

Good Friday Three Hours' Devotion
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst
for righteousness: the crowd
Mthr Melanie Marshall

'I'm sorry for the things I said to you when I was hungry'

So reads a greetings card, a joke about being, as they call it, hangry; and we smile, in recognition - that none of us is at our best when we are hungry. That we feel better in ourselves, and act better towards others, when we are full.

Full. Of what?

Well, we are full of learning, detailed knowledge of the scriptures. We are religious professionals, after all: scribes, Pharisees, Saducees, chief priests and elders. And very handy learning comes in too, to mollify a paranoid despot. Bethlehem, that's where you'll find the Messiah. What, were we supposed to lie? We didn't know Herod would try to murder him; nor those twenty

or thirty other babies, to be on the safe side. But that wasn't us. We were just doing what an educated elite is for. Providing services on a consultancy basis. Access to resources. Brain power. We know how to frame arguments so our side wins. Sure, winners will mean losers. But we didn't make this system. We find the work interesting. It leaves us comfortably off. People look up to us. What else do we need?

Full of assurance. 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'. This baptism John is offering - that's something we're entitled to, right? We've been lucky enough to have been given every spiritual advantage. I'm not sure what you mean by grace. Can God surprise us? You're telling us to pray for God's spirit. For it to descend like a dove, to rest on us, so gently, that we can never again risk a single hasty word or violent deed in case we dislodge it? We have the law. We have the moral fibre that comes from good schools and good families. We mostly vote Lib Dem. Of course there are people facing the wrong way - in Syria, in Saudi; in Tennessee; in Sunderland - and we hope for their repentance. If we needed to be ashamed, we

would know it. Righteousness is our birthright.
What else do we need?

Full of piety. I say my prayers. Ask anyone. You can see me, any day, right there on the street corner. Ditto fasting, ditto almsgiving. I have my direct debits in order. I've told the college staff all the things I've given up for Lent, but I remind them at each meal, just in case. I go to Mass every day, though I admit I may sometimes miss one. Worship is a real point of pride for me. My 90 degree angles are the envy of the serving team. Do you know that in this town there are Christians - so-called - who don't even keep Holy Week and Easter? Whose teachers eat with tax collectors and sinners, and heal people on the sabbath? Of course I make regular confession. Mother church in her wisdom has specified how a Godly life is lived. And, actually, the maniple has never been specifically abrogated. What else do we need?

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A true story. A neglected baby. The hospital pumping in calories through a drip, and she goes

on losing weight. Until someone notices that the mother - young, unsupported - has been feeding the baby but never delighting in her. They show the mother how to talk to the infant, to caress her, to make faces into her face - and then - the child starts gaining weight.

Our greatest need, greater than food or drink, is to believe that we are worth something. We are hungry for that knowledge, and hunger is good. It drives us out, eager for what will do us good. Open your mouth, says the Lord, and I will fill it. But we don't trust that the true food is coming. Hunger means lack. Lack scares us. We panic. We don't behave like healthy hungry people. We behave like starving people. Desperate. Frantic. Sly. Stuffing our faces with whatever we can lay our hands on now.

We are starving to justify ourselves, and we swallow garbage. That man who heals and restores the children of Israel? It's the work of demons. That man who proclaims that sins can be forgiven? Blasphemer. Do these lies nourish us, do they build us up? Of course not. Guzzle packet after packet of this - it will never fill you.

Stand day after day at the altar, offering sacrifices which can never take away sins. But if he is worse, then I am better: better than him, at least for now. The empty calories of self-justification. We kind of know the junk food won't sustain us. But in the moment, we feel better. Better than nothing.

John the Dwarf, a desert father, laments: "We have laid aside the light burden of self-accusation, and we have loaded ourselves with the heavy burden of self-justification."

How heavy that burden is! And how busy it keeps us! Devising tricks to catch our chosen victim: show us a sign if you're so holy? Devising questions to show he's a fool: riddle me a divorce, if you're so clever. Devising regulations to show he's an upstart: who granted you authority to do this? Luring him into real trouble: Should we pay the emperor's taxes?

But he won't give up, this designated victim, no matter how hard we work to put him in the wrong. And if he's going to denounce us in public? Then it's time to get to work in earnest. A se-

cret meeting, a conspiracy, a plot, an arrest. Trumped-up charges, mock-trials, death sentences, rabble-rousing. A scourging, a mockery, a death march, a cross. There is a price, you know. For making us afraid that we may not be righteous after all. Snatch crumbs from starving men, and they will turn on you.

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This is where Christ finds us. Languishing under the weight of all we need to say and do and plot and devise and scheme to assure ourselves we're good. Worn out by the effort. By the heavy burden of self-justification. Come to me, he says. And I will give you rest. Open your mouth, and I will fill it.

The one who says this does nothing devious - you've seen me teaching in the temple day by day.

The one who says this is baffled by violence - what are the swords for? Am I a bandit? I come in peace.

The one who says this offers more than you can ask for - take; eat; this is my body.

The one who says this conspires with no one - Father, your will be done.

The one who can say these things is content to thirst. We try him with it, the mouthful of wine we would suck on for comfort. He wants none of our palliatives, the drugs we gulp down, to anaesthetise us, to insulate us from reality. He will only - can only - experience life in its fullness. Joy-full, pain-full, as our whims dictate.

The one who can say this knows not to put his trust in princes, or in any human power: for there is no help in them. Not in politicians or religious experts. Not in the crowd, the twitter feed that tells now that we are hot property, but now we are a dangerous embarrassment - hosanna, crucify.

The one who can say 'come to me' feels none of our onanistic compulsion, to glut ourselves on flattery. His meat and drink is to do the will of the one who sent him. His flesh, corn-fed on pure righteousness, he gives freely, true food for us, so that we may eat it, and we too may be filled with righteousness.

The one who says all this, says little. A line of scripture - a truth he has been gifted, not one he conjures for himself. More likely, he will answer: nothing at all. What need has he to master our tangled language, to elaborate his own justification?

Lord, I am not stuffed with imagined superiority, nor with sneers and suspicion against others. I do not exercise myself over things the Most High is taking care of. I am settled, and silent. Like a full-bellied baby, snuggled on its mother's breast. My soul is like a babe sated with goodness.

O Israel, trust in the Lord, from this day forth and forever more.
O Israel, open your mouth. And I will fill it.