

Meditation on the Cross for Good Friday

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

The Cross, as we picture it, is in its completed form. The upright has the Cross piece fixed to it near the top to make a shape like the lower case letter 't'. That's the Cross we see on the walls of churches, on the tops of church buildings and hanging from chains or strings round our necks. The only difference we notice is whether it is an empty Cross or a crucifix—a Cross with Jesus depicted on it.

This notion of what a Cross is meant to look like has shaped a lot of graphic art over the centuries. It's particularly shaped the way paintings, and more recently, movies about the crucifixion have shown Jesus carrying the Cross from his prison to Calvary. They tend to show him carrying the familiar small-'t'-shaped Cross over his shoulder, with the long, heavy upright dragging along behind him.

This is in spite of the fact that scholars have known and taught for a long time that it is unlikely that the real thing looked like this traditional image. What they tell us is that the upright of the Cross would probably have been at Calvary already, set in the ground and probably equipped with a winch on the top. So as Jesus walked through the streets of Jerusalem, he would have had the cross-piece lying across his shoulders, and his arms would have been lashed at the wrists to each end of it. They also tell us that he would most likely have been naked.

When you walk through the narrow stone streets of Jerusalem, particularly when they are crowded, it is clear just how vulnerable he'd have been in this position.

Onlookers were viewed with deep suspicion if they didn't throw

things at condemned prisoners, and taunt them or spit at them. The soldiers escorting a prisoner through the streets would shove their charges and bully them with that gratuitous discipline bullies like to inflict on their victims; maybe trip them over a few times along the way. If you fell with that wooden beam across the back of your neck and your arms outstretched, tied back to it, when you fell your face was driven into the road by the weight of the wood. You couldn't save yourself.

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish captured this, and also named the present experience of many of his own people, in his poem, *You are mine, with all your wounds*. He asks Jesus,

Did your feet,
dirty and swollen,
have to pick their way over these smooth stones,
covered with the usual debris
of rainwater and rubbish—
watched by some bored soldiers
who were passing the time of day?
Did your feet,
dirty and swollen,
have to take the long route
right around the road block,
picking their way
past puddles as large as lakes—
watched by some bored soldiers
who were passing the time of day?

It gives you a different perspective when you get a local person's view. It makes you see that for Mahmoud Darwish, what happened all that time ago, was as immediate for him and his friends as it is for them today; he personally knows the person it happens to. And it could just as easily be him.

The Cross says that this sort of compassion—this shared pain is deeply true of God. I remember a shocking story about a young girl who was bullied at school—bullied so hideously that

she gave up her will to live. What the Cross says is that the violation, the shame, the fear and the torture that were inflicted on that child are something that God knows from personal experience.

We know that God doesn't stop people doing terrible things to others. God has a different answer. In the way of the Cross, we find God who will never allow us to suffer alone. Where was God in that young girl's horror? Right with her; God suffered with her in her fear, her grief, even her death—as any parent would who wants to take their child's suffering on themselves instead.

On the Cross, we see God helpless; we see God who is the one who represents all of us who know pain, despair, loneliness, fear, mental breakdown, or who suffer from bullying. On the Cross, we see in God all of us whom God aches to embrace and soothe and comfort and heal.

Of course, we also see the terror; we also see the cruelty. But overriding all of it, in the Cross we see God's love that seeks to heal both perpetrator and victim. In the Cross, we see God's love, that alone can offer abundant life where otherwise there is only a way to death. Amen