



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Archbishop writes the Credo Column in [**The Times**](#) today. His article follows in full...

How do we understand the cross of Jesus Christ?

Perhaps the only way is to stand under it? To become part of the story, seeing there, not so much a carefully worked out plan, but the tenacity of love. When we do our worst, God does God's best.

The cross is humanity at its worst: it demonstrates, in painful detail, our terrible cruelty and the way we often use our ingenious cleverness to hurt others.

The death of Jesus is horribly familiar. Across the world are so many similarly pointless and cruel deaths. We can even become immune to their horrors. And the cross was a supremely clever way of killing people, carefully designed to make the death struggle last days. Jesus' rather quick death was unusual.

In the face of such wickedness, what does God do? Well, God goes on loving. Hence, when people ask me: where is God in all the suffering of the world? I usually reply, he is where we put him. He is on the cross.

This is the first message of the Christian faith: in Jesus Christ, God plumbs the depths of our humanity, receiving the worst that we can do, but also revealing the best. Jesus forgives his executioners. He reaches out to those who die alongside him.

At our best, the Church which bears the cross, does the same, not peddling theories about love or trying to explain God (as if God were a thing that could be explained) but tenaciously loving, and inviting people to stand under the cross. And begin to understand.

Knowing my love of the Scottish artist, Craigie Aitchison, and especially his paintings of the crucifixion, when I moved back to Yorkshire last year, friends and colleagues in Chelmsford bought me one of his prints. It hangs above the fireplace in my study at Bishopthorpe Palace.

Like all his paintings of the crucifixion, a solitary Christ inhabits an empty, though vividly colourful, landscape.

Throughout this difficult locked-down year, I have lived with this image of the isolated Jesus. I have often turned to it, finding there a connection to the isolations all of us have been experiencing this year. Without touch and embrace, without companionship, we are without the very things

that we give and receive beyond words as expressions of our love. Yet, in our isolation, we serve each other. Our separation has become an expression of our love.

God shows his love for us by joining us and then allowing himself to be separated from us. While we were still sinners, says St Paul, Christ died for us. That is, while we were still very far from being the people we want to be, let alone the people God wants us to be, God comes to us in Jesus. We received him. And we rejected him.

And we misunderstand the story if we conclude that it was only wicked people that did this. The story is clear: Jesus was killed by very respectable people, by ordinary people. Those who accepted him, then rejected him. And we are part of this.

The solitary Jesus, the left alone and abandoned Jesus, speaks to our own feelings of sadness and isolation, yet at the same time strengthens us, showing that God is present with us even in our lonely abandonment of God and of each other.

And for a purpose: the purposes of love, that are only worked out by loving and will never do anything to compromise love and therefore takes the terrible risk of rejection and isolation.

This is the Good Friday, the Easter faith: God is united with us in our loss and separation, even in our dying; and we are united with God in the triumph of love that is the resurrection. For if love goes on loving, then, eventually, the sting of spite and the sneer of death is so rebuked and so emasculated, that it can do nothing else, but love in return.

Might this tenacious loving even reach into the depths of my own isolation and dismantle the walls of separation that I have so carefully built around myself?

In the gospel story, there are a few people at the cross. Mainly women, who show a strength and a faithfulness that most of the men cannot muster.

In Craigie Aitchison's crucifixions there may be no other people, but there are usually animals. Often there is a dog standing at the foot of the cross and looking up at Jesus.

I don't quite know what this means, except perhaps that we, too, are called to that sort of obedient faithfulness: to stand and watch; even to lay

down our burdens. And then, acknowledging our failings, our separations and our cruelties, to understand, and to love in return.

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofyork.org/news/latest-news/how-do-we-understand-cross-jesus-christ>