

Holy Cross Day, Matins

14th September 2025

Isaiah 63: 1-16 and 1 Corinthians 1 :1825

Father Tim

Why are your robes red, and your garments like those who tread the winepress?" "I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me."

For me, this is one of the most beautiful, evocative, and profoundly sad passages in scripture, especially as we gather to observe the festival of the Holy Cross. On the surface, it is a dramatic image: a figure alone in a winepress, garments stained, isolated, performing an act that must be done alone. In Christian interpretation, developed by the early Church, this passage comes to prefigure Christ's sacrifice on the Cross — garments stained red, utterly alone, with no one from the peoples standing with him.

The image is both sobering and intensely loving. It invites reflection on the experience of isolation. Did Christ experience loneliness on the Cross, if this passage prefigures his sacrifice? Perhaps he did. Perhaps it was solitude in the sense of a purposefully undertaken isolation, confronting the consequences of human turning from God. The cry of dereliction, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* captures the intensity of that moment. Yet, even in this, it is not about God abandoning us; rather, it is about the human experience of being distanced from God through sin, fear, and alienation.

If we consider the Cross as one of the most profound events in history, it resists simple explanation. Yet one aspect we can meditate on is its isolation. Christ enters the depths of human loneliness and transforms it into a space of encounter with God. In that space, our own experiences of abandonment, despair, or invisibility are not left unattended. The Cross does not remove all suffering, but it opens a path through it, showing that even in our deepest isolation, God is present.

A modern story can illuminate this. In *The English Patient*, a married woman, Katherine, finds herself alone in Cairo as her husband embarks on an expedition. She falls in love with Laszlo, a Hungarian cartographer. When her husband discovers the affair, he attempts revenge, flying a plane with Katherine toward the excavation site. Laszlo rushes to help her, but she is gravely injured. To save her, he must leave her alone and travel three days to Cairo for assistance. When he returns, she has died. Laszlo's actions, however well-intentioned, illustrate a paradox of modern life: our restlessness and preoccupation with action can isolate us from what is most important. In trying to solve the problem, he leaves Katherine alone — perhaps because he cannot bear to witness her death. In our own lives, we are often similarly isolated: from ourselves, from one another, and from God, by fear, distraction, or obsession with tasks and solutions.

It is precisely this isolation that Christ redeems. The Cross is not about accomplishing a task or strategy; it is about entering fully into the reality of human loneliness. In doing so, Christ transforms it. The Cross becomes the ground where God is present in the moments we feel most abandoned, unseen, or unloved. Our deepest fear — being unrecognised, invisible, alone — is met by Christ's solidarity. The passage, "*I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me,*" captures this paradox. In Christ's own isolation, his loneliness opens out into solidarity with all who are alone. The emptiness we fear is revealed as the very space in which God dwells with us.

This theme of sacrificial love is reflected in one of the most enduring Christian symbols: the pelican. Often depicted in churches, the pelican was believed to wound its own breast to feed its young with its blood. While biologically untrue, the legend was interpreted spiritually. The pelican's act of giving its life to sustain others resonates with Isaiah's vision of the winepress. It captures the depth and transformative power of Christ's solitary sacrifice — a sacrifice that cannot be fully grasped by intellect alone. The pelican becomes a visual shorthand for the mystery of the Cross: redemptive, solitary, and life-giving.

Ultimately, the Cross is a story of restored relationships. It is not merely a means to an end, a strategy to achieve some goal, but an act in which God enters isolation to make communion possible. By stepping into the winepress, Christ opens the way for humanity to be with God and one another. The Cross shows that the ultimate goal of redemption is not tasks completed or victories won but presence, connection, and love — being with God, even in the depths of loneliness.

Through the Cross, the isolation inherent in human experience is neither ignored nor erased, but it becomes the very place of encounter. Our fears of abandonment, invisibility, and despair are met not with empty consolation but with solidarity, with love that is willing to tread the winepress alone. In that, the Cross stands as the paradoxical revelation of hope: loneliness transformed into communion, suffering into redemption, solitude into life-giving presence.