Why are we here? Why are we gathered in a grand, gothic building to remember a man who died a criminal’s death 2000 years ago on the other side of the world? What on earth has that got to do with us?

I had a colleague who had an unfortunate habit of starting meetings by saying, “Why are we here?” It would always lead to an awkward, shuffling silence, in which no one had the courage or the bluntness to say, “I really have no idea, but you called the meeting and we were too polite to think of a good reason not to come.” This is a man who’d failed to learn the saying, “Never ask a question to which you might get an answer you don’t want to hear.”

So it takes courage to ask the question, “Why are we here?” We’re gathered to recall the most awful event in human history. Let’s survey the scene. Here is a naked man. He’s been beaten to pulp. He’s bleeding hand and foot. His arms are spread-eagled so he can’t fight off the flies or wipe away the sweat and the blood. He’s practically alone. He’s more or less isolated. He’s totally humiliated. It’s almost impossible to look at a picture of such agony and misery.

And at the climax of this ghastly scene, John’s gospel tells us, this man says one single word. “Finished.” Finished. Think for a moment about the host of meanings of that word. Finished. The dissertation is finally edited and handed in. Finished. The marathon is run and I’m totally done in. Finished. The relationship is over and she’s told me she doesn’t love me. Finished. The work of art is completed and ready for display. Finished. The counselling has run its course and I can face the world without fear or bitterness or anger. Finished. I’ve served my sentence and I can come out of prison. Finished. I’ve been told I’ve no longer got a job and needn’t come back to work. Finished.

Surely Jesus’ climactic words from the cross must be ironic. This isn’t the way the story was supposed to end. Remember the heavenly host of angels in the skies above Bethlehem singing of peace on earth? Surely this wasn’t the way they imagined it would all turn out. Remember the crowds on Palm Sunday waving branches and shouting Hallelujah? Surely they weren’t thinking of this apocalypse five days later. A lot of other words might capture it. Ruined, betrayed, wasted, lost, destroyed, devastated, ravaged, spoiled, wrecked... but not “finished.” What might this word “finished” mean? Let’s look a little closer. Let’s see if we can discover what is finished by Friday afternoon.

One thing that’s finished is the blond Jesus with the constant smile, the loose-fitting toga and the baby lamb constantly around his neck like a primal life-jacket. That would be the Jesus whose picture perched above my bed as a child. The one that loves the little children. There’s nothing sentimental about the cross. There’s no guitar-playing, commune-dwelling, tie-dying, knitted-yogurt-eating, country-road-singing, long-haired-lover-from Liverpool, John-Denver-bespectacled Jesus in the face of Good Friday. Jesus is mutilated. He’s taunted. He’s asphyxiated. The Jesus of our projections, the kind friend, the handsome suitor, the Mr Fixit, the husky organic farmer, the country sage, the wandering minstrel – they all die at the foot of the cross. The rose-tinted Jesus of soft-focused promotional paraphernalia is gone. Finished.

Another thing that’s finished is the conquering Jesus with the righteous fist, the Jesus whom the Crusader thought he was upholding as he smashed the head of the infidel, the Jesus whom the Inquisition thought they were promoting by torture and cruelty, the Jesus proclaimed by conquistadores with colonial mind-sets and rapacious ambitions, the Jesus that demands to seize control of the government, the Jesus that obliterates other religions from the face of the earth, the Jesus whose name is invoked to justify one race or people or gender giving themselves sanction to oppress and marginalize and laud it over others. On Good Friday Jesus
doesn’t conquer. He’s humiliated. He’s defeated. He’s dragged through the streets like a slave or a dog. The Jesus that gives credibility to human power-grabs is gone. Finished.

And that’s by no means all. The Jesus that makes for good citizenship and stable social relations is finished too. Jesus died a criminal’s death. We can plead his innocence as long as we like, but in the eyes of the Sanhedrin he was acting as if he was the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who was bringing Israel’s long exile to an end. And that meant he had to die. And in the eyes of the Romans he was a rabble-rouser and a potential king, and that made him guilty of a capital crime. Jesus was a good citizen of the kingdom of heaven, but not a very reliable citizen of Rome. So the meek Jesus that believes in law and order, the mild Jesus that instructs children to be good and kind and to obey their parents, the Jesus that doesn’t want to rock the political boat or disturb the neighbors – that Jesus dies in the face of the cross. That Jesus is finished.

And what about the Jesus of a mathematical equation – the Jesus that says, “Take one drop of total human depravity, add one pinch of utter divine grace, mix with one broken law and blend in one innocent death, and then subtract one angry devil”? That Jesus, who seems subject to some extraneous logic invisible to the eyes of the disciples but obvious to the well-informed cosmic legal historian, that Jesus disintegrates in the face of the circumstantial detail of the cross. If Jesus were simply a component in a mathematical equation or legal formula that got us off the devil’s hook, then why would the gospels tell us so much about the disciples who deserted him, the women who followed him, the mother who loved him, the sinners he forgave, the sick he healed, the poor he accompanied, the blind he led? By the time we get to the cross the gospels have shown us enough about Jesus not just to show us how much he loves us but to make us love him. You don’t love a formula or an equation. The cross shows us not forensic symmetry but wondrous love. The Jesus of the divine bargain is finished.

And then there’s the Jesus that watches idly by while earthquakes destroy countries, while AIDS afflicts a generation, while civil war becomes a way of life across the world, while loved ones develop cancer, while drought afflicts continents, while hurricanes and tsunamis wreck households and livelihoods and cities. Nero watched from afar and fiddled while Rome burned; but Jesus isn’t looking idly through some heavenly telescope. Jesus is suffering an agony as bad as any known to human experience. Jesus isn’t tucked up in the sky, peering down from a safe distance: he’s in the middle of a human train-wreck, the glass and wheels and rails and twisted metal all contorting his body and piercing his soul. If you ever look up to the sky and shout “Oh God, why?” you’re looking in the wrong place. You need to be looking into the face of the crucified Jesus. That distant remote-control God has got nothing to do with Christianity. In the face of Good Friday, that Jesus is finished.

And here’s a painful one. The Jesus that belongs to the church, the Jesus that gives an affirming thumbs-up to everything Christians set out to do, the Jesus that makes a congregation a circle of holiness and a cradle of wholesomeness – that Jesus withers in the face of the cross. It’s not clear when the church begins. Maybe when Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom. Maybe when Jesus says to Peter, “Feed my Sheep.” Maybe when Jesus breathes on the disciples and says “I send you.” Maybe when the Holy Spirit comes down at Pentecost. But a good candidate for the beginning of the church is right here at the cross, when Jesus hands his mother over to the care of the beloved disciple. You can see Mary representing Israel and the beloved disciple representing the church, and Jesus’ instructions portraying the inextricable destiny of the two. Not a glamorous scene, is it? This is two fragile figures amid a vista of apocalyptic devastation. Not exactly a mega-church bent on growth. Lends a whole new irony to Jesus’ words, “Where two or three are gathered, I am with them,” doesn’t it? In the face of the cross, there’s no place for the self-congratulatory church that’s holier than God. There’s only a place for church that looks like Jesus. Any other church is like any other Jesus. It’s finished.

But here’s the most important one of all. The cross confronts us with the fragility of Jesus. He’s no superman who leaps down and says, “Only joking!” He suffers to the end. We wonder how this awful spectacle can possibly be necessary for our salvation. We’re supposed to wonder that. We wonder whether this tiny, broken, wasted body can possibly be the body of God. We’re supposed to wonder that. We wonder how any
joy, any hope, any glory can possibly emerge from this hideous catastrophe. We’re supposed to wonder that. We wonder why God doesn’t utterly reject us after we’ve shown the very worst that we can do. We’re supposed to wonder that. All of those wonderings should be part of our faith, our imagination, our daily prayer and our compassionate hearts. But for all our wondering and pondering, one thing is utterly clear. When we see the pain, when we feel the grief, when we look upon the loneliness, when we touch the wounds, when we hear the cries, we know, we know that God will go to any lengths for us, God will never be separated from us, that loving us is written into God’s DNA, that there’s no part of God that has any desire to be except to be with us, that Jesus is the embodiment of the way God’s destiny is wrapped up in us forever. Any other notion of God, any other speculation about God’s wishes, any other idea about what lies at the heart of God is gone. Over. Dispelled. Finished.

Jesus’ final words: “Finished.” His life is finished. His ministry’s finished. The scriptures are finished. The reconciliation of God and creation is finished. And a host of misconceptions are dispatched at the same time. Jesus isn’t a cozy companion. He’s not a triumphalist conqueror. He’s not a law-abiding do-gooder. He’s not legal formula. He’s not a heartless onlooker. He’s not a pretext for Christian self-satisfaction. All those idolatries are finished. They’re snuffed out like a line of candles, one by one. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished.

Everything’s finished. Everything’s desolate. Everything’s laid waste. Everything’s lost, except the heart of God laid bare. And if we’re not seduced by a comforting savior, if we’re not mesmerized by a merciless hero, if we’re not domesticated by a model citizen, if we’re not obsessed by a mathematical equation, if we’re not alienated by a distant deity, if we haven’t fled from the cross like most of the church for most of its history, we might just get close enough to glimpse that sacred heart laid bare. And we might just get to read what’s written on that heart, pierced and finished from love of us. And we might just believe these words we see written there: “I swear to you our time has just begun.”