

Palm Sunday 2020.

This Sunday marks the start of Holy Week, that time when we retell the story of the last days of Jesus of Nazareth, of his triumphal arrival into Jerusalem, his final instructions to his disciples, his betrayal, torture and execution. In pre Covid 19 days our Sunday would have started outside the church with a blessing of palms and palm crosses, a reading of the palm gospel, and a procession into the church. Our gospel for the day is the Passion in its entirety and I would have given a very short address.

In these days of isolation the full drama of this day is hard to convey. For me there is always a stark contrast between the festive nature of the palm procession with the moment when, in our dramatic presentation of the Passion, the congregation shouts out “CRUCIFY HIM.” To me it is a great reminder of how we as church do processions very well and yet fall away from our Lord and his teachings when the crowd pressure is too great.

In this secular world in which we live it is not considered an asset to be a person who lives and proclaims the Gospel, indeed we like the early disciples are considered with suspicion, scepticism or derision. There is indeed safety in numbers when we march in parades and yet so often we become like Peter who, when asked if he was a disciple of Jesus, denied him three times.

By the time we get to Easter Eve one could be forgiven for thinking that Jesus sacrifice and suffering was pointless. It is only when we hear the story of the open tomb that it starts to make sense. But couldn't God have achieved the same end without allowing his Son to suffer so much?

There have been so many times in my life when I try to reconcile my loving God with the experience of someone suffering the pain of terminal cancer. Seeing someone that you love, your faithful organist or the husband of one of your parish councillors, or even someone who until you are called to the hospital was a complete stranger and yet then becomes a brother or sister to you lying in bed suffering and dying calls me back to Holy Week.

In these circumstances I am reminded that there is no human experience that God has not experienced firsthand. The joy of friendship and love, sharing a meal and stories, but also the pain of betrayal and torture and execution. Jesus cries out in anguish, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” Those words of the 22nd psalm continue – “Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? I cry to you by day, but you do not answer, and by night but find no rest.”

I would recommend that you read this week's essay from Debie Thomas on Journey with Jesus. She begins:

Some years ago, when my daughter was in middle school, she became anorexic. During the worst of her illness, she had to be hospitalized for both her physical and mental health. On the morning of her admission, after the doctors explained that I would not be able to see my depressed, malnourished child for several days, I walked out of the hospital, got into my car, and started driving without aim or purpose.

I ended up in the parking lot of a Catholic gift shop I'd never seen before. Shaking, I walked in and wandered the aisles until a woman with a kind face approached me. "Can I help you find anything?" she asked. I burst into tears and said nothing. She gave me a hug and said, "Wait here." After disappearing for a minute, she returned with a small, velvet box. Inside it was a tiny silver crucifix on a chain. Pressing the necklace into my hands, she said, "Hold this. Keep it with you. Only a suffering God can help."

*I've never forgotten the line (which I later learned was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's), and I've been thinking about it pretty much nonstop since the coronavirus pandemic began. **Only a suffering God can help.***

... Jesus was and is many things: teacher, healer, companion, and Lord, and it is essential that we experience him in all of these ways. But the center, the heart of who he is, is revealed at the cross. Only a suffering God can help. Only a suffering God can help us bear our own burdens. Only a suffering God can show us the Way and lead us home. Only a suffering God can teach us how to love.

As Christians, we love because the cross draws us towards love — its power is as compelling as it is mysterious. The cross pulls us towards God and towards each other, a vast and complicated gathering place. Whether or not we want to see Jesus shamed and wounded, here he is, drawing us closer and closer to the darkness where light dwells. This is the solid ground we stand on. Stark, holy, brutal, and beautiful.

To take up a cross as Jesus does is to stand, always, in the hot white center of the world's pain. Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and then sidle away, but to dwell there. To identify ourselves wholly with those who are aching, weeping, screaming, and dying. Taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us, and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating that pain — no matter what it costs.

This Sunday, if we read the longer reading, the story concluded with the sealing of the tomb and the feeling of despair. We have this week to examine in detail the events that led up to this point, to examine our own lives as disciples and to identify with those in the story. Very few would confess to identifying with Judas Iscariot but I know that I have great empathy with the figure of Peter.

"Heavenly Father, in this week to come and always, guide our steps as we walk in the footsteps of your Son. Help us to always to be aware of your presence and love, even when your voice seems silent. Help us to grown in that love to serve you in the world as true disciples, even and especially when our faith becomes a source of ridicule and persecution."

Amen.