

A VIGIL LITURGY FOR THE WORLDWIDE ABOLITION OF THE DEATH PENALTY

Iona Abbey, 1999

Helen Boothroyd and Neil Paynter

We believe that use of the death penalty is the ultimate violation of human rights, and is directly contrary to the will and purposes of God. We want to see all people of faith join together to speak out against this planned and ritualised killing by the state, wherever it still takes place.

The intention of this act of worship is to resonate with vigils held by campaigners for the abolition of the death penalty outside prisons in the United States when an execution is taking place inside.

Small unlit hand-held candles are placed on each seat before the service begins.

Reading: The last hours of James Terry Roach

James Terry Roach was executed in South Carolina on 10th January 1986. In 1977, when he was 17 years old, he had pleaded guilty to the murders of two teenagers and to additional charges, including sexual assault and kidnapping. He was sentenced to death despite a finding by the trial judge that he had acted under the domination of an older man, was mentally retarded and had a personality disorder.

One of his lawyers stayed with him on the night of his execution and gave the following account of those last hours:

'Although Terry was twenty-five years old by the time of his death, he seemed very childlike. In general, his demeanour and his reactions to the people around him appeared to me to comport with the finding, made at his last psychological evaluation, that his IQ was 70 – a score which placed his intellectual functioning at about the level of a twelve year old child. When his family minister showed him some prayers from the Bible that they would read together, Terry asked him which ones he thought would be especially likely to help him into heaven: his questions about this seemed based on the childish assumption that one prayer was likely to work better than another, and that he just needed some advice about which ones would work best.

'Terry was a very passive young man, and that showed all through the night. Although he was obviously very frightened, he was as cooperative as possible with the guards, and he tried to pretend that all of the ritual preparation – the shaving of his head and right leg, the prolonged rubbing in of electrical conducting gel – was all a normal sort of thing to have happen. He wanted the approval of those around him, and he seemed well aware that this night he could gain everyone's approval by being

brave and keeping his fear at bay. Still, when the warden appeared in the cell door at 5.00 a.m. and read the death warrant, while Terry stood, each wrist immobilized in a manacle, known as a claw, his left leg began to shake in large, involuntary movements.

'After that, everything happened quickly. I walked to the chair with him, and talked to him as much as I could. After he had read his final statement we had a couple of last words. I left him and walked to the witness area, where I gave him a thumbs-up sign. He signaled back with his fingers, as much as the straps permitted.

'A few seconds later the current hit. Terry's body snapped back and held frozen for the whole time that the current ran through his body. After a few seconds, steam began to rise from his body, and the skin on his thigh just above the electrode began to distend and blister. His fists were clenched and very white. His body slumped when the current was turned off, and jerked erect again when it was resumed. When he was declared dead, several guards wrestled his body out of the chair and onto a stretcher, while taking care to conceal his face (no longer covered by the mask) from the view of the witnesses and me by covering it with a sheet.

'I left the death house at about this time in the company of the warden. As we stepped out of the building, I heard the whoops of a crowd of about 150 or 200 demonstrators who had apparently come to celebrate the execution, yelling and cheering outside the prison gates.'

Chant: Goodness is stronger than evil (*sung three times by all*)

Goodness is stronger than evil;
 love is stronger than hate;
 light is stronger than darkness;
 life is stronger than death.
 Victory is ours, victory is ours
 through him who loved us. (LAA, TIOAU)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Scriptural litany (*based on Matthew 26 and 27 and John 18 and 19*)

Voice 1: The soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people. Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I

said to them; they know what I said.' When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?' Jesus answered, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?' Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Voice 2: Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, the 76-year-old leader of the Republican Brothers Movement in the Sudan, was arrested in January 1985. The movement advocated a new approach to Islam and had engaged in non-violent political activities. Mahmoud was charged with undermining or subverting the constitution, a capital offence. He admitted distributing leaflets calling for the repeal of Islamic laws, appealing for a peaceful solution to the conflict in southern Sudan and advocating an Islamic revival. In one day he was found guilty of subversion and sentenced to death. The Court of Appeal confirmed the sentence, ruling that he was also guilty of heresy by advocating an unacceptable form of Islam. The court gave Mahmoud one month in which to repent or die. President Nimeiri confirmed the sentence and cut the deadline for repentance to 3 days. Mahmoud refused to repent and was hanged before a large crowd.

A kyrie is sung by all, during which a lighted candle is carried from the back and placed on the front table.

Voice 1: Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward.

Voice 2: Eighteen-year-old Edward Johnson was arrested in Mississippi in 1979 for the murder of a white police officer. Edward was black. The jury who tried him had ten white members but only two black in a county with a 45% black population. Edward had been put on an identity parade in front of the one eyewitness, a white woman. The woman said that she had known Edward all his life and he was not the murderer. She said the murderer was heavily built with a full beard. Edward was slim and had never had a beard. Two days later Edward was rearrested and taken by police to some woods. He later testified that they threatened to shoot him unless he confessed to the murder. So he signed the confession. He didn't see a lawyer until he had been brought to court to be charged. Edward recanted his confession at the first chance. However, the eyewitness changed her story on hearing of his confession and identified him as the killer. Edward was convicted and

sentenced to death. Before his trial Edward had been offered a life sentence in exchange for a guilty plea. Edward refused. He was executed in a gas chamber in 1986. A week after the execution his lawyer located a woman whom Edward had always claimed he had been with in a pool hall when the crime was committed. She said that she had gone to the courthouse to testify for him during the trial but was told by a police officer to go home and mind her own business.

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Voice 1: The high priest stood up and said, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?' But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so.' Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves death.' Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, 'Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?'

Voice 2: Dante Piandong, Archie Buian and Jesus Morillos were arrested in the Philippines in 1994, accused of shooting a policeman. They maintained their innocence. In police custody they were beaten, given electric shocks and forced to lie with towels over their faces, which were then doused with water. They testified about their torture during the trial but the judge made only passing reference to it – and then sentenced them to death. They were executed by lethal injection in 1999, when the use of the death penalty was recommenced in the Philippines after 23 years of absence.

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Voice 1: Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do

you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?' After he had said this he went out to the Jews again and told them, 'I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' They shouted in reply: 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Voice 2: Mukobo Putu was arrested in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in connection with killings in Kinshasa in July 1998. Less than 3 weeks later he was sentenced to death by the Military Order Court on charges of murder and plotting to overthrow the president. Facing imminent execution his only recourse was to presidential grace, which was refused. However, Amnesty International organised a worldwide appeal, and due to the huge volume of letters his life was spared.

A kyrie is sung by all, during which a lighted candle is carried from the back and placed on the front table.

Voice 1: Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!'

Voice 2: In 1979 John Spenkelink was executed in Florida's electric chair. Twenty-four hours before his execution these words began a morning radio show in Florida: 'Hey, Spenkelink, you listening this morning? Spenkelink? Just think, in just over twenty-four hours, Spenkelink, you're going to fry, maggot!

You're going to fry! And there's nothing those bleeding hearts can do to save you. Get used to the sound, Spengelink, think of yourself convulsing.'

A kyrie is sung by all, during which a lighted candle is carried from the back and placed on the front table.

Voice 1: Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.' So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two criminals, one on either side, with Jesus between them.

Voice 2: In country after country it is the most vulnerable members of society, the poorest or otherwise disadvantaged, the least able to defend themselves, who are executed. In 1988 Amnesty International analysed the circumstances of more than 120 prisoners on death row in Jamaica. Most of them came from the very poorest sectors of the community. In the United States, 82 per cent of prisoners executed between 1977 and the end of 1998 were convicted of the murder of a white person, even though black and white people are the victims of homicide in almost equal numbers nationwide. A black person convicted of killing a white person in the United States is eleven times more likely to be condemned to death than a white person convicted of killing a black person.

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Voice 1: Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews'. Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.

Voice 2: In September 1983 there was a mass public execution in Zhengzhou, China. About a million people were crowded along the pavements to watch the parade of the condemned. Forty-five flatbed trucks, one after another, rolled along the roads at no more than five miles an hour. At the front of each truck bed, just behind the cab, stood a condemned man bound with heavy rope holding in place a tall narrow sign. On the top half of each sign was an accusation: 'Thief' 'Murderer' 'Rapist'. On the bottom half was the accused's name, marked through with a large red X.

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Voice 1: From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

The words 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' are sung solo at the point they appear in this reading. At the end of this reading the same soloist sings a final commendation, such as is sung towards the end of a requiem mass.

Voice 2: A Thai construction worker hanged in Kuwait in 1981 took more than nine minutes to die because his slight weight did not suffice to break his neck. He died of strangulation. As he stood on the gallows beforehand facing the crowd, the Arab Times reported: 'For a moment his face expressed all the incomprehension, anguish and desperation.'

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Voice 1: Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.

Voice 2: Stoning to death is one of the methods of execution practised in Iran. The procedure is designed to ensure that death is lingering. An eyewitness to a stoning reported: 'The lorry deposited a large number of stones and pebbles beside the waste ground, and then two women were led to the spot wearing white and with sacks over their heads. They were enveloped in a shower of stones and transformed into two red sacks. The wounded

women fell to the ground and Revolutionary Guards smashed their heads in with a shovel to make sure that they were dead.'

A kyrie is sung by all, during which a lighted candle is carried from the back and placed on the front table.

Solo: Were you there when they crucified my Lord? (verses 1–3, SOGP)

Peter's denial: A litany of responsibility (*based on Matthew 26:69–75*)

The tune of 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?' continues to be played while the litany of responsibility is read slowly.

Voice 1: I've got enough to think about in my own life. I don't want to know.

Voice 2: And Peter said, 'I don't know what you are talking about.'

Voice 1: I think the death penalty is a bad thing but it doesn't happen in Britain any more – so it's not my responsibility.

Voice 2: 'I don't know the man.'

Voice 1: There's nothing I can do to influence governments in other countries to abolish the death penalty.

Voice 2: 'I don't know the man!'

Solo: Were you there when they crucified my Lord? (verse 4, SOGP)

Reflection: Taking action

There is something we can do to help bring about the abolition of the death penalty worldwide. Amnesty International campaigns tirelessly for worldwide abolition and petitions governments on specific cases.

Amnesty International needs new members both to give financial support and to write letters on individual cases and on the issue of abolition. You are invited to consider joining them if you are not already a member. (*The attention of the congregation is drawn to display materials and contact details for Amnesty International: Amnesty International UK, The Human Rights Action Centre, 17-25 New Inn Yard, London EC2A 3EA. Tel. 020 7033 1500. www.amnesty.org.uk*)

Invitation to gather

The congregation are invited to gather around the lighted candles as all again sing repeatedly the chant 'Goodness is stronger than evil'. They bring with them the small candle that they found on their seat at the beginning of the service. The first people to reach the front table light their candles from the candles burning there. The light is then passed from neigh-

bour to neighbour until all hold a lit candle. Attention is drawn to the similarity of this gathering to vigils held outside prisons in the United States each time an execution takes place.

The case for abolition

Voice 1: The worldwide movement for abolition is growing. In recent years, an average of three countries a year have abolished the death penalty. But it is still retained in more than 80 countries. Well over a thousand executions are documented by Amnesty International each year; the true figures are certainly higher.

Voice 2: There is no evidence that the death penalty has any special effect in reducing crime or violence. It is used unequally against the poor and minority groups. It is often used as a tool of political repression. It cannot be reversed. Many innocent people have been executed. Mistakes can never be corrected. It is cruel, calculated, cold-blooded killing.

Voice 1: In 2000 the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan received a petition for a moratorium on the death penalty signed by more than three million people around the world. In accepting it he said: 'The forfeiture of life is too absolute, too irreversible, for one human being to inflict on another, even when backed by legal process. Let the states that still use the death penalty stay their hand lest in time to come they look back with remorse knowing it is too late to redeem their grievous mistake.'

Voice 2: Hearts and minds can be changed. Governor George Ryan in declaring a moratorium in Illinois, USA, in 2000 said: 'I supported the death penalty, I voted for the death penalty. But when I was the last person between the prisoner and his execution, I might as well have been pulling the switch, and no human being should be asked to do that.' The day before he ended his term as governor, George Ryan gave clemency to all 142 people on death row. He now travels all over the world campaigning for a moratorium on the death penalty.

A prayer for change and absolution

Thus is our God –
 blessed may he be –
 who has given us to know how he calls at every moment
 and at every moment is ready to receive us,
 no matter the crimes we have committed.

And so, brothers and sisters ...
... those who have brought tears to so many homes,
those who have stained themselves
with the blood of so many murders,
those who have hands soiled with tortures,
those who have calloused their consciences,
who are unmoved
to see under their boots a person abased,
suffering, perhaps ready to die.
To all of them I say:
No matter your crimes.
They are ugly and horrible,
and you have abased the highest dignity
of a human person,
but God calls you and forgives you ...
... in heaven there are no criminals.
The greatest criminal, once he has repented of his sins,
is now a child of God.

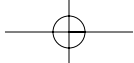
Archbishop Oscar Romero

Closing affirmation (*said by all*)

God, giver of all life
We believe that no person has the right to take away
your gift of life from another person,
that you do not give such authority
to any government or judge.

We believe in a God of compassion
not a God of blood.
A God of love and mercy
not a God who metes out hurt for hurt, pain for pain,
torture for torture, death for death.

We believe in Jesus Christ
and that the message of Christ
is a message of compassion.
A message to disarm our enemies without
humiliating and destroying them.

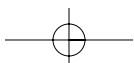
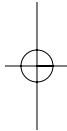
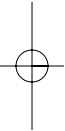


We believe that the movement to abolish the death penalty
needs the help of religious communities everywhere
because the heart of religion is about
compassion, human rights
and the inherent dignity of each person
made in the image of God.

We affirm our part in that movement.
We will seek for the worldwide abolition of the death penalty.

Chant: Goodness is stronger than evil

Sung repeatedly as the congregation process out carrying their lighted candles.



A vigil liturgy for the worldwide abolition of the death penalty

'The last hours of James Terry Roach' – from *When The State Kills...The death penalty v. human rights*, Amnesty International, 1989. Used with permission of Amnesty International.

Goodness is stronger than evil – „ 1995 by Desmond Tutu, from *African Prayer Book*, Doubleday. Used by permission of Lynn C. Franklin Associates Ltd., New York and Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.

Bible readings – from the New Revised Standard Version.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha story – information from *When The State Kills...The death penalty v. human rights*, Amnesty International, 1989. Used with permission of Amnesty International.

Edward Johnson story – information from *When The State Kills...The death penalty v. human rights*, Amnesty International, 1989. Used with permission of Amnesty International.

Dante Piandong, Archie Buian and Jesus Morallos stories – information from Amnesty International website: www.amnesty.org Used with permission of Amnesty International.

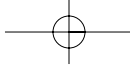
Mukobo Putu story – information from Amnesty International website: www.amnesty.org Used with permission of Amnesty International.

John Spenkelink story – from *When The State Kills...The death penalty v. human rights*, Amnesty International, 1989. Used with permission of Amnesty International.

'In country after country' quote – information from '*When The State Kills...The death penalty v. human rights*', Amnesty International 1989, and '*Killing With Prejudice: Race and death penalty in the USA*, Amnesty International 1999. Both used with permission of Amnesty International.

Mass public execution in Zhengzhou report – information from '*When The State Kills...The death penalty v. human rights*', Amnesty International 1989. Used with permission of Amnesty International.

Thai construction worker story – from *When The State Kills...The death penalty v. human rights*, Amnesty International, 1989. Used with permission of Amnesty International.



380 *Holy Ground*

Stoning to death report – from *When The State Kills...The death penalty v. human rights*, Amnesty International, 1989. Used with permission of Amnesty International.

The case for abolition – information from *Death Penalty Information Pack*, Amnesty International UK, 2001. Used with permission of Amnesty International.

‘The forfeiture of life is too absolute ...’ quote – from *Death Penalty News & Updates*: <http://people.smu.edu/rhalperi/> Used with permission of Rick Halperin.

‘I supported the death penalty ...’ quote – from *Death Penalty Information Pack*, Amnesty International UK, 2001. Used with permission of Amnesty International.

‘Thus is our God’ (prayer for change and absolution) – adapted from words of Oscar Romero, 24th September 1978, ‘God is kind’, from *The Violence Of Love*, Fr James Brockman SJ, Orbis Books, 2004, by arrangement with Plough Publishing and The Society of Jesus. Used with permission of the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus and Orbis Books.

‘God giver of all life’ (affirmation) – adapted from and inspired by some words of Helen Prejean in her book *Dead Man Walking*, © Helen Prejean, Fount, an imprint of Harper Collins, first published 1993, ISBN 000628003X. Used with permission of Helen Prejean. Adapted by Neil Paynter.