

THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Journey through Christ's Passion and reflect on the need to end the death penalty and promote restorative justice.





OPENING PRAYER

Holy God, be with us now as we reflect on Jesus' journey to his death.

Help us to remember that there are many who still live this journey of suffering and death.

Remind us of our call to bear witness to this injustice with our lives and to work for justice in our midst.

As we struggle to right the wrongs of our time, may we never forget your compassionate offering of mercy and grace.

Amen.



FIRST STATION: JESUS IS CONDEMNED TO DEATH

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'"*
(Matthew 27:21-23)

It is hard to imagine what this scene was like. What was Jesus thinking? Did his heart sink as he heard the crowd demanding his execution? What were the people in the crowd thinking? Surely there were at least a few who objected, who recognized the act of injustice occurring right before their eyes.

For many of us, the scene of a condemnation — of a death sentence — is not a reality we have known, or one we can even fathom. But others have, in fact, lived this reality themselves. For the roughly 2,500 people presently on death row across the United States, this moment is one they know all too well.

Imagine what it must be like, to be given a death sentence by a jury of your peers. What must it feel like to wait, to live knowing that you might soon be put to death? What must it feel like being told you will only ever be remembered for the worst thing you have ever done?

The average person on death row lives with these torments for more than a decade. How does the meaning of the death penalty change in light of Jesus's own death sentence?

All: Jesus, help me to see the death penalty through the lens of your own death sentence. Give me a new understanding of the value of human life that comes from your experience in Pilate's court. Allow me the courage to speak out for all life, even the lives of those who are guilty.



SECOND STATION: JESUS TAKES UP HIS CROSS

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"They took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha." (John 19:17)*

Jesus knew this is how it would end: that most everyone, including some of his closest friends, would abandon him. They would leave him to face ridicule and pain, to suffer death and serve as an example of the injustices of the time.

Jesus was an innocent man who would be given a very difficult cross to bear: a death sentence and an unjust execution.

We all bear crosses, though some look different than others. People who are poor, who are sick, who are oppressed or vulnerable, they often live with crosses so heavy it feels as though nothing can be done. Often, the systems put in place to protect our marginalized brothers and sisters – the ones put in place to uphold justice – are broken, plagued by the sins of our society.

The criminal legal system is one of these broken systems. Since 1973, more than 180 innocent people have been exonerated and freed from death row after being wrongfully convicted. In our current system, the falsely accused and convicted can often do little but hope, pray, and bear their undeserved cross.

The cross of a death sentence is a heavy one – regardless of a person's innocence or guilt. In our society, it is a cross not distributed fairly or equitably. A disproportionate number of people on death row in the U.S. are people of color, people suffering from mental illness or intellectual disability, and people living in poverty.

All: Christ, you bore the cross of death so we wouldn't have to. Help us to remember that the injustices in our society place the cross of death unfairly upon others. Call us to listen to the injustices of today that demand of us a response. Give us the strength necessary to stand against the unjust crosses present in our midst.



THIRD STATION: JESUS FALLS FOR THE FIRST TIME

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"Surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:4-6)*

We all find ourselves in situations of suffering and loss throughout our lives. Sometimes these situations are born of harm, crime, or injustice.

As Jesus falls for the first time, there is a call for solidarity with all those who have fallen — including victims of violence and their families. In becoming human, Christ took upon himself the very pain these men and women live with daily. In the suffering of his Passion, he compels us to remember the suffering of crime victims and all who are affected by heinous acts of violence.

All: Christ, as you fall this first time, help us to see in you all victims of crime and their loved ones. Teach us the ways of compassion and mercy so that we too can show solidarity with those who have been harmed, and bind up their wounds. Give us the strength to restore our suffering brothers and sisters to wholeness.



FOURTH STATION: JESUS ENCOUNTERS HIS MOTHER

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'" (Luke 2:34-35)*

We sometimes forget the great cross that Mary had to bear. Imagine hearing the brutal death of your son foretold. Imagine knowing that your child is meant for something bigger than you, and that the price of that prophecy would be his life. Mary's faith, her ability to witness to the meaning of her son's life, is unimaginable.

Imagine your child has been handed a sentence of death. This unthinkable scenario is the reality for thousands of mothers in the U.S. Like Mary, these mothers are forced to wrestle with two opposing conceptions of justice — one that values the God-given dignity of their child's life and one that demands vengeance. They have no choice but to bear witness, to stand in faith as their hearts break. Their pain reminds us of the need for responses to harm that do not create more victims, more loss in the name of justice.

All: Holy Mary, Mother of God, help us bear witness to the injustice of a system that perpetuates harm and suffering. Allow us to see more clearly the pain capital punishment causes, and help us to find the good news of God's love. Give us the strength to transform the witness of all faithful mothers and families into actions which make our world more forgiving.



FIFTH STATION: SIMON HELPS JESUS CARRY HIS CROSS

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus."* (Mark 15:21)

Can you imagine being in Simon's shoes, asked to help Jesus, a condemned man, to his death? What about those in our modern society who are tasked with facilitating executions?

There is nothing healthy or humane about strapping down a defenseless person and killing them. Prison personnel who are involved in executions have high rates of post-traumatic stress, alcoholism, and depression. Asking others to kill in our name takes a heavy toll.

How would you respond to the task of killing in the name of our society? Why do we continue to place this burden on others?

All: Christ Jesus, inspire in us the call to live with mercy. Give us the strength to speak out against state-sanctioned executions. Call us to greater awareness of the toll that capital punishment takes on those asked to administer it.



SIXTH STATION: VERONICA WIPES THE FACE OF JESUS

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"*
(Matthew 25:40)

When Veronica pushed through the crowd to wipe Jesus' pained face, she set an example for us. We, too, should not hesitate to push past societal norms and barriers in order to attend to the needs of our suffering brothers and sisters.

These actions need not always be elaborate or grandiose – after all, Veronica's way of caring for Jesus was simply to clean his face with a piece of basic cloth. What is most important is that we are able to see the crucified face of Jesus in the faces of those who are suffering, and that we have the courage to reach out to these brothers and sisters, even if it takes us to the margins of society.

Whose suffering face will you seek in the midst of our broken criminal legal system?

All: O merciful God, give us the compassion necessary to hear your cries in the voices of our sisters and brothers who have been marginalized by crime, violence, or incarceration. Allow us the wisdom to remember your call to uphold the dignity of all life, regardless of the harm we have suffered or caused.



SEVENTH STATION: JESUS FALLS A SECOND TIME

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone."* (John 8:7)

As Jesus falls a second time, we find ourselves so close to the injustice taking place that we can no longer make sense of it. Learning about the death penalty can have a similar effect: the more we understand how this system perpetuates harm, targets the vulnerable, and violates human dignity, the more baffling the injustice becomes to our consciences.

The teachings of Jesus are counter-cultural. They are meant to shock us, to challenge us, to change us in ways we can't undo. The Gospel calls us to a brutal awareness of the injustices of society and the firm need for action. It demands that systems that violate human dignity be changed — and that we be the ones to change them.

In following Jesus' way of the cross, we are called to recognize our own complicity in societal wrongs like the death penalty and seek ways that we can take part in bringing about justice.

All: Jesus, as you fall with all those who are victims of injustice, bring us closer to their reality. Allow us the strength to turn complicity into action and despair into hope. Teach us the ways of your mercy, so as to give us the tools necessary to live as your disciples.



EIGHTH STATION: JESUS MEETS THE WOMEN OF JERUSALEM

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.'" (Luke 23:28)*

Jesus always met people wherever they were along their journey in life. In comforting the women of Jerusalem, he again shows us that by encountering the other and accompanying the broken, we can come to know God's restorative love.

So many of our brothers and sisters whose lives have been touched by crime and the criminal legal system are in need of accompaniment along their journeys of healing. In the way of Jesus, can we meet these people where they are, being present to them as they move toward hope and restoration?

All: Loving God, show us the path to everlasting life so as to teach us the ways of your Kingdom. Help us to act with justice and live with compassion that helps to bring mercy to those who are oppressed. Give us the strength to stand up for life even in its darkest hours.



NINTH STATION: JESUS FALLS A THIRD TIME

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"The Lord does righteous deeds, brings justice to all the oppressed. Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger, abounding in kindness. God has not dealt with us as our sins merit, nor requited us as our deeds deserve. As the heavens tower over the earth, so God's love towers over the faithful. As far as the east is from the west, so far have our sins been removed from us." (Psalm 103: 6-12)*

The problems we see in our world today can often be overwhelming. Imagine those who have followed Jesus this far on his journey to the cross; to see him fall a third time must have been too much to bear. "How much more can one man handle?" they must have thought. "How am I to move on after having witnessed something so terrible? What am I to do?"

Modern injustices can cause us to ask the same questions, as we reckon with our place in this world and in God's schema. What does it mean to live as God wants? What does it look like to live in a way that serves the faith I believe in? How can I defend the lives threatened with execution by the death penalty, deportation from our country, hunger and lack of shelter, and lack of healthcare?

All: Christ Jesus, grant me the courage to defend the rights of those who are vulnerable. Teach me about the ways in which mercy and justice can transform society. Give me the tools necessary to restore those affected by the broken systems of society, fear, and apathy.



TENTH STATION: JESUS IS STRIPPED OF HIS GARMENTS

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God... in hope that [it] would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God."*
(Romans 8:19–21)

As society evolves, we develop newer, better ways of doing things. Yet so many things about our society have either not improved, or have only improved for a select few. It often seems corruption and injustice are constants in our culture. From the time of Jesus through the present, this facet of oppression has always existed in society.

The humiliation that Jesus experiences as he is stripped of his garments is an example of this constant. The dehumanization that occurred here at the cross has remained constant and still occurs as we allow the state to devalue life and execute in our name. Oh, how creation must be groaning! How long will it take for us to learn? How long will we let the dignity of life be stripped?

All: Christ Jesus, we humbly ask that you show us the path to conversion of hearts. Help us to voice the groans of creation for justice in our world. Allow us to shed light on the wrongdoings of our past and present so as to bring about the promise of your Kingdom.



ELEVENTH STATION: JESUS IS NAILED TO THE CROSS

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" (Luke 23:42-43)*

Have you ever felt like you ran out of time? Has there been a moment in your life when you desperately wish you had just a little longer to accomplish something? Have you ever found yourself in utter despair, wishing you could go back and change things to a different outcome? Maybe it was from this place that the man being crucified next to Jesus, St. Dismas, spoke out when he pleaded for remembrance.

Yet in Jesus, there is rest. God provides comfort and promise of new life, or second and third chances. Jesus gave St. Dismas comfort and solace at the end of his life, and showed that God's grace is always available to those who desire it.

How are we being called to change? How can we live in a way that exemplifies God's grace? One way is to assure that even those who commit crimes are given the chance to change. The call to end the death penalty is a call for restoration and to turn away from vengeance.

All: Gracious God, move us to be vessels for change. Help us to move society and ourselves to be a people of restoration and conversion instead of death. Teach us to be instruments of your transforming grace.



TWELFTH STATION: JESUS DIES ON THE CROSS

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:45-46)*

Sometimes, in the face of great suffering and tragedy, there is nothing to do but lament. The only thing you can think to do is to cry out in pain, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

We witness so many unspeakable moments of injustice in our society, and that can take its toll on our sense of faith. What do you think Jesus' disciples at the foot of his cross were thinking at the moment of his death? Do you think they were struggling to have faith? Struggling to trust God despite all the unknowns?

That is our task today. In the midst of our attempts to be faithful disciples, we encounter countless injustices occurring, thousands of people suffering, and often the outlook seems bleak. How are we to live in the aftermath of an execution, knowing full well this one won't be the last? How do we acknowledge the reality of Jesus' death while still holding on to hope for something better to come?

Our task as Christians is to linger with the unknown. We are called to move forward with those who suffer and be present with our hearts and trust in God's redeeming grace. We are called to live beyond the stains of injustice and bring about hope for our world.

All: Loving God, give us the courage to bear witness to the pain and suffering present in our society today. Help us to linger with the unknown and hold faithfully to your path. Allow us to remain in hope and work towards justice within our society.



THIRTEENTH STATION: JESUS IS TAKEN DOWN FROM THE CROSS

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *"Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.'" (Luke 22:19)*

As we come to grips with the broken body of Jesus, we also remember that his death is not the end, but the beginning. Jesus preached a message of radical, counter-cultural love and mercy. The teachings of Jesus are meant to change us, to give us purpose, and to call us to justice. As we mourn the end of Jesus' earthly life, we are called to embrace and carry on his message of love and inclusion.

Perhaps we can see each life lost to the death penalty in this light. If we continue to live out the mission of Jesus, continue to love one another and uphold the dignity of all life, then the lives of those lost to the death penalty can also continue.

Jesus lives on after his death in the embodied spirits of each one of us, including those on death row. We are called to live out that love, to continue to spread the Gospel message beyond the death of Christ. Let us also carry forward the spirits of the lives we have lost to the death penalty and do what they were incapable of doing in this lifetime as we work for justice.

All: Christ Jesus, in you we were given the ultimate gift of love, teach us to pass on that gift as we work for change in this world. Help us to allow your mission to rise anew through the lives and experiences of those on death row.



FOURTEENTH STATION: JESUS IS LAID IN THE TOMB

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

All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *“When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.”*
(Matthew 27:57-61)

Jesus’ life was filled with great controversy and met with great resistance. He lived in a way that challenged the systems of oppression that perpetuate poverty, sexism, and racism. Yet it is his death that has the greatest impact.

As his broken body was placed in the tomb, the aftermath of Jesus’ life was just beginning to be felt. The Gospel message that Jesus preached broke down the walls of division and opened the doors to justice to all. In dying, Jesus’ message was disseminated by the Spirit, and given new life by the apostles.

We are still feeling the effects of Jesus’ life. We feel it every time an oppressed group is victorious over an injustice, every time people choose life over death and healing over vengeance. As we move forward with our own works of justice, let us remember the life and death of Jesus. We are called to let the mission and teachings of Jesus inspire us to call out injustices like the death penalty and move us to act in a way that makes his presence felt.

All: Christ Jesus, as we continue to live out your mission give us the gift of your presence. Help us to remember your life and death as catalysts that destroyed divisions and hate. Give us the tools necessary to create change and inspire justice.





CLOSING PRAYER

Christ Jesus, we have journeyed the way of the cross with you. We have contemplated the crucifixions of our time and heard your call to justice.

As we continue through this holy time of reflection, may we always remember all who are impacted by the death penalty. Give us the courage to spread the Gospel message and witness to your presence in our midst.

Amen.

