our Father...