

Maundy Thursday - sharing in the suffering of others

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together. Father, we come now to your word and ask as we've just sung that the mind of the Lord Jesus would be in us tonight.

! That we might love and serve and care and minister as he did in his love and grace and in the power of your spirit. Amen.

We've covered a lot of ground, haven't we, in our series on suffering. We've talked about suffering's origins, its causes, its purposes. We've thought a little about how we can walk with God through it, pray to God through it and rejoice in God through it.

Tomorrow we'll reflect on the sufferings of God as Jesus dies on the cross. And on Sunday we'll rejoice in Jesus' victory over sin and suffering. But tonight is all about getting our hands dirty and our shoulders wet as we consider what the Bible might teach us about sharing in the suffering of others.

Once again, the Lord Jesus is our teacher. As we see how he shares in the suffering of Mary and Martha who were grieving over the death of their brother Lazarus. But we'll also see that in his full humanity, even Jesus needed people to share in his suffering and sorrow with him.

[1 : 28] But before we get to the events of that first Maundy Thursday, come back with me a few months before to the village of Bethany. And let's see a little about how Jesus shares in the suffering of his friends.

Earlier on in John chapter 11, we've been told that Jesus heard of Lazarus's illness, but delayed his departure so that he wouldn't arrive until Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days.

The reason for that is obvious to us now, isn't it? We know the end of the story. Jesus was about to perform a mighty miracle to show that he really was the resurrection and the life.

But for Mary and Martha, Jesus' coming brought with a tinge of sadness, regret and even resentment. But if we can do our best to push the ultimate miracle to one side, I think there are some wonderful principles here to help us as we seek to walk alongside others.

To support those who are going through themselves times of grief and suffering, because that is what we are called to do as Christians, isn't it? We're called to weep with those who weep, mourn with those who mourn, as well as, of course, rejoicing with those who rejoice.

[2 : 44] That's what it means to be part of God's family. It's being the hands and feet of Jesus to our friends, our family and our neighbours. So how does Jesus share in their suffering?

Well, firstly, he turns up. It was a long walk. It required a great deal of effort. And Jesus was no doubt very busy doing lots of other things. The demands on his time were great.

But he made the time to go. Of course he did. He loved them. Sometimes we may not know what to say or even what we might do when we get there.

But our physical presence with those who are struggling matters. Turning up, knocking on the door, or if we are too far away, simply picking up the telephone.

Those things matter. They demonstrate our love and commitment to those who are in times of need. Jesus turned up.

[3 : 40] And we must too. Notice, secondly, how patient he was. Jesus was a wonderful talker. A great teacher. But he was also a wonderful listener.

And so here we see him letting first Martha and then Mary shape the conversation. I'm sure he knew what he wanted to say. He certainly knew what they needed to hear.

But he doesn't turn up with a long list of things to do. Quick five-point plan to help people get over grief quickly. He's patient. He gives time for silence.

For them to ask their questions. Sometimes, perhaps, we can be too quick to seize the agenda rather than listening. I know I fall into that trap often.

But Jesus here is patient. And he listens. When he does speak, he speaks the truth. There are no sugar-coated words. No glib fortune cookie wisdom.

[4 : 39] He doesn't tell them that every little thing is going to be all right. If he doesn't say, well, he had a good life, you'll get over it. His words, spoken at the right time, spoken simply and clearly, point them to real and lasting hope.

They are words that offer real, true, deep comfort. Of course, Jesus was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. So his talk of resurrection was immediate, not distant.

But talking of such things, and at the right time, do calm our fears and strengthen our souls. As Christians seeking to minister to one another in times of sorrow and suffering, that's exactly the kind of words we need to be speaking to each other.

Fourthly, he absorbs insults and slights. Grief and pain and suffering sometimes take away our politeness filter. We can sometimes find ourselves being blunt or even rude to people, saying things that other times we would have kept inside.

But notice how Jesus responds to both Martha and Mary as they get very close to blaming Jesus' tardiness for their brother's death.

[5 : 55] He doesn't respond to their anger and frustration in the same way he absorbs it. He doesn't send him running for the door. Instead, he shows the kind of love 1 Corinthians speaks of.

Love that is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, that perseveres. Lastly, we see Jesus weeping. This coming Sunday, we'll rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus, the promise of eternal life that his rising from the dead gives to all those who trust in him.

That is such a glorious hope, such good news. But it does not end grief in the here and now. When the Apostle Paul spoke of grief, he told Christians not to grieve like those who had no hope.

Grieve, yes. Weep, yes. Cry, real tears. Feel devastated and broken, yes. But not as those who have no hope. Remember, Jesus was about to raise Lazarus from the dead.

And how does he respond? With tears. Tears of empathy. By entering into the sorrow of those he loved, whose lives had been touched by death.

[7 : 09] Now, there is much more going on in Jesus' tears and being deeply moved in spirit than just that. But at the very least, Jesus is sharing in the grief and suffering with others, weeping with those who weep.

It's a good thing for us to do as well. I guess the fact that Jesus offers the perfect example comes as no real surprise, does it? But what might come as a surprise to us is that in his humanity, Jesus needed exactly the same kind of support from his disciples as he was wracked with grief and fear on the night before his own death.

I can't imagine how Jesus must have been feeling around the last supper table, knowing this was the last meal he would share with his friends. Knowing that one of them would betray him, that another would deny him, that all of them would run away.

Not only that, of course, Jesus knew what was coming the next day, didn't he? He knew he was heading to the cross and he knew all too well the level of suffering that would be coming his way.

But despite his divine character, the full measure of the Holy Spirit who was there with him, despite knowing what would happen, was not just his father's will, but his own plan, planned before the creation of the world, on that dark Maundy Thursday, Jesus found himself in need of his friends, leading his friends to come alongside him, to share in his suffering.

[8 : 45] Let me read you a couple of those verses again. Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. Notice that Jesus needs the physical presence of his disciples with him at that point.

All eleven come with him to start with. Then he takes Peter, James and John a little further into the garden. Jesus clearly needs company.

He doesn't want to go through this on his own. And if Jesus needs that, then how much more do we need the physical presence of others at times of suffering and grief or fear?

More than that, he needs spiritual encouragement, doesn't he? He's not expecting them to come up with the same kind of life-bringing words that he was able to speak to Mary and Martha.

But he does desperately want his disciples to pray for him. I wonder if you've ever thought about that. At this point in his life, Jesus needed his disciples' prayers.

[10 : 15] That's extraordinary. How much more is that true of us? And what Jesus was looking for from his friends was a sign that they really had his back, that they were really with him.

Of course, they'd eaten a good meal, no doubt drunk some nice wine. I guess their emotions and energy levels were strained after a busy and emotionally heightened week.

But at that point, Jesus needed them. He needed them to stay with him. That would be hard. It would be costly.

But ultimately, all they had to do was to stay awake. How they must have regretted that afterwards, that they could not even watch for one hour. By the time the guards had arrived, there wasn't much more the disciples could do.

The events that followed on that Maundy Thursday evening and continued during Good Friday had been divinely ordained and declared by prophets long ago.

[11 : 20] They had to happen. But I do wonder if the pain and anguish might have been easier for Jesus to bear if he had known that his disciples were close by.

That wasn't to be... Of course, in fact, the scriptures had already predicted that they would all fall away and leave him alone. But again, if Jesus needed people to be with him, to wait with him, to pray with him, how much more will that be true of us?

And in our own times of need, what do we find? We find that Jesus is the one who comforts us in the way we need comforting. We need his presence and we have his promise that we are never alone because the Holy Spirit is with us, just as he promised.

Our good shepherd walks with us through the soft green pastures and the valley of the shadow of death. That's why we need never fear. His presence, his strength, his promises, comfort and strengthen us spiritually in a way that we need others to do for us as well.

When it comes to words of encouragement, well, the scriptures are full of them. God's written word is there to strengthen our hearts, to build our courage, to ease our fears, to point us to the hope that is theirs, sorry, that is ours in Christ.

[12 : 47] And wonderfully, the Bible also tells us that right now, Jesus is praying for us, for our strengthening, for our guidance, for our joy, for us to hold on to the truth and to stand firm in our faith.

Having friends who gather around us and pray for us is wonderful. But how much more wonderful to know that our Lord Jesus is interceding for us now.

One final thing. As we'll think more about tomorrow, the Saviour who is with us by his Spirit, whose word speaks into our hearts, whose prayers encourage our faith, is a Saviour who suffered himself in every way.

And his suffering, of course, was for us. As the old hymn puts it, he took our sins and our sorrows, he made them his very own.

He bore that burden to Calvary and suffered and died alone. And he did that out of his gentle and lowly heart of love, a heart full of compassion for you and for me.

[14 : 06] And Jesus won't be put off by our doubts and frustrations, just as he wasn't put off by Mary and Martha's. And he won't be put off by our failure, as we find as Jesus ushers his disciples back into the fold after his resurrection.

And just as he was with them, was present, patient, kind, forgiving, compassionate, so Jesus will be with us. And as Jesus will be with us, so we too need to be those who are with others, walking with them through times of suffering as the Lord walks with us, weeping with those who weep, mourning with those who mourn, standing with the suffering and the broken and the grieving, living out our lives as the hands and feet and presence of Jesus.

How might we follow his example in these coming weeks? How might we take to heart the fact that Jesus needed these things, then how much more do our brothers and sisters need those from us?

who might need our prayers, our presence and our patient kindness? Who might need us to speak words of gentle, gracious hope into their ears?

Well, may the Lord direct us and use us for his glory in the service of others. Amen.