

Reflection from the *'Little Book of Lent'* – an anthology composed by Reverend Canon Arthur Howells (2014, London: Harper Collins) comprising extracts from several of his favourite spiritual writers and reproduced here with his kind permission.

4. Saturday, Week Three

For Reflection

Michael Mayne served for forty years as a parish priest in south London and Hertfordshire. He was also head of religious programmes at the BBC, Vicar of Great St Mary's, Cambridge and Dean of Westminster until he retired in 1996, when he was knighted and made Dean Emeritus. He was the author of A Year Lost and Found and This Sunrise of Wonder. He died in 2006.

The God Who Suffers

A constant Lenten theme, spelled out in collects and readings, is that of Christ's suffering and vulnerability. Truths which pierce to the very heart of that redefinition of God which is what Christian belief is about. A God who does not give simple answers to Job in his anguish, for Job must learn that there are absolute limits to the extent of human understanding; a God who, by his awesome gift of human freedom, cannot prevent the cancer cell or the Holocaust; a God who, but for one thing, would seem to be an uncaring tyrant. But it is that one thing that changes everything: the claim that God does not give answers. There are no answers. Instead, he gives himself. The most perceptive of the Old Testament writers had written of a God who shares his people's joys and sufferings. Hosea pictures this relationship with his people in terms of one who says: 'I took them in my arms ... I secured them with reins and led them with bonds of love ... I lifted them like a little child to my cheek, (and) bent down to feed them.'

But it was inspired guesswork: for how can we know that the unimaginable God suffers and has compassion ... What Christians claim is that he can and does, that in Jesus, rather than providing answers, he enters into the questions – and in so doing transforms them. Enters into them in the only terms we can recognise and understand, in terms of one man's birth, life and painful death. Jesus comes to be the love of God in our midst. That, and nothing less than that, is what every church exists to proclaim, that in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Only a suffering God can help', or in the words of John Austin Baker, 'The crucified Jesus is the only accurate picture of God the world has ever seen'. And so our most painful human wounds are most intimately connected to the sufferings of God himself, for in Christ he too knows (though this is where human language falters and ultimately fails) what it is to live, to know pain at its potentially most destructive, to face desolation and to die. 'He went not up to joy but first he suffered pain.'

PRAY, LOVE, REMEMBER
MICHAEL MAYNE

Scripture Reading

Hosea 11:1-4

'I bent down to them and fed them.'

Prayer

Strengthen us, Lord
when we are weak and vulnerable.

Assure us of your presence
when the questions arise.

Lift us up
when we are down.

Give us faith
where there is fear.

Enfold us in your love
when courage fails.