Jesus Falls for the Second Time

STATION VII

Under the crushing weight of the cross, Jesus fell a second time.

The prophet Jeremiah gave voice to a longing and a hope that must have been deeply planted in the collective consciousness of the nation. He expresses Yahweh's own pledge that he himself would one day fulfill the covenant and forgive the sins of the people. In the thirty-first chapter of the book of Jeremiah, we find these extraordinary words: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors...a covenant that they broke....But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people." All the prophets know that the covenants God made with Israel—through Abraham, Moses, and David—have failed, due to the people's infidelity. But Jeremiah dreams that one day, through Yahweh's own direct intervention, a faithful Israel will emerge, a people who have a heart for the Lord, who consider the law not an external imposition but a joy.

How will this renewal take place? How will Yahweh plant the law so deeply in the children of Israel that their fulfillment of the covenant will be effortless? To find the answers, we must turn to some mysterious texts in the book of the prophet Isaiah, texts that particularly fascinated the first Christians. In the fifty-second chapter of Isaiah, we find a reference to a figure called "the servant of the Lord," who, we are told, "will

be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high." The nations of the earth will see him in this prominent position, but they shall not be looking at a splendid warrior or a majestic victor. Instead, they will be astonished at how "marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance." In chapter fifty-three, the description of this servant continues: "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity." And then the reason for his deformation and anguish is made clearer: "Surely, he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases....He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities...and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

The "suffering servant" is presented, in short, as a sacrificial figure, one who will, on behalf of the entire nation, offer himself for the sins of the many. His greatness will consist not in personal independence and political power, but rather in his willingness to bear the weight of sin, to disempower sin, as it were, from within. In a word, the covenant of which Jeremiah speaks (the writing of the law in the hearts of the people) would be effected through the sacrificial servant of whom Isaiah speaks.

Jesus meets the Women of Jerusalem

STATION VIII

As Jesus is led to Calvary, a great number followed him, including weeping women of Jerusalem. Jesus turned to them and spoke as judge of the world, saying, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children."

The New Testament insists that Jesus both shows us that we are sinners (he is judge) and offers us the way out of sin (he is savior). When one or the other of these emphases is lost, our spiritual path is decisively compromised, either through overconfidence or through terror. When they are both adequately stressed, our spiritual path opens up, because we know we *must* walk it and we *can* walk it.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God's own mind became flesh—that is to say, the pattern of God's being appeared in time and space. Colossians tells us that Jesus is the "perfect image," the *eikon*, of the Father. And thus, his arrival was in itself a challenge to all that is not in conformity with the divine pattern. In his very person is the kingdom, the divine ordo, and therefore his presence is the light in which the disorder of all the earthly kingdoms becomes apparent. In this sense, his every move, his every word, his every gesture, constituted God's judgment on the world, for in the measure that he was opposed, he clarified the dysfunctional nature of his opponents. When John the Baptist spoke of the coming of the Messiah, he used an edgy image: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." The farmer in first-century Palestine

would place the newly harvested wheat on the floor of the barn and then, using a sort of pitchfork, would toss the grain in the air, forcing the lighter chaff to separate itself from the usable wheat. Thus Jesus' presence would be a winnowing fan, an agent of separation and clarification.

And nowhere is this judgment more evident than in his violent death. Jesus did not simply pass away; he was killed, executed by command of the Roman governor and with the approval of the religious establishment. As Peter put it in the earliest kerygmatic preaching in the Acts of the Apostles: "And you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead." The implication of Peter's speech, of course, is that you, the killers, have been revealed as the enemies of life. And the "you," as Peter himself knew with special insight, included not simply the Roman and Jewish ruling classes, but everyone, even Jesus' most intimate followers.

All the social groups of Jesus' time—Pharisees, Saducees, Zealots, Essenes, Temple priests, Roman occupiers, Christian disciples—had this in common: they were, at the end of the day, opposed to Jesus. At the moment of truth, "they all fled." Bob Dylan said, "The enemy I see / wears the cloak of decency." A favorite ruse of sinners is to wrap themselves in the mantle of respectability; Jesus the judge is the one who rips away the cloak, literally unveiling, "revealing" the truth of things. Whenever we are tempted to think that all is well with us, we hold up the cross of Jesus and let our illusions die.

Jesus falls for the Third Time

STATION IX

Why did Jesus bear the terrible weight of the cross—a cross so heavy it caused him to fall not once, not twice, but three times?

Because if the weight of sin had been addressed only from a distance, only through divine fiat, it would not have been truly conquered; but when it is withstood by someone willing fully to submit to it, it is effectively exploded from within, undermined, defeated. This is the strategy of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

We see it in a number of Gospel scenes where Jesus is tired out after his contact with the sick, the lost, the sinful. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, we find an account of a typical day in the ministry of Jesus. The people press on him from all sides, compelling him to find refuge in a boat lest he be crushed by the crowd, and at one point there are so many supplicants surrounding him that he couldn't even eat. Mark tells us that Jesus went off to a secluded place to pray, but even there they sought him out, coming at him from all sides.

In the magnificent narrative of the woman at the well in the Gospel of John, we hear that Jesus sat down by Jacob's well, "tired out by his journey." This description is straightforward enough on the literal level: Who wouldn't be tired after a morning's march through dry country? But as Augustine and others have reminded us, it has another sense on the mystical level. Jesus is tired from his incarnational journey into human sin and dysfunction, signified by the well. "You come to this well every day and you become thirsty again," Jesus

says to the woman, indicating that the well is emblematic of errant desire, her tendency to fill up her longing for God with the transient goods of creation: money, pleasure, power, honor. In order to effect a change in her, the Lamb of God had to be willing to enter into her dysfunctional world and to share the spiritual weariness of it. J.R.R. Tolkien keenly appreciated this sacrificial dynamic. His great Christ-figure, Frodo the hobbit, brought about the salvation of Middle-earth precisely through his entry into the heart of the land of Mordor, disempowering that terrible place through his humble willingness to bear the full weight of its burden.

All of this was, however, but an anticipation of the ultimate sacrifice of the Lamb of God. The final enemy that had to be defeated, if God and his human family could once again sit down in easy fellowship, was death itself. In a very real sense, death (and the fear of death) stand behind all sin, and hence Jesus had to journey into the realm of death and, through sacrifice, twist it back to life. Innumerable heroes in the course of human history had tried to conquer that realm by using its weapons, fighting violence with violence and hatred with hatred. But this strategy was (and still is) hopeless. The battle plan of the Lamb of God was paradoxical in the extreme: he would conquer death precisely by dying.

Jesus is stripped of His garments

STATION X

The soldiers took Jesus' clothes and divided them into four shares, a share for each soldier, and cast lots for his tunic, fulfilling the words of the Psalms: "They divided my garments among them, and for my vesture they cast lots." Christ is stripped of everything: reputation, comfort, esteem, food, drink—even the pathetic clothes on his back.

Thomas Aquinas said that if you want to see the perfect exemplification of the beatitudes, you should look to Christ crucified. He specified this observation as follows: if you want beatitude (happiness), despise what Jesus despised on the cross and love what he loved on the cross.

What did he despise on the cross but the four classical addictions—wealth, pleasure, power, and honor? At the root of sin is fear, especially fear of death. To counter that fear, people aggrandize the ego, decorating it with the approval of others or stuffing it with worldly goods. But the crucified Jesus was utterly detached from wealth and worldly goods. He was stripped naked, and his hands, fixed to the wood of the cross, could grasp at nothing. More to it, he was detached from pleasure. On the cross, Jesus underwent the most agonizing kind of physical torment, a pain that was literally excruciating (*ex cruce*, from the cross), but he also experienced the extreme of psychological and even spiritual suffering. And he was bereft of power, even to the point of being unable to move or defend himself in any way. Finally, on that terrible cross, he was completely detached from the esteem of others. In a public place not far from the gate of Jerusalem, he hung from an instrument of torture, exposed to the mockery of the

crowd, displayed as a common criminal. In this, he endured the limit case of dishonor. In the most dramatic way possible, therefore, the crucified Jesus demonstrated a liberation from the four principle temptations that lead us from God. St. Paul expressed this accomplishment in typically vivid language: "He nailed our sins to the cross."

But what did Jesus love on the cross? He loved the will of his Father. His Father had sent him into the farthest reaches of godforsakenness in order to bring the divine love even to that darkest place, and Jesus loved that mission to the very end. And it was precisely his detachment from the four great temptations that enabled him to walk that walk. What he loved and what he despised were in a strange balance on the cross. Poor in spirit, meek, mourning, and persecuted, he was able to be pure of heart, to seek righteousness utterly, to become the ultimate peacemaker, and to be the perfect conduit of the divine mercy to the world. Though it is supremely paradoxical to say so, the crucified Jesus is, therefore, the man of beatitude, a truly happy man. And Jesus, stripped of his garments and nailed to the cross, is the very icon of liberty, for he is free from those attachments that would prevent him from attaining the true good, which is doing the will of his Father.

Jesus is Crucified

STATION XI

On the cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Dying on a Roman instrument of torture, he allowed the full force of the world's hatred and dysfunction to wash over him, to spend itself on him. And he responded not with an answering violence or resentment, but with forgiveness. He therefore took away the sin of the world (to use the language of the liturgy), swallowing it up in the divine mercy.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus compared himself to a mother hen who longed to gather her chicks under her wing. As N.T. Wright points out, this is much more than a sentimental image. It refers to the gesture of a hen when fire is sweeping through the barn. In order to protect her chicks, she will sacrifice herself, gathering them under her wing and using her own body as a shield. On the cross, Jesus used, as it were, his own sacrificed body as a shield, taking the full force of the world's hatred and violence. He entered into close quarters with sin (because that's where we sinners are found) and allowed the heat and fury of sin to destroy him, even as he protected us. With this metaphor in mind, we can see, with special clarity, why the first Christians associated the crucified Jesus with the suffering servant of Isaiah. By enduring the pain of the cross, Jesus did indeed bear our sins; by his stripes we were indeed healed.

Through the final sacrifice of Jesus the high priest, eternal life has been made available to the whole of humanity. The sacrifice of the Mass is a participation in this great eternal act by which Jesus entered on our behalf into the heavenly

sanctuary with his own blood and returned bearing the forgiveness of the Father. When the high priest came out of the sanctuary and sprinkled the people with blood, he was understood to be acting in the very person of Yahweh, renewing creation. The ultimate sacrifice having been offered, Christ the priest comes forth at every Mass with his lifeblood, and the universe is restored. The priest's actions at the altar are but a symbolic manifestation of this mystical reality, which is why he is described as operating *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ).

Though the ordained priest alone can preside at the Mass and effect the Eucharistic change, all of the baptized participate in the Mass in a priestly way. They do this through their prayers and responses but also, as *Lumen Gentium* specifies, by uniting their personal sacrifices and sufferings to the great sacrifice of Christ. So a father witnesses the agony of his son in the hospital; a mother endures the rebellion of a teenage daughter; a young man receives news of his brother's death in battle; an elderly man tosses on his bed in anxiety as he contemplates his unsure financial situation; a graduate student struggles to complete his doctoral thesis; a child experiences for the first time the breakup of a close friendship; an idealist confronts the stubborn resistance of a cynical opponent. These people could see their pain as simply dumb suffering, the offscourings of an indifferent universe. Or they could see them through the lens provided by the sacrificial death of Jesus, appreciating them as the means by which God is drawing them closer to himself.

Jesus Dies on the Cross

STATION XII

In Mark's Gospel, the last thing we hear from Jesus is an animal cry: "Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last." But in John's Gospel, in which the priesthood of Jesus is consistently emphasized, we find, just before Jesus' death, a liturgical word. In the Latin version of this passage, it is *consummatum est*: it is completed. This is the affirmation that a work has been done, that something has been brought to fulfillment. How often in the New Testament do we hear the language of fulfillment: "in order that the Scriptures might be fulfilled" and "in fulfillment of the Scriptures." Jesus saw himself as the climax to a story, as the culminating chapter in a novel, as the hinge of a great drama. If we don't know the contours of the drama, we won't know him.

And the drama involves a rescue operation that God launched by forming the people of Israel after his own heart. When the world had gone wrong through sin, God endeavored to fashion a family that would know him and would worship him aright. This process began with Abraham and the covenant that God cut with him. It continued through Moses and David, as God secured further covenants with them. He wanted to form a priestly people, a people of orthodoxy, right praise. This rightly-ordered people would then become a magnet to the other nations of the world. "Mt. Zion, true pole of the earth, there all the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord." Though God was ever faithful, the people Israel wavered. Though they were called back by the prophets to covenant fidelity, they did not listen. Though the temple was established as the place of right praise, it became corrupt. And Israel was not the magnet for the other nations, but rather their footstool and servant. Israel was enslaved

by Egypt, overrun by Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome. More to it, the tribes of Israel, instead of coming together around Mt. Zion, had been scattered. And so Israel began to dream of a new King David, a figure who would fulfill all of its expectations and complete God's rescue operation.

The author of John's Gospel was a master of irony, and one of his most delicious twists involves the sign that Pontius Pilate placed over the cross of the dying Jesus: *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews). The Roman governor, of course, meant it as a taunt, but the sign—written out in the three major languages of that time and place, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek—in fact made Pilate, unwittingly, the first great evangelist. The king of the Jews, on the Old Testament reading, was destined to be the king of the world—and this is precisely what Pilate effectively announced. Even at Calvary, when it had dwindled to three members, Jesus' Church, his community, was catholic, for it was destined to embrace everyone. At Pentecost, the disciples, gathered in the Upper Room, were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to preach the Good News. They were heard, miraculously, in the many languages of those who had gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles. As the Church Fathers clearly saw, this was the reversal of the curse of Babel, when the one language of the human race was divided and the people, accordingly, set against each other. Now, through the announcement of the Lordship of Jesus, the many languages again become one, for this message is the one that every person, across space and time, was born to hear: Jesus is the new King.

Jesus Is Taken Down from the Cross and Laid in the Arms of Mary

STATION XIII

After the Crucifixion, Jesus was taken from the Cross and laid in the arms of Mary——a scene famously captured in Michelangelo's iconic *Pietà*.

For five centuries now, scholars and admirers have remarked the serenity and youthfulness of Mary's face in the *Pietà*. Mary, we presume, would have been at least forty-five or fifty at the time of the Crucifixion. And yet, Michael depicts her as a young woman, perhaps in her early twenties.

What Michelangelo was showing us is not only the historical Mary, but Mary as new Eve, an ever-young mother of the Church. Michelangelo was, throughout his life, a great devotee of the poet Dante. At the end of the *Divine Comedy* we find a famous line, placed on the lips of St. Bernard as he sings the praises of the mother of God: "Virgin mother, daughter of your Son, humbled, and exalted, more than any other creature." Since Mary's son, according to the flesh, is also the divine Word through whom all things are made, Mary is indeed both mother and daughter of Christ. Michelangelo suggested this absolute unique relationship in the youthfulness of Jesus' mother.

One of the most extraordinary features of the *Pietà*, from a purely structural or compositional standpoint, is how Michelangelo managed to make the figures of Jesus and Mary look so natural and elegant together, despite the fact that what is being presented is a woman supporting the body of an adult man on her lap. In fact, Mary's body is significantly larger than that of Jesus. She contains him. In

the wonderful words of Sister Wendy Beckett, she's like a great mountain, and his body is like a river flowing down. The Church Fathers compared Mary to the Ark of the Covenant, the receptacle of the Ten Commandments, which the ancient Israelites appreciated as the dwelling place of God. So Mary, who carried the incarnate Word in her very womb, becomes the Ark of the Covenant par excellence.

According to the Gospel accounts, Mary, having given birth to Jesus, placed him in a manger, the place where the animals eat. At the climax of his life, Jesus would become food for the life of the world. Michelangelo depicts Mary's left hand in a gesture of offering, as though she is presenting him as a gift. (This same gesture is found in that especially evocative scene in *The Passion of the Christ* when Mary, marked with Jesus' Blood, presents the sacrifice of her Son to us and for us.) Her right hand supports him but touches him only indirectly, through her garment. Both are Eucharistic references. The Church continually offers the body of Jesus under the forms of bread and wine. And when the priest shows the Blessed Sacrament, he touches the monstrance only through a veil. Keep in mind that the sculpture was intended to be an altarpiece—that is to say, something closely associated with the celebration of the Mass. What we see in the *Pietà*, the image of the Virgin Mother cradling her Son, is what we see at the Mass—namely, the offering of the body of the crucified Jesus for the life of the world.

Jesus Is Laid in the Tomb

STATION XIV

Joseph of Arimathea, a secret admirer of Jesus, came courageously to ask for the body of the Lord, and a group of women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee watched carefully to see where he was buried. As his enemies closed in on him and even his most intimate disciples fled in fear, these people stayed with Jesus until the end. Luke aptly speaks of the women as having "followed" the body of Jesus to its resting place, their discipleship of the Lord complete and consistent. Jesus wants to go to the cross because he loves his Father's will; and therefore, those who love him—who want what he wants—go to that same bitter end. In St. John's Gospel, we hear that Jesus is buried in a new tomb that was situated in a garden, which signals the renewal of Eden, the way back into the garden from which we were exiled through sin.

The three women come as we might expect any visitor to any grave to come: they have their oil with them, and they intend to honor the body of Jesus. We might imagine them sitting in reverential silence afterward, reflecting on the life and words of their friend, expressing their admiration for him and the tragedy of his death.

But this is no ordinary grave. The first thing they notice is the stone rolled away. Now, this could have been the result of grave-robbers, of someone trying to break in and desecrate the tomb. It is just beginning to dawn on them that it is the result of someone breaking out.

Then it says, "They made their way out and fled from the tomb bewildered and trembling, and because of their great fear, they said nothing to anyone." This grave is not the source of peace and rest, calm and thoughtful meditation. This grave is the source of terror and upheaval. Ordinary graves are places of finality and inevitability; this grave is a place of novelty so shocking that it frightens the wits out of people. From this grave of Jesus, we learn that the supposed laws of nature aren't laws after all, that what always moved this way now moves that way. Some people think that they will make the Resurrection more intelligible, more acceptable to modern people, if they allegorize it away, turning into a vague symbol of the perdurance of Jesus' cause. But then his grave wouldn't be frightening; it would be, like the grave of any ordinary hero, sad, wistful, reassuring.

Evangelization—the proclamation of the Good News, the Gospel, the *euangelion*—has to do with the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. On every page of the New Testament, one can discern an excitement born of something utterly novel and unexpected: that Jesus of Nazareth, who had died on a cross and was buried in a tomb, was, through the power of God, raised up.

Everything else in Christian life flows from and is related to this empty tomb.

All Stations of the Cross images are from the Church of All Saints in Blato, Korcula Island, Croatia.