St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
Good Friday 2026

It was about twenty years ago when I took part in a Good Friday service I knew I wouldn't soon forget. Seven homilists had gathered to reflect on Jesus's seven last words, and we followed each homily with a piece of music. It was quite something just to have that number of reflections from an array of thoughtful preachers. And the musicians were wonderful. But the moment I actually remember the most came at the end. It was time for the seventh homilist to offer her reflection but others had run long and we were out of time. She only had a minute or so to speak. And so instead of going to the pulpit, she knelt in front of the altar, paused for a moment and slowly said these words:

Go to dark Gethsemane, You who feel the tempter's pow'r;
Your Redeemer's conflict see; Watch with Him one bitter hour;
Turn not from His griefs away; Learn of Jesus Christ to pray.

Follow to the judgment hall; View the Lord of life arraigned;
O the worm-wood and the gall! O the pangs His soul sustained!
Shun not suff'ring, shame, or loss; Learn of Him to bear the cross.

Calv'ry's mournful mountain climb There' adoring at His feet,
Mark the miracle of time, God's own sacrifice complete:
"It is finished!" Hear the cry; Learn of Jesus Christ to die.

We all agreed afterward that, as fine as the other reflections had been, these words, and the way she read them, had stuck with us most. The words are from an old hymn; very old as it turns out. The poet who wrote them flourished at the end of the 18th Century. A composer decided to set the words a couple of generations later, and it's been sung around the world during Holy Week ever since. Remarkably, its words remain untouched. Most older hymns are adapted and updated over time. But not this one. No one's touched it. It just takes you so clearly and indelibly into the final twelve hours of Jesus's life and to the heart of the mystery.

And so first: It sends us to Gethsemane, where Jesus went to pray at midnight on the eve of his arrest. Go, it tells us. Go and watch with him just one hour. The hymn urges us to stay with him, to remain present. Prayer, it reminds us, is presence. It's the presence of remaining and waiting, of listening and watching. It's the presence we offer to another when it's most needed. It's saying I'm here with you always; I'm here whenever you need me. It's the *sitting shiva* offered to Martha and Mary when Lazarus died; it's the unshakeable devotion of the women who stood at the cross and never left their friend's side. Prayer, the poem urges us, is presence. It's refusing to turn away. It's being steadfast, faithful; it's saying "Here I am." And we learn it here.

We're sent next to Jesus's trial before the Roman procurator Pilate. Follow, the poem urges us. Though surely we will want to, it urges us not to turn our eyes away. Don't look away, it asks, from this moment even though it hurts and stings. Don't push away this suffering, and even this shame. Know instead precisely in this moment what it might feel like to give away, to yield, to

shed, to empty oneself to fill others; to offer oneself as gift to others. Learn to hold lightly to the glories of this world, beautiful and real as they are. Learn the way home to the one place of true, abiding peace, beauty, and redeeming love. Learn of him to walk and to live the way of the cross. And we learn it here.

And finally it sends us to the place we need to go most; to the place where we find ourselves today. It sends us to Calvary. Climb, it urges us. Climb to behold and adore the ultimate mystery. God gives God's own life as a gift. "Take this gift," God says, "I give you it all; I give you everything." Climb to behold the great miracle of time, the work of salvation now complete in a death, of all things, that brings *eternity*, a death and an eternity, the poem insists, *into which we are invited*. Learn of him to die, the poet says as we're urged to consider finally letting die any of those things that might still keep us from him, that might still keep us from the wholeness, the fullness of life he craves for us. Learn of him to die, another poet says, to anything that keeps us from him — anger, indifference, grudges, certainties that smother possibilities, our arrogant insistence on how it has to be — learn of him to die to all of it and thus, finally, to live. We learn it here.