

Good Friday 2023

The suffering of God on the cross

Quite a few years ago, now, I often used to spend the morning of Good Friday helping to lead the Good Friday holiday club that Kenwyn Church ran then for young families. My main role was to tell the Easter story from the last supper to the empty tomb, which I did by using a range of props together with the building and its surrounds to illustrate some of the action of the story. I usually started by telling the story of the last supper, inviting the children to sit round the altar and sharing a bread roll and a jug of ribena with them. One year, I was digging around in the vestry at Kenwyn and I came across a remarkable passiontide altar-frontal that had been made by the sisters at Epiphany House for Kenwyn church. It was created out of sackcloth with a range of implements from the crucifixion story appliqued onto it in red. There was the cup of wine and the dice, the whip used to flog Jesus, a ladder, the nails, rope and of course the crown of thorns. It seemed to me to offer many possibilities as a prop to help me tell the story for the children, so we put it on the altar and I began to use it to tell the easter story.

But as soon as I began to comment to the children on the various items that they were looking at, I realised my mistake. You can't point to nails being used to pin a person to cross or the crown of thorns that was put on Jesus' head without it all becoming all too real. Of course, as soon as I noticed the horror on the children's faces I realised my mistake and moved the story onto safer ground. But I never used that altar frontal as a prop again – though I did continue to tell the story to groups of children in a similar way for several years.

Even more years ago, I was once at a Christian conference at St John's college in Nottingham. During some group work we were offered a range of pictures of artwork depicting the crucifixion and my group was offered a picture of a 1975 sculpture called 'the tortured Christ' by the Brazilian artist Guido Rocha. It is an horrific picture of a human being in torment on a cross, so much so, indeed, that the group I was part of was offered the possibility of rejecting that picture and choosing something else if we found Rocha's work too upsetting. I was the only one of the group who wanted to keep the image and talk about it (which we did actually do) – because for me it was and remains one of the most powerful images I have ever seen depicting the reality and meaning of what we are gathered here today to remember. It is without a doubt an extremely disturbing work of art, but at the same time, it is a fearsomely accurate depiction, it always seems to me, of what my sin and the sin of the world does to God.

Here, in the tortured person of Christ is the agony of God over the sin of world ... here, in starkly uncompromising terms is the almost unbearable grief of God

at what humanity has done in and to the world that God has loved into creation – and of all the days in the Christian year today is surely the day when we are called to look on that reality squarely and with honesty and realism.

Indeed, we look away at our peril. Of course, I made a mistake in asking the children at the holiday club to look too closely at the reality of a crucifixion – it was inappropriate to their level of maturity – but I *would* ask the same group of adults at the conference discussion group to confront the tortured Christ again if the situation arose. It is too easy for us to choose to look at the anodyne peaceful images that so much crucifixion art, especially from the Middle Ages, portrays – and to turn away from the reality of what really happened to Jesus – to God – on that day. It is too easy for us to slip over Good Friday and go straight to the happy ending (or new beginning) of Easter Sunday and thus to avoid the painful, difficult parts of our Christian faith – but we do our suffering world, and our long-suffering God, a great disservice if we do that.

Because if we turn away from, or gloss over, the torment of the cross, we implicitly give ourselves permission to turn away from, or gloss over, the torment of so much of the world that we live in. The crucifixion of the Christ was hot, dirty, painful and bloody (and I use the word deliberately in its proper sense here). To perform such an act of cruelty – everyday work for the Roman soldiers who carried it out – debased and hardened their souls, and those who were forced to watch were torn apart in their inmost beings by the depths to which human beings could sink. Here in that brutal act of state-sanctioned murder the sin of all the world was brought into focus for that time and for all time. And until the day when all sin, all cruelty and all suffering is no more, God calls us to look with honesty at what went on then – and thus at what is still going on now.

If we look away from or somehow forget through familiarity, the reality of what went on in Jerusalem on the first Good Friday, it makes it too easy for us to look away also from the barbarism, oppression and injustice still with us in today's world. It makes it too easy for us to look away from the injustice of Putin's war in Ukraine, or the oppression of women in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, or the armed criminal gangs of drug dealers across the world – including in this country – who enslave millions in life-long misery. It makes it too easy to look away from the selfishness of the rich (some of whom might even be us) who continue to pour poisonous fumes into the atmosphere resulting in the starvation of millions of human beings and the deaths of untold numbers of God's precious creatures across the world.

Every single one of them hangs on the cross with Jesus. And God is in torment with them on the cross as his love is torn apart like the veil in the temple, as he looks on the world that he has loved into being in anguish.

God, in his faithfulness, never looks away. And on this day of all days, we also are called to look and not to turn away, to face honestly everything that is going on in the world and to keep faith with those who suffer today.

One of the difficulties for us, as 21st century western people, in looking and not turning away is that we are brought up, most of us, in a very 'can do' culture. As we look at what is happening in the world around us, if there is something we can do to help fix it, we often do. But if it is something we can't fix, it often seems that the sensible thing to do is to turn away, to avoid looking too closely, to spare ourselves from the frustration and pain of being unable to do anything about the suffering of another. We feel helpless and we prefer to 'look after ourselves' by simply not looking.

Today calls us not do that. Part of the story of Jesus' journey to the cross is his modelling of helplessness in the face of the cruelty meted out to him. There were those in the crowd who jeered at him – if you are the son of God, get yourself off that cross and save yourself – but he did not do that. To be sure, his helplessness was freely chosen whereas ours may not be, but the fact is that God in Jesus stayed on that cross, absorbing into himself the cruelty, wickedness and injustice of the world, sitting with and absorbing the horror and teaching us to do the same. There is a huge amount of suffering, cruelty and torment in the world that we can do nothing about, but today God invites us nevertheless to sit with him in the midst of it, to open our eyes to the full reality, and to know that through the cross Jesus is with us and we are with Jesus as the worst happens, either to us or to others.

At Christmas, we often use the name Emmanuel, God with us, for Jesus. It is perhaps a bit surprising that this is not a name that crops up very much in our liturgies at this time of the year. Because if there is anything that shows us clearly that God is indeed Emmanuel, then, now and for all time, it is surely the sight of God, nailed in anguish to the cross by my sin, by your sin and by the sin of the whole world. It is by opening our eyes on this day, to the full reality of the suffering of God that we are enabled to become the more fully aware of the extent of God's being with us – and that enables us in turn to be the more fully able to share in God's love for the world, .. and thus the more fully able to recognise the full glory of what God has done for us when we arrive at Easter morning.

Amen