

Good Friday

I find myself every Good Friday wondering, wondering what it must have felt like for those first followers of Jesus, for those first disciples, for Jesus. And then wondering how we are supposed to mark Good Friday. We hear familiar stories and readings, not just today but all through Holy Week. And then we arrive at this day when the story is bleak, and dark, and hopeless, and yet we call it Good Friday as we know, we as post-resurrection people, know it is not the end, we know that it is not hopeless and finished, but a new beginning and new life.

And that is where we differ from those first disciples. How must it have felt to see the one you had put your hopes in, the one you had begun to believe might be the one, how must it have felt to see him die?

We know the promise of Easter Sunday is new beginnings and a new hope, but the reality of Good Friday is that it doesn't always feel that way.

We know what is coming on Sunday, we know that death is not the end and hope is not lost. But the thing about the resurrection, the thing about Easter Sunday, is that it doesn't take away the events of Holy Week and Good Friday, it doesn't take away Jesus' death and pain and sadness, it doesn't take away the grief the disciples, the women, others felt as they watched their beloved die. Yes it brings a new hope and thread, a new understanding and framework, yes we know that eternity is full and good, that death has ultimately lost its sting and that one day, one day, there will be no more tears or sadness or dying, but actually the resurrection does not take away those times of life where there is pain and grief and things seem hopeless. Sometimes, just sometimes, all we can see in life is pain and sadness, pain and sadness like that felt on that first Good Friday, by John, by Mary, by Peter, by Judas and by Jesus.

We know the promise of Easter Sunday is no more pain, no more tears, no more sadness, but the reality of Good Friday is that it doesn't always feel that way.

Think of the journey that they have been on, three years with Jesus, getting to know him, developing deep friendships, giving up their old lives for this new, exciting, challenging life. Beginning to see who he was and what that might mean. Peter making declarations of Jesus as Messiah. Watching him heal and bring new life, listening to him preach and challenge and question, doing some of the things he did. And then, just last Sunday, accompanying him into Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna, full of hope that this man might be the promised one of God. What a roller coaster of excitement.

And then yesterday, Maundy Thursday, we remember Jesus eating with those friends, the disciples, others there too, as he would have done every year but here it was different. Jesus, knowing what was going to happen to him and yet being the one who is strong for his disciples when they are confused and bewildered at his words, giving and sharing even when he knows that one of them will betray him. They sit and bicker over who is the greatest, all the while missing the fact that there with them is the greatest man ever to live, the one who said in order to be great you must serve and the one who took serving to a whole new level, washing their feet, even those of his betrayer and then going to his death.

Holy Week is the point in the church calendar where we see that sometimes the joy and excitement and hope of life can go wrong, things appear to be upside down or back to front, there is confusion and misunderstanding, betrayal and denial.

And then today, the day we remember the Son of God arrested and tried and beaten and crucified, the darkest day in history. It doesn't feel right and everything they longed and hoped for, everything they enjoyed has unravelled. We can only imagine how it must have felt to those first disciples.

We know the promise of Easter Sunday is new life, life to the full, but the reality of Good Friday is that it doesn't always feel that way.

So how do we mark today? How do we grasp the hopelessness they must have felt, how do we stay in the Good Friday moment, indeed should we, or do we just leap to Sunday because we know everything will be good again?

I think we do need to stay here, we do need to ponder how those disciples must have felt, because actually for most of us, we know what it is to experience the reality of Good Friday, now perhaps more than ever as we face days, weeks, months of uncertainty, fear of a virus, isolation, lockdown. We know the reality of feeling hopelessness, feeling death, feeling like we have come to the end. Even those of us with a strong faith, question, and sometimes struggle to believe God is still present, or interested, or able to redeem and save.

What did Good Friday feel like then? Like the bubble had burst, the dream had become a nightmare, the hope was crushed and beaten and dead. We have the privilege of knowing the whole story, knowing that Good Friday can indeed be called Good because of resurrection that comes a few days later, because of God raising Jesus to new life that first Easter, but those in the story, the ones who were closest to Jesus didn't know it. All they saw was their friend, their rabbi, their beloved master and leader, the one who they had given up everything to follow, Jesus, die a terrible and painful death on a cross.

We know that the promise of Easter Sunday is good news and new life with God, but the reality of Good Friday is that it doesn't always feel like that.

We are Easter people, we are resurrection people who know the defeat of Jesus over death, we know the love and grace so freely offered, we know of forgiveness, we know of hope, we know of life, life after death and life to the full.

That is the kingdom in which we as Christians should be living and showing to others. But unless we engage with Good Friday and tomorrow, Holy Saturday, we are in danger of believing that all of that means that we never need, as Christians, to face difficult times. Being a Christian does not remove suffering or pain from our lives, it might give us a framework for it, a hope and a promise that one day things will be different but it doesn't remove it. And Good Friday is our reminder of that.

We know that the promise of Easter Sunday is abundant, freeing, full life for eternity, but the reality of Good Friday is that it doesn't always feel like that.

For those in this story, that we know so well, that we read so often, for Judas, for Peter, for the other disciples, for the women, for Jesus' mother Mary – hope had died, it felt like the end, they had not experienced the resurrection – all they knew was their grief and loss.

Even Jesus himself, who presumably had some idea of what was to come, only felt pain on Good Friday. The fact that he was the messiah, the fact that he was to be raised, didn't lessen the pain of the whip, the nails or his death. It didn't take away the feeling of utter loneliness as he cried out to God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus, on Good Friday, is not full of jollity and happy smiles, smiling through the tears of pain looking forward to Sunday, but a God who is suffering to the extreme, who faces the depths as well as the heights, who feels all alone and like his father has abandoned him and here on Good Friday we see that at its most obvious.

Good Friday brought real pain and suffering to those involved. Yes it was part of a bigger story but that doesn't lessen the pain for the disciples or for Jesus. The temptation for us, as Christians, is to feel in suffering or hard times that we must focus always on the bigger picture, on the long term view which we know to be true, that God will wipe every tear, that there will be no pain and no suffering but what about when it doesn't feel like that?

The blow brought by pain and loss and grief is still great even when we view it in this eternal framework. Indeed even in his resurrection body, Jesus bore the mark of his suffering, the scars of his crucifixion.

So today we stay at the cross for a while, not afraid to admit feelings of hopelessness, of loneliness, of grief and of pain – and of maybe not being able to see beyond all that. Maybe today we only feel able to cry out with Jesus, My God, my God why have you forsaken me?

We know that the promise of Easter Sunday is resurrection, ultimate freedom from pain and sin and suffering, of good news, of life, abundant life, of hope and love and joy and peace, of salvation and redemption but the reality of Good Friday is that it doesn't always feel like that.