



Dreaming of the Holy Rood

a liturgy of the Incarnation
based on the Ruthwell Cross

Location
Date
Time

Encountering & Envisioning the Ruthwell Cross

by Timothy J. Ray

Many years ago, I visited the village of Ruthwell in southern Scotland to make a spiritual retreat guided by the carvings on the Anglo-Saxon preaching cross at the local church. Years before this, during my university studies, I read the Anglo-Saxon poem titled "The Dream of the Rood" and learned it was reputedly inspired by this cross (which had some verses from the poem carved onto it after being erected) and the idea of praying in front of it caught my imagination and never fully faded from my memory. So, when the opportunity arose, I reached out to the local minister through a mutual friend and asked permission to visit the church for a few days. He agreed and I used this as an opportunity to make a personal retreat in Ruthwell with this ancient cross.

As I approached the Ruthwell Cross in prayer, my retreat was shaped by two spiritual resources: "The Dream of the Rood" and the contemplations on the life of Jesus in *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*. The anonymous Anglo-Saxon poem narrated another person's encounter with the cross on which Jesus died, allowing the holy cross (and, by extension, the cross in the church) to tell me its story in the same way that it did to a poet centuries before. The Ignatian exercises provided me with a structure within which that story could unfold as they narrated the events of the Incarnation of Christ in human history. Together, these spiritual resources converged to create a single narrative for my journey into the holy poetry of "The Dream of the Rood" and the spiritual mystery of the Holy Incarnation.

These resources proved to be indispensable to my experience since the cross is now incomplete, either because the images on the cross were gently worn away by pilgrims in the centuries after its construction or because the pieces of its crossbeam were lost between its destruction during the Scottish Reformation in 1642 and its reconstruction in 1823. Still, the quiet grandeur of the damaged cross echoed the descriptions in "The Dream of the Rood", and the techniques of Ignatian imaginative prayer allowed me to see and hear the events in Jesus' life depicted on the cross and to encounter moments from his life not presented on the restored (or, more accurately, resurrected) cross.

This prayer service attempts to recreate the intense interplay of imaginative creativity and prayerful contemplation. Its readings and hymns echo the prayers which shaped my four days in Ruthwell, and the images created by Cat Outram mirror the manner in which I prayerfully connected (or conceived) images on the Ruthwell Cross all those years ago: seeing some images actually preserved on the cross, others being imagined as they once looked upon the cross, and still others being imagined as they might have been carved into the cross. It is my deepest hope that you experience the depths of Jesus Christ's love through this prayerful encounter with the Incarnation so that, in Saint Paul's words to the Ephesians:

"Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

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The Vision of a Jeweled Cross

The Dreamer

Lo! I will tell of the best of dreams,
what I dreamed in the middle of the night,
after the speech-bearers were in bed.
It seemed to me that I saw a very wondrous tree
lifted into the air, enveloped by light,
the brightest of trees. That beacon was all
covered with gold. Gems stood
beautiful at the surface of the earth, there were five also
up on the central joint of the cross.
All those fair through eternal decree gazed
[on] the angel of the Lord.
[It] was certainly not a wicked person's gallows there,
but holy spirits, men over the earth,
and all this famous creation gazed on him.
Wondrous was that tree of victory, and I stained with sins
wounded sorely with defects, I saw the tree of glory,
honored with garments, shining joyously,
adorned with gold. Gems had splendidly covered the Lord's tree.
I was able, however, to perceive through the gold,
the ancient hostility of wretched ones, [that] it first began
to bleed on the right side. I was all troubled with grief,
I was afraid in the presence of that beautiful sight. I saw that noble
beacon
change its coverings and color; sometimes it was drenched with
moisture,
soaked with the flow of blood, sometimes adorned with treasure.
Nevertheless, I, lying a long time there,
gazed troubled at the Saviour's tree.

Choir

"Faithful Cross"

Faithful Cross, above all other,
one and only noble Tree,
none in foliage, none in blossom,
none in fruit thy peer may be;
sweet the wood, and sweet the iron,
and thy load, most sweet is he.

Bend, O lofty Tree, thy branches,

thy too rigid sinews bend;
and awhile the stubborn hardness,
which thy birth bestowed, suspend;
and the limbs of heaven's high Monarch
gently on thine arms extend.

Thou alone wast counted worthy
this world's Ransom to sustain,
that a shipwrecked race for ever
might a port of refuge gain,
with the sacred Blood anointed
of the Lamb for sinners slain.

I. Mary, the God-Bearer

Convener Praise and honor to the Father,
praise and honor to the Son,
praise and honor to the Spirit,

All Ever three and ever One;
One in might, and one in glory,
While eternal ages run. Amen.

Convener Both wonderful and mysterious, the history of this bejeweled cross began
when the divine persons of the holy Trinity looked upon the breadth and
length of our world – the whole circuit of the earth – with love:
seeing it inhabited by so many nations,
seeing the diversity of peoples living in it,
seeing some in peace and others in war,
seeing some weeping and others laughing,
seeing some healthy and others sick,
seeing some being born and others dying.

All We are humbled and ask for mercy.

Convener This Divine Majesty in Heaven looked at the diverse humans upon the
earth and their many different manners, gestures, and actions in our
world:
swearing and blaspheming against God,
wounding and killing one another,
despoiling and polluting the beauty of nature,
hoarding the bounty of creation and allowing others to suffer in
need,
sinning in so many other ways and descending into hell through
this blindness.

All We are sinners and ask for mercy.

The promised Fruit to man displayed.

The virgin womb that burden gained
With virgin honour all unstained;
The banners there of virtue glow;
God in His temple dwells below.

Forth from His chamber goeth He,
That royal home of purity,
A giant in twofold substance one,
Rejoicing now His course to run.

Reader 2 Luke 2:8-20

Choir “From God the Father He Proceeds”

From God the Father He proceeds,
To God the Father back He speeds;
His course He runs to death and hell,
Returning on God’s throne to dwell.

O equal to the Father, Thou!
Gird on Thy fleshly mantle now;
The weakness of our mortal state
With deathless might invigorate.

Thy cradle here shall glitter bright,
And darkness breathe a newer light,
Where endless faith shall shine serene,
And twilight never intervene.

All laud to God the Father be,
All praise, eternal Son, to Thee;
All glory, as is ever meet,
To God the Holy Paraclete.

Reader 1 Matthew 2:1-12

Reader 2 Matthew 2:13-16

Choir “Why, Impious Herod”

Why, impious Herod, vainly fear
that Christ the Saviour cometh here?
He takes no earthly realms away
Who gives the crown that lasts for aye.

To greet His birth the Wise Men went,
led by the star before them sent;
called on by light, towards Light they pressed,
and by their gifts their God confessed.

In holy Jordan's purest wave
the heavenly Lamb vouchsafed to lave;
That He, to whom was sin unknown,
might cleanse His people from their own.

New miracle of power divine!
The water reddens into wine:
He spake the word: and poured the wave
in other streams than nature gave.

All glory, Lord, to Thee we pay
for Thine Epiphany today;
all glory as is ever meet,
to Father and to Paraclete. Amen.

Reader 1 Matthew 2:19-23

The Dreamer You are the wall-stone that the builders of old rejected.
Well it seems that you become the keystone of the spacious hall,
binding in firm embrace wide-running walls and flint unbroken;
that every eye throughout the world may marvel evermore, O Lord of
glory!
Through your skilful craft, show the beauty of your handiwork –
truth-firm and triumphant – leaving firm wall upon firm wall.
The work needs the Craftsman to return, the King himself,
and repair that house which now lies decayed under its roof.
For He shaped the body and the limbs of humankind from the clay;
and now the Lord of life shall free that wretched throng from their
enemies,
liberate the all-forlorn from fear, as He often did in the past.

III. The Public Ministry of Jesus

Convener When Jesus began his public life and ministry, he humbly went to the
Jordan to be baptized by John.

Reader 1 John 1:29-34

Convener Eternal Lord, help us in our need as we seek resolution of heart,

All Following you with courage and excitement.

Convener	Give us the understanding of mind to know and embrace the costs of following you,
All	Accepting the insults and abuse that you also bore on our behalf.
Convener	Give us the determination of spirit to take risks in your service,
All	So we may be worthy to be called your disciples.
Convener	These we ask in your name.
All	Amen.
Convener	The Gospel of Saint John tells us of Jesus' first miracle.
Reader 2	John 2:1-11
Convener	The Gospel of Saint John also tells us how Jesus miraculously fed 5000 people with five barley loaves and two small fish.
Reader 1	John 6:1-15
Choir	"Creator of the Starry Height"

Creator of the starry height,
 Thy people's everlasting Light,
 Jesu, Redeemer of us all,
 Hear thou thy servants when they call.

Thou, sorrowing at the helpless cry
 Of all creation doomed to die,
 Didst come to save our fallen race
 By healing gifts of heavenly grace.

When earth was near its evening hour,
 Thou didst, in love's redeeming power,
 Like bridegroom from his chamber, come
 Forth from a Virgin-mother's womb.

At thy great name, exalted now,
 All knees in lowly homage bow;
 All things in heaven and earth adore,
 and own thee King for evermore.

To thee, O Holy One, we pray,
 Our Judge in that tremendous day,
 Ward off, while yet we dwell below,

The weapons of our crafty foe.

To God the Father, God the Son,
and God the Spirit, Three in One,
laud, honor, might and glory be
from age to age eternally.

Convener In the Gospel of Saint Luke, we are told of Jesus' compassion and forgiveness when he responds to a woman's remorse while visiting the home of Simon, a pharisee.

Reader 2 Luke 7:36-50

Convener In Saint John's Gospel, we hear of Jesus healing a blind man and of the man's community to this miracle.

Reader 1 John 9:1-12, 35-38

The Dreamer He who shaped the world, the Spirit-Son of God,
shows us honour and grants us grace,
eternal habitations with the angels.
And He sows varied wisdom of mind
and sets it them the hearts of all people.
Unto one He sends wise abilities of tongue
through the spirit of his mouth and noble insight in his heart,
so richly may one sing and utter all things,
who has might of wisdom hidden in his heart.
And with skillful fingers another may fairly sound the harp before the
hosts;
yet another may read aright all godly law,
or tell the mysteries of the stars and the wide universe,
or write skilfully the spoken word.
So toward all humanity the Lord, the Son of God,
directs His gifts and offers honor and power
and bounteous blessings upon the children of earth.
But to no one person does He give all wisdom of heart,
wary that in giving strength beyond others to one
that pride may take hold upon them to their own harm.

Choir "O Word of Might"

O Word of Might, that springing forth
From out the Father's heart, wast born
To raise our fallen state on earth,
Bring help, and leave us not forlorn.

Illume our breasts with heavenly light,

And set our souls aflame with love,
That we, forsaking things of night,
Shall lift our hopes to joys above.

When from the awful judgment throne
Dread doom unto his foes the Lord
Shall send, and call in tender tone
The just unto their sweet reward;

Let not our souls on that dread day
Be rolled in seething pools of fire;
Let mercy melt thine ire away,
And be thy love our sole desire.

Then to the Father and the Son
And Holy Spirit, one in three,
From first to last, as ages run,
Eternal praise and glory be.

Convener In Saint John's Gospel, we also hear of the resistance to Jesus by those in authority:

Reader 2 John 11:47-53

The Dreamer Lo! We have heard how the Christ-child by His advent
brought again salvation;
how He, the Creator's noble Son,
freed and kept men beneath the clouds,
so that now each mortal, while he dwells here in life,
may choose either the shame of hell or the fame of heaven,
the shining day or the loathsome night,
the power of glory or the pain of darkness,
joy with the Lord or wailing with demons,
bliss with angels or torment with fiends,
either life or death,
whichever the person prefers to achieve
while body and soul abide in the world.
Therefore let blessing and eternal thanks
be unto the glory of the Trinity!

IV. The Crucifixion of Jesus

Convener Saint Paul, in his Letter to the Philippians, reminds us of the profound sacrifice Jesus Christ made on our behalf.

Reader 1 Philippians 2:1-11

Convener	Eternal Lord, help us in our unbelief and failings, to feel the depths of grief and confusion that your cross should evoke in us, Reminding us that you suffered so cruelly for our sake,
All	To understand the infinite love and humility that led you to the cross,
Convener	To desire the courage and humbleness of heart to share in your sacrifice upon the cross,
All	Hoping to accept a portion of the suffering you endured for us.
Convener	May we honestly recognize that in our own sinfulness,
All	When we also reject you and place you yet again upon the cross.
Convener	These we ask in your name.
All	Amen.
The Dreamer	With humility and remorse, I hear the words of the Savior's tree echo in my memory.
The Cross	<p>It was years ago (that, I still remember), that I was cut down from the edge of the forest, removed from my foundation. Strong enemies seized me there, they made me into a spectacle for themselves, commanded me to lift up their criminals. Men carried me there on their shoulders, until they set me on a hill, many enemies secured me there. Then I saw mankind's Lord hasten with great zeal, that he wished to climb upon me. There, I did not dare break to pieces or bow down against the Lord's words, when I saw the surface of the earth tremble. I was able to destroy all the enemies, nevertheless, I stood firmly. The young hero stripped himself then (that was God Almighty), strong and resolute. He ascended onto the high gallows, brave in the sight of many, there, [since] he wished to release mankind. I trembled when the man embraced me. However, I dared not bow down to the earth, fall to the surface of the earth, but I had to stand fast. I was raised [as a] cross. I lifted up the mighty king, the lord of the heavens; I dared not bend down. They pierced me with dark nails. On me, the scars are visible, open malicious wounds. I did not dare injure any of them. They mocked both of us, together. I was all drenched with blood, covered from the man's side, after he had sent forth his spirit.</p>

I endured many cruel events on that hill.
I saw the Lord of Hosts severely stretched out.
Darkness had covered the bright radiance
of the Lord's corpse with clouds, a shadow went forth,
dark under the sky. All of creation wept,
they lamented the king's death. Christ was on the cross.

A bell tolls slowly, followed by a period of silence.

Choir "Much Have Sinned in Deed and Word"

Much have we sinned in deed and word,
We bare our hearts before thee, Lord;
Thy tender clemency we seek,
Oh heal our wounded souls and weak.

Grant that we may the body cleanse
Of sinful stain through abstinence,
May lift our fasting hearts to thee,
From all defiling evils free.

O tender Godhead, three in one!
Be ours the will all crime to shun.
To know and keep thy laws divine,
And be the fruits of fasting thine.

V. The Resurrection of the Lord

Convener	In his Gospel, Saint Luke tells us how the first disciples were confused by Jesus' empty tomb.
Reader 1	Luke 24:1-12
Convener	In the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke tells us how the Risen Jesus stayed with his disciples for a short time before ascending into heaven, promising his followers that they would be sustained by the Holy Spirit as they gave witness to him "to the ends of the earth".
Reader 2	Acts 1:3-11
The Dreamer	With joy and gratitude, I hear again the words of the bejeweled cross of Christ.
The Cross	The time is now come that men over the earth and all this illustrious creation far and wide honour me, they pray to this sign. On me, God's son

suffered a time. Therefore, now I rise up
glorious under the heavens, and I am able to heal
each one of those who hold me in awe.
Formerly, I was the most fierce of torments,
most hateful to people, before I opened the right
path of life to them, the speech-bearers.
Lo, the prince of glory, the guardian of the kingdom of the heavens,
honoured me over all the trees of the forest!
Just as he, Almighty God, before all men,
honoured his mother also, Mary herself,
over all womankind.
Now I command you, my beloved warrior,
that you tell this vision to men,
reveal in words that it is the tree of glory,
on which Almighty God suffered
for mankind's many sins
and Adam's deeds of old,
He tasted death there. However, the Lord arose again
to help men with his great power.
None needs to be afraid [of]
of [he] who already bears on his breast the best of signs,
but through the cross, each soul must seek
the kingdom from the earthly way,
those who intend to dwell with the Lord.

Convener	Eternal Lord, touch our minds and hearts so that we may feel the deep gladness and joy that should come with your victory, allowing ourselves to be consoled,
All	Accepting and proclaiming your continuing presence and love,
Convener	Helping us to see and announce your true nature, Now revealed in its fullness after being hidden upon the cross, sustaining us as we seek to walk with you as true companions,
All	Aware of the many changes and graces received through your death and resurrection and ascension.
The Dreamer	It is therefore fitting that the tribes of men give thanks unto the Lord for every good which late and early He has given us, through mystery of wonders manifold. He gives us food and fulness of possession, wealth over the spacious earthy and gentle weather beneath the protecting heavens; the sun and moon, noblest of constellations, heavens candles, shine forth for all mankind on earth alike; dew falls and rain; they call abundance forth

to nourish life for all the race of man; earth's riches they increase.
For all these gifts must we give thanks and praise unto our Lord,
yet first for our salvation, the hope vouchsafed,
when He at His ascension turned away the miseries which we had
suffered long.

Choir

“O Thou Who Seek'st the Christ to Find”

O thou who seek'st the Christ to find,
Uplift thine eyes on high;
For lo! to every humble mind
His glory fills the sky.

His mighty wonders there behold,
In boundless fields of light,
Sublime, eternal, and as old
As heaven and ancient night.

Here is the nation's King indeed,
Here Israel's mighty Lord,
To Abraham promised and his seed,
Forevermore adored.

To him each prophet witnesseth,
By word and sign sincere;
Acknowledged by the Sire, who saith,
"Behold, believe and hear!"

To Jesus, who his light displays
To babes, all glory be,
To Sire and Spirit equal praise
For all eternity.

Convener

We stand before the Lord, the Angels, and all the Saints, with openness
and love, as they look with favor upon us.
In their presence and inspired by their example, may we receive a deep
inner knowledge of all the good we have received, so that acknowledging
this with deep and abiding gratitude, we may love and serve the Divine
Majesty in everything.
In that hope, let us recall the many benefits we have received from God
and the love with which we were created,

All

We are grateful and give thanks.

Convener

Remembering the gifts and attributes by which God shaped us,

All

We are grateful and give thanks.

Convener	Remembering the many things God has done for us or given to us in deep affection,
All	We are grateful and give thanks.
Convener	Remembering how much God has given us of what he possesses, including the Godhead's very self in Christ.
All	We are grateful and give thanks.
Convener	Let us recall the ways in which God dwells within each creature,
All	We are grateful and give thanks.
Convener	In all plants and animals, giving them sensation and life,
All	We are grateful and give thanks.
Convener	In each person upon the earth, giving understanding of creation and compassion toward others,
All	We are grateful and give thanks.
Convener	Let us recall the ways in which God works and labors on our behalf with deep love and affection,
All	We are grateful and give thanks.
Convener	Remembering that God works to sustain all of creation, guiding its ways,
All	We are grateful and give thanks.
Convener	Remembering that the Spirit shapes each of us, fulfilling our unique purposes.
All	We are grateful and give thanks.
Convener	Let us recall that every gift descends from God,
All	We are grateful and give thanks.
Convener	That our limited powers descend from God's supreme and infinite power,
All	We are grateful and give thanks.
Convener	That every virtue descends from God's supreme and infinite virtue,

All We are grateful and give thanks.

Convener Just as the rays of light descend from the sun,

All And as the waters flow from their fountains. Amen.

Choir "Sing, My Tongue"

Sing, my tongue, how glorious battle
Glorious victory became
And above the cross, his trophy
Tell the triumph and the fame
Tell how he, the Earth's Redeemer
By his death, for us o'ercame.

When at length the appointed fulness
of the sacred time was come,
he was sent, the world's Creator,
from the Father's heavenly home,
and was found in human fashion,
offspring of the virgin's womb.

Now the thirty years are ended
which on earth he willed to see,
willingly he meets his passion,
born to set his people free;
on the cross the Lamb is lifted,
there the sacrifice to be.

His the nails, the spear, the spitting
Reed and vinegar and gall:
From his patient body pierced
Blood and water streaming fall;
Earth and sea and stars and mankind
By that blood are cleansed all.

The Dreamer Now this is my life's joyous expectation
that I may seek the tree of victory
and honour [it] well
most often of all men. The desire for that is
great in my heart, and my patronage is
directed to the cross. I do not have many
powerful friends on earth, since they departed away hence
from the joys of the world, they sought the King of Glory;
now they live in the heavens with God the Father.
They dwell in glory, and each day
I look forward to the time when the cross of the Lord

that I previously saw here on the earth,
in this temporary life, will fetch me,
and will then bring me to where great bliss is,
joy in the heavens, where the Lord's people are
seated at the feast, where perpetual joy is;
then it may set me, where afterwards I might
dwell in glory, with the saints
to enjoy bliss well. May the Lord be a friend to me,
who suffered here on earth before
on the gallows-tree for men's sins;
he redeemed us and gave us life,
a heavenly home. Joy was restored
with blessings and with bliss, for those who endured the fire there.
The Son was triumphant on that expedition,
mighty and successful, when he came with the multitude,
the host of souls, into God's kingdom.

Convener From the depths of our longings, may our lives' joyous expectation be
that we may seek the tree of victory and honor it.

May this desire be great in our hearts and may we look forward to the
time when the cross of the Lord we previously saw here on the earth, in
this temporary life, will fetch us, and will then bring us to where great
bliss is, joy in the heavens, where the Lord's people are seated at the
feast, where perpetual joy is; then it may set us, where afterwards we
might dwell in glory, with the saints to enjoy bliss well.

May the Lord be a friend to us, he who suffered here on earth before on
the gallows-tree for men's sins; he who redeemed us and gave us life, a
heavenly home. Through his suffering on this cross, joy was restored.

All We are grateful and give thanks.

Convener Praise and honor to the Father,
praise and honor to the Son,
praise and honor to the Spirit,

All Ever three and ever One;
One in might, and one in glory. Amen.

Choir "Faithful Cross" (reprise)

Faithful Cross, above all other,
one and only noble Tree,
none in foliage, none in blossom,
none in fruit thy peer may be;
sweet the wood, and sweet the iron,

and thy load, most sweet is he.

Bend, O lofty Tree, thy branches,
thy too rigid sinews bend;
and awhile the stubborn hardness,
which thy birth bestowed, suspend;
and the limbs of heaven's high Monarch
gently on thine arms extend.

Thou alone wast counted worthy
this world's Ransom to sustain,
that a shipwrecked race for ever
might a port of refuge gain,
with the sacred Blood anointed
of the Lamb for sinners slain.

Praise and honor to the Father,
praise and honor to the Son,
praise and honor to the Spirit,
ever Three and ever One:
one in might, and One in glory,
while eternal ages run.

Acknowledgements

This service uses readings from the King James Version Bible.

The following hymns are used in "Dreaming of the Holy Rood":

- "Faithful Cross". Words by Venantius Fortunatus, translated by J. M. Neale. Music: Picardy (French Traditional)
- "From God the Father He Proceeds" ("Come, Thou Redeemer of the Earth", verses 5-8). Words by Saint Ambrose, translated by J. M. Neale. Music: Puer Nobis Nascitur (Praetorius)
- "Why, Impious Herod". Words by Caelius Sedulius, translated by J. M. Neale. Music: Agincourt (English Melody)
- "Creator of the Starry Height". Words by Venantius Fortunatus, translated by J. M. Neale. Music: Warrington (Ralph Harrison)
- "O Word of Might". Words by Saint Ambrose, translated by Daniel Joseph Donahoe. Music: O Waly Waly (English Melody)
- "Much Have Sinned in Deed and Word" ("Benign Creator of the Spheres", verses 3-5). Words by Gregory the Great, translated by Daniel Joseph Donahoe. Music: Hesperus (Henry Baker)
- "O Thou Who Seek'st the Christ to Find". Words by Prudentius, translated by Daniel Joseph Donahoe. Music: Antioch (H. Holford)
- "Sing, My Tongue". Words by Venantius Fortunatus, translated by J. M. Neale. Music: Triumph (Henry John Gauntlet)
- "Faithful Cross" - reprise ("Sing, My Tongue", verses 5-8). Words by Venantius Fortunatus, translated by J. M. Neale. Music: Picardy (French Traditional)

The excerpts from "The Dream of the Rood" spoken by the Cross and the Dreamer are from a translation by Dr. Mary Rambaran-Olm. Some selections from Cynewulf's *Christ* spoken by the Dreamer were adapted by Timothy Ray using translations in *Cynewulf's Christ: an eighth century English epic* (1892) by Israel Gollancz and *The Poems of Cynewulf* (1910) by Charles W. Kennedy.