

Good Friday - reflections on the suffering of God in Jesus

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[0 : 00] But our first reading is Matthew 26, verses 47 to 56. It's on page 997 if you want to follow. While Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people.

Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them. The one I kiss is the man. Arrest him. Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, greetings, rabbi, and kissed him.

Jesus replied, do what you came for, friend. Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out, and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

Put your sword back in its place, Jesus said to him. For all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my father? And he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels.

But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way? In that hour, Jesus said to the crown, am I leading a rebellion that you have come out to me with swords and clubs to capture me?

[1 : 24] Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Our reflections this Good Friday continue our series on the Christian view of suffering, this time with a focus on the suffering of God.

For scripture tells us that we do have a saviour who is familiar with suffering. Isaiah 53 tells us that the saviour would be despised and rejected by mankind.

A man of suffering and familiar with pain. That means that as Hebrews 4 puts it, we now have a high priest who is able to empathise with our weaknesses, whether temptation or suffering.

But in what ways did our Lord Jesus suffer? In many ways, as we'll see. We'll think about Jesus' physical suffering, his emotional suffering, and his spiritual suffering.

[2 : 28] But we begin by seeing that Jesus also endured relational suffering. That is, the suffering that comes to us when those we love and trust and rely on let us down.

In the passage we've just heard, we see this happening to Jesus in three ways. With one more before our passage begins, and a fifth that follows fast on its heels.

Firstly, the failure to stay awake and pray. We spoke about this last night. But in the gospel accounts, you sent Jesus' disappointment and the disciples' guilt and shame as they fail to stand by Jesus in prayer.

It was a simple thing they were asked to do. Yet when he needed them, his friends couldn't even stay awake. Secondly, in our passage, the clear betrayal of Judas.

Matthew has told us of Judas' plans and schemes he made with the Jewish hierarchy. How he went willingly to them and asked what he would give them to hand Jesus over.

[3 : 32] Judas' motivation, it seems, was money. A bribe of 30 pieces of silver was all it took for him to turn his back on Jesus and betray him to those who wished to have him put to death.

Although Jesus knew it would happen, he had predicted as much at the Last Supper. How it must have pained him to see one of his closest friends, one he had taught and nurtured over three and a half years, give him up.

For such a small price. Then the pain of misunderstanding. At least three times Jesus had explained what must happen to him. And yet when the moment of his betrayal came, one of his

disciples, and we're not told here who it was, decided to resist God's plans with violence. If you've ever had a friend misunderstand your motives or completely ignore your wishes, you'll know how painful this can be. Jesus experienced this in the Garden of Gethsemane as well. Fourthly, desertion. The last verse in our passage sums it up bluntly, doesn't it? Then all the disciples deserted him and fled. Maybe we can understand their fear and confusion that led to them behaving like this.

[4 : 49] But the pain of being deserted is real. Some of you will know that. Having been deserted by a spouse or a good friend. Well, Jesus experienced that as well.

When the going got tough, his friends got going. And left him all alone. And although at least two of them followed on behind, skulking a little in the shadows, Peter then compounds his previous failures by his threefold denial of even knowing Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that when the cock crowed, Peter realised what he had done and went out and wept bitterly. Luke's Gospel adds the detail of Jesus looking at Peter and catching his eye. How terrible for Peter. But what pain Jesus must have felt as Peter, who had boldly declared his love for him and pledged his life for him, fell away at such a crucial time.

So as we sit and listen to the next piece of music, let's contemplate these ways in which Jesus suffered as those who loved him let him down.

[6 : 01] And perhaps we might take the time to acknowledge before the Lord our own failures to be as loyal as we should. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

They came to the place called Golgotha, which means place of the skull. There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gull, but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.

When they crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head, they placed the written charge against him.

[7 : 44] This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. For the Romans, torture was a form of religious ritual and social theatre designed to keep the people in order.

The idea was to make such an example of an opponent that nobody would consider emulating them. In this section of the story, we've heard that Jesus was surrounded by a cohort of 500 to 600 men.

He stripped and put in garments that mock his position as King of the Jews. They even gave him a crown of thorns.

Not the tame things that we get here, but Zysiphos, Spenad Christi, with thorns more than an inch and a half long that will puncture lorry tyres. They gave him a mock staff of office.

And then with the blood pouring down his face, they did mock obeisance. And having had their fun and made their point, they spat on him. They took the staff and beat him again and again.

[8 : 53] And bear in mind, he's already been scourged. He may well have broken ribs. He certainly has wounds on his back and his legs. It would have put him in hospital for months today.

We can tell how bad Jesus' condition was. As they led him away to crucify him, they grabbed Simon and forced him to carry the cross.

They wouldn't have done that if Jesus was capable in any way of carrying it. And then they led him through the crowds on the busiest streets to the place of execution.

When they got to Golgotha, they offered him wine mixed with gall. This would have been a kind of painkiller. He would have been given either to hasten his death or to help him cope with the pain.

But Jesus refused. And then he's crucified. We don't know exactly how this would have been done. In the Roman Empire, this was so common that nobody would have needed an explanation.

[10 : 04] And so Matthew doesn't give us one. But we do know that from remains found in archaeological digs, that square cut nails six or seven inches long, would probably have been hammered through a piece of wood, and then through his hands and feet.

They placed a charge sheet above his head, which said, Jesus, King of the Jews. Once he was crucified, he would have started to have problems breathing.

All of his weight would have been on his arms. And that would have stopped his diaphragm from moving properly and stopped him from breathing correctly. The only way he could breathe would have been to support his weight on his legs, which with his dehydration and blood loss and fatigue would have soon gone into spasm and cramped.

When he could no longer support his weight, his compromised breathing would have started increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in his lungs. And that would have caused fluid to start building up there.

And that, in turn, would have put a strain on his heart. In the end, he either suffocated, drowning in the poor Maria deema in his lungs, or suffered a heart attack from the pressure on his heart.

[11 : 31] And all the while, the soldiers cast lots for his clothes, and the people jeered. As King David said a thousand years before, dogs surround me.

A pack of villains encircles me. They pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display. People stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garments.

They take a seat and kickers. his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, you who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself. Come down from the cross if you are the son of God. In the same way, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. He saved others, they said, but he can't save himself.

He's the king of Israel. Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him. For he said, I am the son of God. In the same way, the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

While reflecting on the mocking of Jesus, we read of his false trial and the terrible physical treatment with the beatings and the crown of thorns. And also the spiteful mockery from the chief priests and passers-by and even the robbers who were crucified with him. Not only was the physical suffering of the most tortuous ever devised, but the emotional suffering and grief inflicted upon our Lord must have been mentally tortuous. In fact, this emotional suffering must have begun right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. When the devil mocked Jesus in the wilderness, if you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread. Mocking was the reaction of the crowd who were wailing over the death of

[14 : 59] Jairus' daughter when Jesus said, the child is not dead, but merely sleeping. We read, they laughed him to scorn.

But the child lived. Jesus predicting his mocking to his disciples when he said, they will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him and spit upon him, flog him and kill him. Our Lord's emotional suffering, his passion, the cry from Isaiah, my God, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Psalm 22.

Mockery is a horrid thing. None of us liked to be mocked, and it can have disastrous effects upon us, perhaps worse for our young people who are at the brunt of cyber-bullying.

Sticks and stones may break our bones, but names will never hurt us. Not true. We who follow Jesus are not exempt from being mocked for our faith.

We are not exempt from emotional suffering, being laughed at or scorned at and thought a little odd or narrow-minded.

[16 : 39] So how do we react when we are insulted or mocked for being a Christian? Do we pray for the blasphemers to become believers?

Do we just try to protect our own reputation? Paul claimed to be a fool for Christ's sake. Of course, we don't set out to be odd or out of step, but prepared to take our stand for Christ, for what we believe is right.

And that can be emotionally draining, but it is nothing compared to that of Christ's love and suffering for us.

And we do well to make sure that anything we do or say does not make a mockery from us of our Saviour, our Christian faith or our Church, or causes pain to our Lord in Heaven.

For it wasn't just the Romans, the soldiers or pilots or the chief priests who crucified Jesus. It was you and me.

[17 : 58] He suffered and died for all humanity in every age. He suffered for each one of us. Matthew 27, 45 to 50 From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness came over all the land.

About three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, He's calling Elijah. Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink.

The rest said, Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him. And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

Now it is finished. This is how the kingdom of God comes. How Jesus became king. In his death and desolation.

[19 : 23] Throughout Jesus' life, as we've heard, evil has done its worst. There was the poverty and homelessness of our Lord and Saviour from his birth. The threats to his life from the beginning.

Those temptations of stones into bread, magical acts, using the powers of false, manipulation celebrity. Being thought mad, misunderstood by parents and siblings.

Hated by the principalities and powers. Betrayed by one of his best friends, abandoned by the rest.

The public humiliation, mockery and jeering. The torture and the excruciating pain.

In all of this, Jesus has overcome the power of evil with the power of love. And now the ultimate agony. The bearing of the world's sin and shame.

The ultimate devastation. The loss for Jesus in time and space of his unity with his Father. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[20 : 29] The words are, from the opening of Psalm 22, The meaning for Jesus is horribly personal. Going to the core of his being. As in utter bewilderment, he cries out in the abandonment of his essential being.

He who knew through his life that I and the Father are one, is alone. As he bears the world's sin, all the world's sin, from the beginning of time and through all the ages.

The whole creation rocks in awe. Darkness comes over all the land for three hours. A supernatural event.

It could not be a natural solar eclipse if this was Passover, when there would be a full moon.

Creation rocking in awe some dread and wonder.

And prophecies of long ago coming to fulfilment. Amos recorded hundreds of years before, the Sovereign Lord declaring that in that day, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.

[21 : 39] I will make that time like morning for an only sun, and the end of it like a bitter day.

Indeed, a bitter day. The bitterest of days.

Some think Jesus is calling for Elijah to come and rescue him. A mishearing and a complete misunderstanding of Jesus, God, everything.

Jesus, in overwhelming love, is yet resolute. There is to be no escape. Continuing, yet not my will but yours be done.

Wine is offered. Is this the last cup of the Passover? It does not seem to have been drunk in the last supper.

Is it now? The last cup of the Passover is the cup of consummation of praise. This is indeed the moment of consummation of awful praise.

[22 : 40] The death of Jesus, Yeshua, the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, the King of Kings. He who filled the oceans with water. He who is the lifeblood of all creation.

The voice that called forth the dead thirsts and dies. Evil did everything it could and lost.

Now it is finished. Love wins. So come, leave all your sin and shame here at the cross with Jesus.

Forgiveness, grace, mercy are yours.

Eternal life, fullness of life are yours. The love of God is yours. Nothing but nothing can separate you from his love.

It is finished. Even in this utter desolation. Love wins. Christ is the victory. There will be resurrection. Amen.