

# **Scriptural Stations of the Cross For Autistic People**

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## **Introduction**

A word or two to explain what you are about to read. Many Christians, over the centuries, have followed the devotion known as the Stations of the Cross. In this devotion, people can follow the story of Jesus' suffering and death in stages or "stations", stopping to reflect at each one in order to see how their own lives parallel that of Jesus' life, and how Jesus' suffering and death can help other people bear their own sufferings and challenges in the Spirit of Jesus.

However, there is very little available to us that seeks to connect the story of Jesus' suffering and death to the experiences of autistic people. Yes, autistic people share a common humanity with everyone else, and can profit greatly from a more "generic" Stations of the Cross devotion. Nevertheless, we believe that the story of Jesus' Passion and Death can speak powerfully to the specific challenges faced by people on the "spectrum" and those who love them.

The following Stations are an attempt to address this need. I am a Catholic priest who is also autistic, and I am aware of the experiences and challenges faced by others on the "spectrum". Family members and friends of autistic people face their own challenges. I hope that there is something here for them as well.

I will be using and adapting the Scriptural Stations of the Cross that Pope St. John Paul II used on Good Fridays in Rome. I chose this version, rather than the more traditional Stations, so that people can then more easily follow the story of Jesus' suffering and death in the Gospel accounts themselves, and thus deepen their own faith in and love for Christ.

May these Stations be a means for you to encounter the deep and powerful love of God in the joys and the pains that are part and parcel of living "on the spectrum".

Peace in Christ,

Fr. Mark P. Nolette

## Opening Prayer

God of power and mercy,  
in love you sent your Son  
that we might be cleansed of sin  
and live with you forever.  
Bless us as we gather to reflect  
on his suffering and death  
that we may learn from his example  
the way we should go.

We ask this through that same Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

## First Station: Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

## Reading

*Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to feel sorrow and distress. Then he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me." He advanced a little and fell prostrate in prayer, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will." When he returned to his disciples he found them asleep. He said to Peter, "So you could not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:36-41)*

## Reflection

Anxiety.

In poll after poll, autistic people name anxiety as our greatest challenge. Changes in our daily routines, or an upcoming social event, can trigger anxieties that make us feel as though our very lives are in danger. In our logical minds, we know well that our reactions are way out of proportion to the things that trigger them. Still, the anxieties overwhelm us anyway. We shut down. We resist. We want to run away. We may even

have a meltdown, and feel totally out of control, totally vulnerable, and totally humiliated. Others react to our meltdowns in a hostile or demeaning way. Who can understand this? Who can see us in the midst of the anxieties and stand with us? Jesus leads his disciples to the garden of Gethsemane. He knows well what will soon happen to Him. His humanity is already repulsed by this. He feels anxiety and struggle, even as He is resolved to follow through with offering His life out of love for us.

He could have faced the struggle alone. Yet, he chooses three disciples: Peter, James and John, the ones who were with Him at His Transfiguration, and takes them with Him. Jesus is willing to let them see Him in his vulnerability and anxiety, as He deals with His fears and resolves to do His Father's will. But his three friends could not stay awake and accompany Him then, when He most needed them!

Jesus knows what it is to face a deep and overpowering anxiety. He knows what it is to reach out for friends, and to have friends "fall asleep" by not seeing the need or failing to be fully present in love and support. Jesus knows what it is to feel alone in His agony. He resolved to keep going, out of love for us.

When great anxieties beset you, turn to Jesus. He has been there. He will walk with you in love and compassion, no matter how frightening your inner storms may feel. He will not abandon you in your fears but will give you the courage to face them so that you can be faithful to what you need to do. Moreover, your great anxieties will help you understand the weaknesses of others, and to reach out to them with your love and hard-earned wisdom.

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow you in all things.  
When anxieties seem to overwhelm us,  
remind us of Gethsemane,  
and how You stand with the broken and hurting  
wherever they may be.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Second Station: Jesus, Betrayed by Judas, is Arrested**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*Then, while [Jesus] was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs, who had come from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. His betrayer had arranged a signal with them, saying, "the man I shall kiss is the one; arrest him and lead him away securely." He came and immediately went over to him and said, "Rabbi." And he kissed him. At this they laid hands on him and arrested him. (Mark 14: 43-46)*

### **Reflection**

How difficult it can be to find good friends! Though this is true for everyone, it is a particular challenge for those of us on the autism spectrum. We may miss subtle cues that would tell other people that someone does not mean well. We may trust someone too much and give them the keys to our whole lives before we know if they are trustworthy. We may feel that we are not likeable, and so we too easily accept anything that seems like friendship and give away our hearts too quickly.

We may be very blessed and find that our friends are good friends. At other times, however, these friends turn out not to be friends at all. They ridicule or embarrass us in front of others and call it a "joke". They betray our trust in order to score points with others. They pressure us into doing things that violate our sense of what is right. They are not true friends.

Jesus had many disciples. Out of those, He chose Twelve to be His closest friends, His inner circle. One of them, Judas, for reasons we may never know for sure, chose to betray Him. Jesus had placed such trust in all Twelve, including Judas. He knows what it is to have that trust violated and betrayed. Yet, in His love for us, He was able to turn that betrayal into a means of making the ultimate gift of love for all of us. He showed Himself to be our truest Friend.

Have you been betrayed by "friends" in any way? Turn to Jesus in your pain. Let Him heal your violated trust. Ask Him to help you find true friends who will love you, treasure your faith and values, and always stand with you. Trust Him to transform your pain into a means for you to grow in compassion for others who are so violated, so that you will find ways to become a true friend for someone else who needs you.

## **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow you in all things.  
When people we have trusted betray us,  
may You show us Your steadfast love,  
help us to be true friends to others,  
and grant us friends after Your own heart.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

### **Third Station: Jesus is Condemned by the Sanhedrin**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

#### **Reading**

*When day came the council of elders of the people met, both chief priests and scribes, and they brought him before their Sanhedrin. They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us," but he replied to them, "If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I question, you will not respond. But from this time on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied to them, "You say that I am." Then they said, "What further need have we for testimony? We have heard it from his own mouth." (Luke 22: 66-71)*

#### **Reflection**

The Sanhedrin was the council of the elders of Israel. For you who are Catholic, your parish has a parish council, led by your pastor. Your diocese has a pastoral council, led by your bishop. If we imagine the Jerusalem Temple as the “cathedral” of Israel, the Sanhedrin becomes the Israelite “pastoral council”, led by the high priest. As such, it has the role of safeguarding and promoting the faith of Israel.

What has your relationship with your parish or other faith community been like? When you were a child, did you find Mass overstimulating so that you acted out in ways that drew attention to you? Did others reject or disapprove of you? In your desire to understand and absorb information, did you ask priests or sisters or teachers question after question? Did they welcome such questions, or did they seem bothered by you? Did anyone in your faith community see your autistic gifts as assets, or did they only see you as somehow “disabled” and merely needing help – not capable of giving anything worthwhile to the community?

Just as your faith community may not have known what to do with you, so, too, the Sanhedrin was at a loss as to what to do with Jesus. They would not listen to His words about Himself or accept His perspective. Instead, they tried to place Him in a box where they could feel justified in rejecting Him.

Jesus knows well what it means to be misunderstood and rejected by those who should have been most welcoming and most open to Him. He came to fulfill everything the Sanhedrin claimed to believe and uphold, but they would not see it.

Ask Jesus, then, to help you find your place in your faith community. If anyone has rejected or misunderstood you, ask for the grace to understand them and to forgive. We cannot, in all fairness, ask for what we refuse to give. Tell people in your parish how they can better listen to and support their autistic sisters and brothers. If you have misunderstood your faith community, seek forgiveness and reconciliation for this. We need our faith communities in order to learn how to love and be loved, how to forgive and be forgiven. They need us in order to become more truly the full Body of Christ in every place.

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow you in all things.  
Heal our relationships with our faith communities.  
Help them to support us in our needs,  
and help us to support them in theirs.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Fourth Station: Jesus is Denied by Peter**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. One of the maids came over to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it in front of everyone, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about!" As he went out to the gate, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus the Nazorean." Again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man!" A little later the bystanders came over and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; even your speech gives you away." At that he began to curse and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately a cock crowed. Then Peter remembered the word that Jesus had spoken: "Before the cock crows you will deny me three times." He went out and began to weep bitterly. **(Matthew 26: 69-75)***

### **Reflection**

Many people on the spectrum are capable of deep love. Often, that first shows itself in the interests that captivate us and light up our eyes. This interest could be most anything: the planets, dinosaurs, trains, vacuum cleaners, car tires. We read everything we can about our interests and speak of them at great length and with great passion to all who will listen.

But not everyone will listen. We may find ourselves with the wrong crowd. They do not understand our loves. They may pressure us to hide them or deny them in some way.

Peter was passionate about following Jesus. He would often speak first before thinking. He made his mistakes. But he was willing to risk being wrong if it meant being closer to Jesus. But here, Peter finds himself in the wrong crowd. They are all hostile to Jesus. They are equally hostile to Peter and his funny Galilean accent. Peter is overwhelmed by the hostility all around him and ends up denying the One he loved as his Lord. Peter then realizes what he has done, and weeps bitterly. He has a meltdown – in our terms.

Have we ever felt pressure to deny something very dear to us? Did we take our faith in Jesus very seriously, only to be told that we were too naïve or too literal? Did anyone ever pressure us to deny our most cherished loves and values? If we succumbed to that pressure, do we still carry that guilt and weep bitterly on the inside? Can we forgive those who pressured us? Can we forgive ourselves?

Jesus forgave Peter in the end by asking Peter about his love, and then commissioning Peter to live out that love for the sake of the world. Jesus will do the same for you and me. Bring to Him your deepest loves. Bring to him any times when you felt that you had denied them, and thus denied Him. Hear Him tell you that your loves were indeed good and let Him help you renew and heal them by His love.

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow You in all things.  
Forgive all the ways in which we have failed  
to love all You have given us to love.  
Help us forgive ourselves for every time  
we have failed to love you as we long to love you.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Fifth Station: Jesus is Judged by Pilate**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*The chief priests with the elders and the scribes, that is, the whole Sanhedrin, held a council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He said to him in reply, "You say so." The chief priests accused him of many things. Again Pilate questioned him, "Have you no answer? See how many things they accuse you of." Jesus gave him no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.... Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas... [and] handed [Jesus] over to be crucified. (Mark 15: 1-5, 15)*

### **Reflection**

Have people ever marveled at your silence? Did your parents or friends ever tell you to speak up, or to show certain emotions when company was over or when you were visiting relatives? How did even those closest to you react to your quiet demeanor? Your poker face? Did they see the "you" beneath the poker face, or did they begin to accuse you of not caring, or of being a faker, or of living too much in your own world for your own good? Did anyone ever ask you about this in a spirit of love, wanting to know and understand you, or did they approach you with accusations about your motives? After all, even some "experts" still say that we on the autism spectrum lack empathy merely because we do not show it in ways they expect. They cannot see that many of us have too much empathy. We get overloaded too easily and are not able to respond right away. We need time to know how we feel about most anything.

In this Station, Jesus is brought before Pilate, the Roman governor. The Sanhedrin has accused Jesus of many crimes. Pilate has little interest in Jewish affairs. He merely wants to keep his province orderly, under Roman rule.

Jesus does not respond to the accusations. His accusers are not looking for a serious, open dialogue. Their minds are made up. Pilate can only feel amazement at Jesus' silence. Jesus did not try to defend Himself or beg for mercy. He knows that speech is pointless now. Jesus knows what He is about. The others do not get it.

When others misunderstand our reserved ways and accuse us bad motives, think of Jesus and His silence before Pilate and those who accused Him. Tell Jesus, as best you can, how you feel. Trust that He already understands you and loves you. Your silence will not put Him off! Ask Him to help others understand you, and for the grace to

forgive them when they do not understand. One day, you will know how to explain yourself to them. Trust in God's grace.

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow You in all things.  
Forgive all who falsely accuse us because of our silence  
and help us stay on the course You have laid out for us.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Sixth Station: Jesus is Scourged and Crowned with Thorns**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*Then Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged. And the soldiers wove a crown out of thorns and placed it on his head, and clothed him in a purple cloak, and they came to him and said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck him repeatedly. (John 19: 1-3)*

### **Reflection**

Sensitivities.

Many people are sensitive to certain things. We on the autism spectrum can be very sensitive to specific things: sounds, smells, textures, colors. We may be very allergic to certain foods. We may feel overwhelming anxiety if our daily routine is changed, or if something in our home is misplaced. Other people may not understand why such things affect us as they do. They may accuse us of overreacting, or of being too weak. They do not know how painful some things can feel to us. They may even mock us for reacting as we do to them.

We didn't choose those sensitivities. We wouldn't have chosen any of them. We do not know if there may be an undiscovered sensitivity waiting to pounce on us. The world can feel like a threatening place when we are dealing with such high sensitivities to ordinary things.

After Jesus is found guilty and condemned to death, it was not enough for the Romans to simply lead Him to the Cross. No, they scourged Him with a whip that had multiple strands, each one of them having a small piece of bone tied to the end. The whip was designed to cause as much pain as possible with every blow. Then they made a "crown" out of thornbushes and pushed it into His head, to mock Him and to increase His pain all the more.

See how Jesus willingly takes on such pain and endures it for us. See how He wants us to know that He loves us so much that He wants to experience every pain, every high sensitivity, in order to assure us that He understands our sensitivities. He is there with us, joining our pain to His, helping us bear it. He shows us how our pains can be

transformed by our willingness to offer them for others. We pray that Jesus can love us through our sufferings in such a way that we know that we never bear them alone. Moreover, through our sufferings, Jesus enlarges our hearts even more. We realize that others, too, bear great pains along with us. By offering our pains to Jesus, He can somehow work through them to bring healing to ourselves and to others who so need it. His power usually works best through our human weakness. As autistic people, we learn that lesson when we are very young. We need not give in to fear or despair. We want to be close to those we love, and to have them near us – even in the most difficult moments. Through our pains, Jesus invites us to be close to Him in His suffering, and thus to be closest to Him in the supreme gift of His love for us. How can we not be blessed by our trust in Him in such times?

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow You in all things.  
Help us to endure our sensitivities and pains  
and to see how Your Son is close to us  
through them all.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Seventh Station: Jesus Bears the Cross**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*When the chief priests and the guards saw [Jesus] they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him. I find no guilt in him." ... They cried out, "Take him away, take him away! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your king?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, and carrying the cross himself he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew, Golgotha. (John 19: 6, 15-17)*

### **Reflection**

We often hear people speak of “crosses” they have in their lives. When we listen more closely, we see that they are speaking of things they did not choose, things they would never choose, things that have been forced on them: some illness that drags on, a physical or emotional injury that leaves deep scars, a person at home, work or school who is very difficult for us to deal with. For such people, a “cross” is something alien, unwanted, imposed on them. For us who are on the spectrum, we could add our extreme sensitivities, our anxieties, our meltdowns, and how other people misunderstand these things and may accuse us falsely of a negative attitude, or even of being a faker.

The problem with seeing a “cross” as something imposed from without, against our will, is that it can lead to resentment, bitterness, and even despair. We see no purpose in our “cross”, and no way out.

This is not what the Cross meant to Jesus. Nor is it what He meant when He challenged us to take up our crosses daily and follow Him. Again and again in the Gospels, Jesus says that His death is not imposed on Him. He accepts and embraces it as a way of love, His supreme gift to us, and His supreme way of revealing the Father’s love for us. Jesus is resolved to be totally faithful to His Father’s mission, even if it means suffering and death.

Jesus invites us to follow Him. He invites us to accept the amazing love He has for us, and to place our trust completely in that love – even if it leads to occasional experiences of misunderstanding, rejection, and other kinds of suffering. In this way, our crosses are transformed from impositions from without that we resent to gifts of love from our hearts that we embrace out of radical trust in the love of God for us. Through them, we stand with Jesus in His sufferings, just like we stand with our friends and family in

theirs. Through them, Jesus assures us that He stands with us, and gives us a share in His own love and joy. He sustains us in our fidelity, so that our crosses become acts of love and gratefulness.

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow You in all things.  
Help us to be so committed to following Jesus  
and so trusting in His love for us  
that even the sufferings and trials of our lives  
may be transformed into ways for us  
to stand by the Lord in His trials  
and to experience His loving presence in our own.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Eighth Station: Jesus is Helped by Simon the Cyrenian to Carry the Cross**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.*

**(Mark 15: 21)**

### **Reflection**

Based on what little we are told about him, it is reasonable to assume that Simon was a Jew from Cyrene (a city in present-day Libya) who had come to Jerusalem to be part of the celebration of Passover. Being from another land, he may have heard very little about Jesus. From his point of view, he was simply going about his own business when he happens upon this procession of soldiers and men who were about to be crucified. Simon is then seized by the soldiers and forced to carry Jesus' cross. Simon is diverted from what he thought would be his celebration of the Passover. What he did not know was that, now, God was inviting him to take part in the celebration of THE Passover, when the Lamb of God would offer His own life on the Cross for us all.

As autistic people, we tend to build our lives around our customary rituals and routines. We don't tolerate change very well. We have empathy for others – far more than other people may see – but it is so intense that we ourselves can't express it. We may settle for lives centered in our own minds, where we try to do the best we can, but also protect ourselves against a great deal of the needs we see in people around us. These needs can feel overwhelming. We may not know what we are supposed to do.

What can happen – if we are blessed – is that God taps us on the shoulder and leads us in a direction we would never have chosen on our own. This new direction may, at first, feel like a diversion – unsettling, confusing, illogical. However, if we discern that it is truly from God, and then choose to trust God, we discover that what looked like a “diversion” becomes the calling, the service, and the experience of God's love that our hearts have desired all along. We never knew it – and could not have known it – without having the faith to follow God's little “diversion” in our lives.

This appears to be what happened for Simon of Cyrene, too. Biblical scholars believe that, because St. Mark gives us the names of Simon and his two sons, that they must have been known to the original readers of Mark's Gospel. They were likely Christian converts themselves. Simon did come to see, and believe, that he had celebrated the real Passover in Jerusalem, after all!

## **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow You in all things.  
May we trust the diversions and curves in the road  
which you send us,  
with faith that, following them, we will discover  
our own true place in the world  
and the deepest desires of our hearts.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Ninth Station: Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*A large crowd of people followed Jesus, including many women who mourned and lamented him. Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep instead for yourselves and for your children, for indeed, the days are coming when people will say, 'Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.' At that time, people will say to the mountains, 'Fall upon us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' for if these things are done when the wood is green what will happen when it is dry?"*

**(Luke 23: 27-31)**

### **Reflection**

Since autism has long been officially defined as a “disorder” or a “syndrome”, people may view it as a “disease” that needs a “cure”. Accordingly, many people have come forward, offering their sure-fire “cures” for autism – especially to worried parents who see their children seemingly un responsive, poker-faced, or, at the very least, quite socially awkward.

It’s easy to sympathize with those who want to “cure” autism in their loved ones. Those of us who are autistic could point out at least some traits that we would rather not have. It’s important to remember this, however. Although we autistic people are more than our autism, autism is so interwoven in nearly every aspect of our lives that it would be impossible to imagine ourselves without it. Moreover, the proposed “cures” do little more than ease this or that symptom, at best. Many have unpleasant side effects.

Asking for a “cure” may be the wrong question to begin with. What if we asked this instead: as autistic people, what do we need in order that our gifts will not remain safely inside ourselves, but rather, can be shared with the larger society?

I will offer a hypothesis. One of our challenges as autistic people is not a lack of empathy but an excess. We are too sensitive to the presence and the feelings of others. That sensitivity overloads us and makes it very hard for us to respond emotionally. What we need is to encounter an empathy that does not merely equal but even surpasses our own. An empathy that can center and guide our own, teaching us how to love. We find that empathy in Jesus, an empathy on full display in this Station.

Recall that, in the last Station, Simon of Cyrene was made to carry Jesus' Cross. This was because Jesus had been beaten and whipped so badly that the Roman soldiers feared that He might not make it to Calvary, thus depriving them of the spectacle of seeing Him in pain on the Cross. Nevertheless, even in His great suffering, He reaches out beyond His own pain to the pain of the women of Jerusalem – even suggesting that they were better off weeping for their coming trials rather than for Him! We can turn our hearts over to our most compassionate Lord, who will help us reach out to others appropriately even in our own struggles and pains, discovering in that love for others not the “cure” but the fulfillment of our autistic vocation.

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow You in all things.  
May the great compassion of Your Son  
enliven and guide our own,  
so that we might discover the full meaning  
of our autistic vocation  
and love as You love.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Tenth Station: Jesus is Crucified**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and the criminals there, one on his right, the other on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."*

**(Luke 23: 33-34)**

### **Reflection**

Being part of the human community gives us opportunities to experience the best and the worst that people are capable of. We have all experienced love from at least some people in our lives. However, we have also been wronged, hurt, misunderstood, and ridiculed by others. This is not distinctive of autistic people, of course. Anyone can experience such things.

Being on the spectrum, however, means that we are vulnerable to some things in ways that most people aren't. Things that would scarcely faze most people can torment us. Because of this, when people treat us poorly or cruelly, they may not be aware of cruel they are to us. They may not even believe us when we speak of how some things can feel like torture to us.

In times like this, we may be told that we should forgive just like Jesus forgave His enemies on the Cross. That may confuse us, or seem very difficult, or even impossible. It's important to notice one little detail. Jesus did not actually forgive those who had crucified Him. If He did, He would have said, "Your sins are forgiven", or something very similar, as He said to so many who came to Him for mercy. No, on the Cross, Jesus prays to the Father, that the Father might forgive their sin. He does not forgive them directly.

Why?

Whenever Jesus speaks of the necessity of forgiveness in our lives, He always does so in the context of the offender apologizing and asking for forgiveness. For Jesus, forgiveness is not something that one person dispenses from a great distance. No, forgiveness is meant to heal relationships and restore community. It's always a two-way street.

When Jesus is on the Cross, those who have condemned and crucified Him are not asking for forgiveness. Far from it. They are convinced that they are right. Jesus prays to the Father, therefore, that one day they might repent and be forgiven.

It works the same for us. If someone does come and apologize for hurting us in some way, then, yes, we forgive them. But if that person cannot or will not see what they did to us, then the best we can offer is to pray: pray that, one day, they can seek mercy and be forgiven, for their own sake. Then, we can pray for the grace to let that hurt go, even if it is deep, and to pray that Jesus can transform that hurt into compassionate love for all who are afflicted or abused or treated unjustly in any way.

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow You in all things.  
Bless us with the ability to forgive  
all those who seek our forgiveness,  
and the mercy to pray that those who do not  
may be led to repentance and forgiveness one day.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Eleventh Station: Jesus Promises His Kingdom to the Good Thief**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, "Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied to him, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

**(Luke 23: 39-43)**

### **Reflection**

Catholics, along with many other Christians, have had the tradition of making a regular examination of conscience. This involves looking over our day to see where we may have done well in the sight of God, and where we may have failed or sinned in some way. This examination of conscience is meant to be a spiritually healthy practice for us. We can look at our lives, see where we may have strayed from the path that God has given us, and ask for forgiveness and renewed commitment to Him.

Examinations of conscience can be tricky for people on the spectrum. For one thing, we tend toward literal thinking. For another, we tend to be better than average at seeing the anomalies in whatever we are looking at. This means that, as we look at ourselves, our anomalies – sins – will stand out. However, if anyone calls any of us a good person, our literal thinking will immediately engage and search our memories for any time we were not good, and then inwardly conclude that we cannot be good, because we were not good in this or that situation – be it yesterday or five years ago. If we continue on that way of thinking, we can feel depressed with ourselves since we can never score a perfect 100% on the test of life – and, therefore, we can never call ourselves good people. If we imagine that God judges us by that standard, we have still greater reason to feel depressed.

There is another side to this phenomenon. We apply our literal thinking and our ability to spot anomalies to the Church as a whole. We immediately see that others in the Church fail to live out all the teachings of Christ – sometimes in small ways, at others in

scandalous ways. We may wonder how a Church that seems so compromised by the flaws of its members can be a means of grace and forgiveness.

Combine both sides, and it's not hard to see how many on the spectrum may be tempted to depression or even despair.

Enter one of those crucified with Jesus – the one we call the Good Thief. On the outside, he sees Jesus as one seemingly disgraced, rejected, and discredited. Yet, his faith still sees the true Messiah and King of Israel. The Good Thief knows he has sinned but does not allow his sins to imprison him or to be the last word. His last word is faith: “Remember me when you come into your Kingdom”.

Jesus then responds. He perceives the great faith of our Good Thief and, in turn, offers forgiveness and salvation: “Today, you will be with me in Paradise”.

So it can be for us. May our sins or failures not be our last word. May we believe that the mercy of God – who knows our hearts better than anyone, even ourselves – will come to us as we open our hearts to Him by faith, will forgive our sins, and will give us a taste of Paradise. Yes, Paradise. Even now.

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us the faith and perseverance of the Good Thief.  
May we perceive the riches of Your love and mercy  
even in our wounded Church  
so that we can encounter Paradise  
even in our wounded hearts.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Twelfth Station: Jesus Speaks to His Mother and the Disciple**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. (John 19: 25-27)*

### **Reflection**

Autistic people, we are told, are more prone to either/or thinking than the general population is. In other words, we see readily how something must be either (a) or (b), but we might not notice that, in some circumstances, something can be both (a) and (b) at the same time. Or, we may not see how more than one thing can be (a) at the same time.

Let's apply this to our experience with our parents – or whoever filled the role of parent(s) for us as we grew up. Either/or thinking tells us that these are our parents and that no one else is (we'll leave out divorce and remarriage for the sake of clarity). This helps us feel a deep sense of attachment and loyalty to our parents. Autistic people can be fiercely loyal. We become more open to whatever our parents have to offer us.

This parental devotion, for us, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes us more receptive to all the love our parents want to give us. On the other hand, it makes us vulnerable to any failings or sins that our parents have as well. All of us have darkness as well as light in our hearts. We have all been affected by both the light and the darkness of people around us, especially our parents.

Now, if we only use either/or thinking, then we end up seeing ourselves only as our parents saw us. This, again, is a mixture of light and darkness, of how our parents genuinely loved us and of how they may have failed us or abused us or manipulated us, in small or even significant ways. It's only when we can broaden our thinking a little – seeing how other people can supplement what our parents gave us, and how they can help us see what is good and what is imperfect in all of this.

In this Station, we see an either/or become a both/and. Mary was Jesus' Mother; He was her Son. Literally. Now, on the Cross, Jesus gives Mary to the Beloved Disciple as

his mother, and the Disciple to her as her son. Jesus, of course, remains Mary's son. She remains His mother. But now her motherhood is expanded, multiplied, to include everyone who has faith in her Son. Mary is now our Mother as well. Her presence and intercession can help supply us with whatever our parents were unable to give us or heal any hurts that our parents cause us – even unintentionally. Through Mary, we are led to the whole Communion of Saints – all those who have proved faithful to the Lord in their earthly lives and who can now offer us their intercession and guidance. We can have many mentors, many guides, along with our parents. Both/and!

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
we give you thanks for our parents  
and all who have been like parents for us.  
May we grow in faith from the richness  
of their example and prayers  
and become Your true daughters and sons.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Thirteenth Station: Jesus Dies on the Cross**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"; and when he had said this he breathed his last.*

**(Luke 23: 44-46)**

### **Reflection**

Before the Fellowship sets out from Rivendell in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Elves give them cloaks that can render them invisible to their enemies. Many autistic people wish that they could have such “cloaks of invisibility”, at least some of the time. We would like to fly under the radar, unseen, most of the time. For many of us, then, ‘dying to self’ may mean a willingness to be seen, exposed, vulnerable. The courage to stand for something. Accepting to speak or do whatever the love of God bids us say or do – even if we don’t know it all ahead of time; even if we lack a spiritual GPS that tells us precisely where we are on the spiritual journey; even if we must proceed into the darkness with only our faith in God’s love to sustain us.

This is the very way that Jesus gave His life for us on the Cross. He allowed Himself to become radically vulnerable, even to His enemies. He accepted the Cross with faith in His Father’s love and with commitment to His Father’s will, even as His humanity naturally shrunk (at Gethsemane) from the suffering He would endure. Because He became the very example of the Beatitudes He proclaimed - poor in spirit, meek, persecuted – He became the source of love, hope, and grace for all who place their faith in Him.

We will, at times, feel called to make ourselves open, seen, and vulnerable before others. We may need to speak in the presence of others, take some stand, or help someone who has been unjustly treated – with all the risks that such loving actions involve. We will not know the outcome of our actions. We can only trust in the love and faithfulness of God – of God who promises us that if He sees even the sparrows, He sees all that we do in His name. He sees our love, our trust, and our willingness to be exposed and vulnerable. He knows how difficult that can be for us. He will bless our love and make it bear much fruit.

## **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow you in all things.  
Strengthen our faith in Your love.  
May we always follow You  
with open and sincere hearts.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## **Fourteenth Station: Jesus is Placed in the Tomb**

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

### **Reading**

*When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who was himself a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be handed over. Taking the body, Joseph wrapped it [in] clean linen and laid it in his new tomb that he had hewn in the rock. Then he rolled a huge stone across the entrance to the tomb and departed.*

**(Matthew 27: 57-60)**

### **Reflection**

Has anyone ever taught you how to fail? Do we know what to do when our hopes seem to be shattered by life?

Some autistic people are very successful academically. Most know a great deal about the topics that grab our interest and stimulate our wonder. In these areas, no one can touch us.

Life, however, is larger than our interests, and larger than academics. We soon encounter areas where we feel overwhelmed, not knowing at all how to act or how to understand what the rules and expectations are. We are bound to get it wrong, even with our most sincere efforts.

Because of this, many of us on the spectrum are especially vulnerable to depression and to the temptation to despair. We feel that we can't fit in. We can't succeed socially. We can't find good friends who support and understand us. We may struggle in the workplace. We may have dreams but may have little sense of how to achieve them.

We look to Joseph of Arimathea and his role in the burial of Jesus. Joseph is a disciple of Jesus. How his faith must have been tested by Jesus' death on the Cross! He could have given up. Yet, at a time when everything looked darkest and stepping forward was dangerous, Joseph keeps going. He does what he can. He asks Pilate for Jesus' body, and buries Jesus' body in his own tomb. Joseph may not know what will happen next. He simply sees how he can help and takes the next step in faith – in a faith that will not be stifled completely by what appears to be failure. Joseph buries Jesus' body and waits in hope.

This is what we can do when our feeling of failure weighs down upon us and threatens to sink us. We pray for the grace to have faith, hope and love. We pray for strength to keep going. We ask for guidance as to what good we can do now and do it. We place the rest in God's loving hands. We know that God has promised an abundance of grace to all who say yes to Him. So, we do what we can, and live in hope. Like Joseph of Arimathea, like Mary, like the other disciples, we wait. We have tasted death. We will soon taste Life.

### **Prayer**

Father of mercy,  
grant us Your strength and wisdom,  
that we may follow you in all things.  
When we experience failure and taste death,  
may Your promise of abundant life, love and joy  
be our hope as we walk on our journey in You.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Closing Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
your passion and death is the sacrifice that unites earth and heaven  
and reconciles all people to you.  
May we who have faithfully reflected on these mysteries  
follow in your steps and so come to share your glory in heaven  
where you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit  
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.