

*These reflections on the Stations of the Cross are by Father J.B. Stone,  
a former Parish Priest of Balclutha Parish.*

This little study came about as a result of a Lenten practice I tried to keep during the Lent of 1999. When I was a student at the seminary in the forties and fifties the custom was to go around the Stations every day as part of what were called our spiritual duties. As a Lenten practice I made the Stations in the local church at Balclutha. Being somewhat new to this parish of Balclutha N.Z., and having nothing to do with the construction of the new church, I had not taken much notice of the Stations, particularly as they are gathered along the back wall, a place not designed for any close attention. As the making of the Stations is initially a looking exercise, it was only gradually that I became intensely interested in these ceramic pictures. My reflections are of course my own experience, seeing things that were present for me, but perhaps not for anybody else. If you ask any visual artists about their work they will go silent. Perhaps the work has a meaning for them only, or, what they have portrayed takes on a meaning for others which they himself allow, but do not intend.

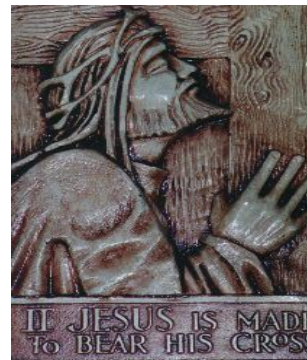
**THE FIRST STATION. JESUS IS CONDEMNED TO DEATH.**

Pilate has finished playing politics. Trying to please everyone did not work. Sentence must be passed. The cuffs on the sleeves of his gown prove, at closer inspection to be the bonds that have held him through the trial. They hold his hands unnaturally together. Soon he will swap them for the cross, the outline of which is not yet formed, but its texture is already evident. Until he is taken down, the cross will form the background of virtually every scene.



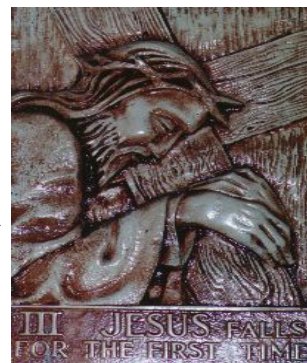
**THE SECOND STATION. JESUS IS MADE TO BEAR HIS CROSS.**

Essentially the Way of The Cross is a love affair between Jesus and his cross. Here he is introduced to it, and he clasps it, not unlike the way John Paul 11 clasps his Processional Cross. He does not hold it like a standard, but rather like a treasured friend, something to embrace and caress. None of us looks for a cross, yet any serious attempt at pursuing a spiritual life must inevitably embrace The Cross in one form or another.



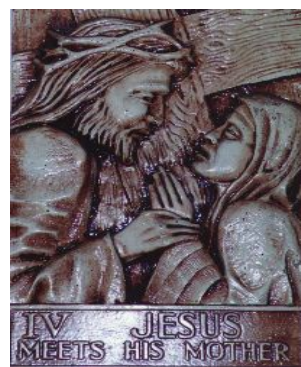
**THE THIRD STATION. JESUS FALLS FOR THE FIRST TIME.**

The expression on the face of Jesus as he experiences this first fall seems to be one of gentle respect for this cross, which nevertheless has bent him under its weight. Not yet is that ravaged look that we see growing station by station, and fall by fall. This is something like that ancient courtly respect and knightly honour, accorded any sacred sign. The cross is always only an instrument, but one which is identified with his love for the Father.



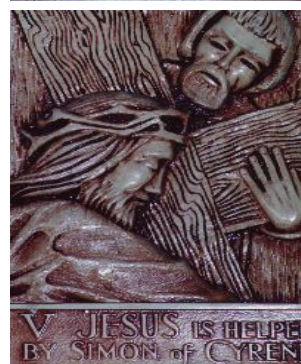
**THE FOURTH STATION. JESUS MEETS HIS MOTHER.**

The look on the face of Mary seems only for her Son. She sees no one else. His gaze, on the other hand seems at one time concentrated on her, and at another, looking beyond her as if he realises that she more than anyone, will understand the love of the Father, in his giving of him who was Son to both of them. Solidly in the background, uniting them and interpreting for them is the cross.



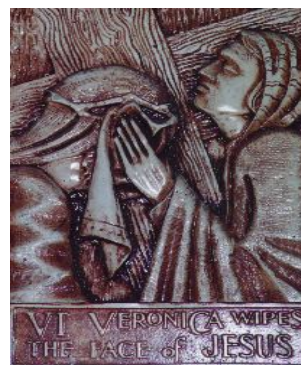
**THE FIFTH STATION. JESUS IS HELPED BY SIMON OF CYRENE.**

Simon, we are told, was compelled to help Jesus. He got caught up in a drama not of his own choosing. Yet the expression on his face is one of enquiry rather than a betrayal of fear about being so coerced. It seems to ask, Who are you, and why are they doing this? I like to think that this was Simons opportunity to make, as the evangelists say, the decision for Christ. If he made a decision at all, it must indeed have been for Christ.



**THE SIXTH STATION. VERONICA WIPES THE FACE OF JESUS.**

The cross is always only an instrument, but Veronica does for Jesus the one practical thing that is in her power to do. Perhaps she has done this for other men on the way to crucifixion. She has brought the towel as an instrument of her compassion. It is typically what a woman would do. Practical, merciful, yet futile in its inability to change anything. But what she can do, she does. With affection, with all that womanly compassion, which although not achieving anything that will change the outcome of this day, nevertheless achieves a world of healing.



**THE SEVENTH STATION. JESUS FALLS FOR THE SECOND TIME.**

The second fall, (God knows how many there actually were), shows Jesus compressed on the cross. If it were not for the cross he would be already prostrate on the ground. His affection for the cross is evident. It is as if he is saying to it, My friend, we are in this together. There is no sign of any surprise on the part of Jesus. This ordeal is merely the reality that he has been aware of long before it came about.



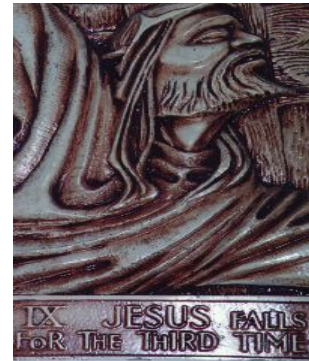
**THE EIGHTH STATION. JESUS COMFORTS THE HOLY WOMEN.**

The Women do not respond to the legal reasons why Jesus was being crucified. Women have always gone spontaneously to answer the need when it occurs. So they did what they could. They are bewildered at the sight of Jesus, clearly a good man suffering, and they would dearly understand it. Jesus seems able in this picture to be the one who comforts them. He seems to be above the present suffering. Perhaps he is somehow able to convey that this is about the mystery of the love both he and the father have for them.



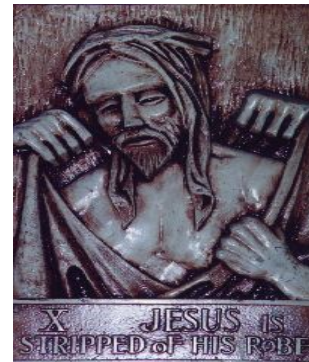
**THE NINTH STATION. JESUS FALLS FOR THE THIRD TIME.**

The worst of all the falls of Jesus is this one that flattens him to the ground. There is no question of any heroic summoning of his human strength. Quite simply the cross has beaten him. The Son of God is also a human being. The way his garments stream in one direction as if pulled by some cyclonic force reminds us that he will not get up from this one unless somebody else lifts him up. Even his captors, experienced in the grizzly business of crucifixion must be concerned that he may not last long enough to die on the cross.



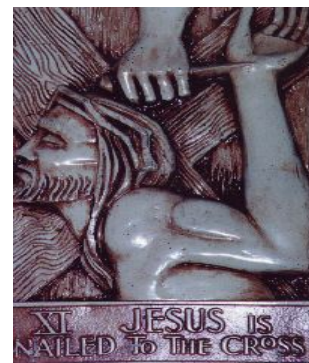
**THE TENTH STATION. JESUS IS STRIPPED OF HIS ROBE.**

The hands that strip Jesus of his dignity if not his modesty appear like a garden rake rather than the fingers of a human hand. This is a brusque rapid rape-like gesture, brutal and unfeeling. But it is quite irrelevant to Jesus. The humble bearing he has shown throughout his treatment is not going to quibble at yet another unfriendly act. All this has been accepted in advance. There will be no last-minute protest.



**THE ELEVENTH STATION. JESUS IS NAILED TO THE CROSS.**

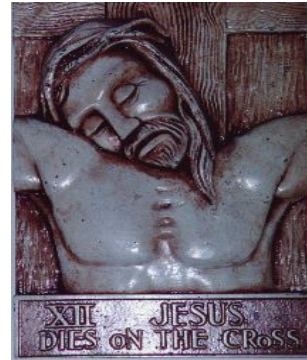
This awkward angle portrayed by the artist seems to be at pains to show the unbreakable connection between Jesus and his cross. If Simon actually carried the cross over the last stages instead of Jesus, then it would have been necessary to make physical contact with it again. But here we see Jesus in a contorted effort to allow himself to be nailed so that the connection is not broken even for an instant.





**THE TWELFTH STATION. JESUS DIES ON THE CROSS.**

Even a strong man can bear only so much. This human frame was flogged, crushed, and pierced. Loss of blood, shock to his system, and a decision to die, all helped to bring about the inevitable. He told them he was impatient for this baptism to be accomplished. But it was not for any love of human suffering. This was no masochist. Ultimately what made him die was love. Love for his Father, and love for us.



**THE THIRTEENTH STATION. JESUS IS TAKEN DOWN FROM THE CROSS.**

This is the first time that Jesus has parted with the cross since he took it up after leaving the presence of Pilate. If you are looking for that heavy grain in the wood you can still see it in the background. Although he has finally finished with it, it is the Cross that gives meaning to the whole of his life. For him the cross was never the background, but rather the substance of his life.



**THE FOURTEENTH STATION. JESUS IS PLACED IN THE TOMB.**

The photographs I took are all vertical, in the sense that Jesus is usually standing. When I look at this I am tempted to turn it, thinking I have got it wrong. But of course He is lying down, and in a space so confined you feel claustrophobic. Until, that is, you realise that since this is a tomb, there is no need for air. While this is perhaps the most desolating of all the Stations, at least we are sure that He was dead, and any thought of resurrection, did we not know better, should be far from our minds.

