

Aldham Good Friday: Sound *Jennifer*, Lead *Wendy P***Sermon:** Ian S-T

Prose engages our understanding, our reason; but poetry fires up our imagination, it moves our emotions. Just as music and art touch us at a deeper level, so does poetry. I'm very grateful to Jan Rogan for proposing and carrying through our meditation today. And I quickly agreed with her, that I wanted *The Dream of the Rood*, written so long ago, but still with power to move our hearts. The complete poem is long, but Jan has chosen the heart of it, in a good translation that we can read more easily.

Perhaps you've wondered, if these stones could speak, what stories they could tell? That magnificent oak, standing guard outside at the crossroads: what might have passed beneath its boughs since it was an acorn, centuries ago? And in this ancient meditation, what might the rough wood have said and prayed, as it carried the weight of the Son of Man?

I love the descriptions of Jesus: the Lord of all mankind, the young hero (who was God almighty), the warrior, the noble King, the Lord of heaven above, the God of hosts, the Ruler, the King, Christ, dear warrior, the Son of God. So many names, expressing love and devotion! The tree, the creature, honours and worships its Creator. But the name Jesus is never used, as if the Rood knows only what it sees and feels.

And it feels so much! Part of the character of wood, a tree, is its strength. "I durst not ... bend down or break ... yet stood I fast ... upright I had to stand." The tree senses also the strength of Christ himself, who "hastens with eager zeal ... climbed onto the lofty gallows-tree, bold in the sight of many watching men, when He intended to redeem mankind."

It seems to be a partnership, between tree and Saviour. They are doing this together.

Why the title, "The Dream of the Rood"?

Is this your dream and mine, our own Dream of the Rood: imagining what tale it might tell, if the wood could speak. This was written in the

age when pieces of wood were treasured as fragments of the True Cross, bought and sold for large sums as holy relics. Am I perhaps holding a small piece of wood, and wondering about that day eight centuries ago, when this very shard of wood carried the Saviour of all mankind, the Son of God? Am I dreaming what it might say? "It was long past – I still remember it..."

Or, is this the Rood personified, itself Dreaming, in its imagination going back to that day when it held high the young hero, the focus of attention of all Creation, when even the earth itself heaved and shuddered at the cataclysmic event that was taking place, the death of the Son of God?

And it tells a tale, recounts the story from first to last. The story once so familiar in ages past, perhaps less so today in the twenty-first century. The Rood tells the story from its own viewpoint, and we see it afresh. What must it have been like to hold Jesus in his agony; to feel the weight of sin that bore him down and crushed his noble heart – the burden of the world, the sin of all mankind. "I was made wet all over with the blood ... I underwent full many a dire experience on that hill."

And since then, "far and wide on earth men honour me." Mediaeval churches would have a Rood Screen in wood or stone at the Chancel Arch, surmounted by a Crucifixion tableau: Christ on the Cross, maybe with disciples around the Cross, perhaps with thieves either side. An image of the central event of our faith, inspiring honour and worship and adoration. The Cross, the Rood, has become the universal sign of Christian faith. "And to this beacon offers prayers ... I tower mighty underneath the heavens, and I may heal all those in awe of me. Once I became the cruellest of tortures, most hateful to all nations, till the time I opened the right way of life for men."

The Cross, the Rood: once a terrifying pain-maker, a barbaric killing machine. Now, by this central act of our Saviour, transformed into a focus of adoration.

For here, on this Rood, was the greatest love shown, the greatest prize gained, Life itself. Today, we worship.