



**“Those who do what is true come to the light”  
(Jn 3:21)**

***Reflections for Lent from the African Jesuit AIDS Network (AJAN)***

### **The shadows cannot stop this light**

*Our reflection for Good Friday is written by Fr Jean-Claude Michel SJ, assistant to the Superior of the Jesuit Region of Rwanda-Burundi and ecclesiastical assistant of the Christian Life Communities of Rwanda.*

I invite you to join me in reading the narrative of the trial and execution of Jesus of Nazareth written by his disciple John (18:1 – 19:42).

Look first of all at the group of armed men, among whom we see Judas. They are under orders; we can discern the religious leaders of Israel behind them. Will they come to the light? Will they do what is true? The man they come to arrest, Jesus, hopes with all his heart that they will, but they intend to do otherwise. Can't you see all this? Jesus asks them questions calmly, he refuses the violence of his disciple Peter, and he refers to God. How is it possible to react like this in such circumstances? The armed men are shocked. They step back but the light does not enter their heart. They remain in the shadows.

Let's move forward in this dark world. John puts the figures of Annas and Caiaphas in the spotlight, and an armed guard too. Interrogating, hitting – this is the trial! What point is there of saying anything else? The dice is cast. For us, the important thing is to look at Jesus. He doesn't defend himself, he takes the initiative by suggesting they ask the men and women who took the time to listen to him. He questions the conscience of the violent guard. Everything is transparent. Who are you, Jesus? Aren't you in the light? And yet your disciple, Peter, is wavering. He had professed his faith but today the shadows hide the light.

Not long ago, an older person came to tell me about her revolt. Apolline has AIDS, she has been reduced to poverty. No, she cannot pray to God anymore! She has broken her rosary

beads! There is no longer a way to see the light in such a reduced existence... shadows from the distant past... shadows today.

We come to Pilate. The Roman leader makes a good impression at first. He seeks to find out thing, he asks questions, he tries to understand. He appears to be a judge who will “do what is true”. And Jesus helps Pilate to take a step towards the truth: *My kingdom is not from this world... I came into the world to testify to the truth*. But the light does not enter: *what is truth?* And then the shadows lead the assault of he who is “politically obliged”, who wants to remain in the good graces of the emperor of this world. And so much the worse for the king of a Kingdom that is not of this world! Pilate caves in: he hands over Jesus to be crucified.

Paul is one of my friends. He enjoys good social standing and is well able to earn a living. But he has AIDS. He treats this condition discreetly and never talks about it. This would be a disgrace. His faith in God is firm but his religion is searching. And if Jesus asked him what he is looking for, Paul is not sure that his reply would be “light”. He is also wavering, he too is leaning on the things of this world. When, then, will he come to the light?

The scene of the crucifixion is sordid. There are brigands, executioners, a squabble about a sign, the torn clothes of the crucified one are divided up. But there is Jesus and there is a ray of light that connects him to his mother, to the other women, to John. There is no complaining, no revolt. There is terrible suffering, physical and moral, and at the heart of the suffering, some words to lighten the pain of others. Up until the end of his earthly existence, Jesus is full of attention for his mother. He wants to see his disciples grow. He has taken God’s part : he prays for his executioners, he promises a future in heaven for the brigand. No, the shadows cannot stop this light!

Robert had a bad reputation. AIDS does not spare him. When he was bedridden, some friends urged him to do “what is true” and to turn towards the light. He agreed, a priest came, and Jesus changed the heart of this dying man. Then, to the amazement of those around him, he helped him to get up. Robert broke off with his past. He knows he is fragile but he listens and prays to Jesus every day. “I asked him to give me a bit more time so that

I'll be able to give a future to my daughter, my only one!" And Jesus granted his wish. The light continues to guide him to this day.

It is finished; he gave up his spirit.

John, the disciple, did not leave immediately. He looked at the body that lay still, without breathing. And he saw that the light had not been extinguished. He received with faith the sign of water and blood. He allowed his memory to evoke the words of Jesus: "Take and drink, this is my blood; do this in memory of me."

Apolline no longer goes to Mass. Paul goes sometimes. Robert is there nearly every morning. How I wish, with Jesus, that all people with AIDS would find friends who would lead them to the light!

Two men had long hesitated to publicly take steps towards the light they had seen: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Strangely, it is at the moment when the forces of death seem to triumph that they come to the light. They are the ones who take Jesus down from the cross.

Stéphane was one of Robert's friends. He had AIDS too. He died but his last endeavours were those of a friend of Jesus. His niece testified: "If I can follow a path of deep faith now, it is thanks to my uncle Stéphane."

We can close the book of John's Gospel. He told me – and I hope he told you – that AIDS belongs to the shadows, but that Jesus lives in the heart of the shadows, and that he has the power to shine the light of love in the heart of every one who is infected. I pray to Jesus for Apolline and Paul, I turn to the intercession of Stéphane, and I gain from the indestructible hope of Robert.

Thank you, Jesus.

