

Good Friday Meditation – Rev Frances Nestor

On Maundy Thursday a few years ago, I remember talking to a friend about the pattern of Holy Week and Easter. I said I liked Holy Saturday, because it was imbued with a sense of stillness and yet anticipation of the climax of Easter Sunday. After all the exhaustion of Holy Week, we could only wait in hopeful expectation. In a sense, I suggested to him, the pattern of our own lives is a kind of 'Holy Saturday' existence, living in the 'now and the not yet'. The reality of Good Friday has taken place, and we place our hope in the encounter and experience of Easter resurrection. However, my friend disagreed. He said that to experience the journey to Easter is to live each part of it without the benefit of hindsight - and so Holy Saturday shares the darkness and desolation of Good Friday, albeit in a quieter, more understated way.

Although I could see that this was how we *should* view the period between Jesus' Passion and the Resurrection, I remained unconvinced. Because, even as we had in our churches followed Jesus' journey from Jerusalem on Palm Sunday through to the narrative of the last supper, to his capture, condemnation, crucifixion, death and burial - even as the altar is stripped, the sacrament removed, the liturgy of Good Friday completed, the church closed - even as we have done these things, we have simultaneously been planning for the celebration of Easter Sunday: the flowers, the Paschal candle, the Easter egg hunt, the First Communions, the celebratory Sunday lunch. The choreography, while genuinely offered in holiness, has been carefully anticipated, worked out and controlled: we always knew the outcome. Until now.

This year, as Covid 19 rages through the world and this country, it is no exaggeration to say that, for many, every day is Good Friday. Fear, anxiety, abandonment and darkness lurk, whether we feel isolated and alone in our homes, whether we fear for ourselves or our families and friends - or whether we mourn the death of someone close to us. For those who have lost a loved one, the funeral rite, which fulfils that that fundamental, deeply rooted instinct to bury our dead and be comforted is denied or diminished. Our churches are closed, we cannot physically attend services, or take part in the Eucharist - even on that most important day in the Church calendar, Easter Sunday.

We cannot know when, or how the current Tsunami of suffering and desolation will end. Yet, this Holy Week, which on the face of it is so different, so *unlike* the expected liturgical climax of the Christian year, presents us, I believe, with a Passion journey more authentic than any we have ever known or experienced.

It's understandable that, because the familiar world - including church - has been turned upside down; because this is unlike anything experienced, Holy Week and Easter don't seem to really be Holy Week and Easter at all, but rather, a sort of liturgy lite; a virtual reality, two-dimensional church - a poor second to the 'real thing'. What, though, is the purpose of the great liturgical outpourings of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday? Is it not to help us to accompany Jesus through his Passion; do we not seek in Lent to travel with Christ, 'to take up our Cross and follow him'. The key is surely to experience Holy week without the benefit of hindsight - to know the terror of suffering and abandonment; the experience of helplessness, pain, isolation, and with no sense of when it will end - or if it will ever end. Jesus' agony in the garden; his prayer that the cup of suffering be taken from him; his final cry of despair to the God he could no longer perceive or sense (recorded in Mark and Matthew's gospels) - these were not choreographed controlled parts in a drama whose outcome was known. Do we not also pray that the cup be taken from us - that we and our loved ones will escape the virus, that we will not be overcome by despair; that the familiar and comforting will one day return? The Agony in the Garden; the Passion, is not something abstract: it is real and experienced here and now, and throughout this country and the world

No formal, gathered community worshipped and comforted one another on that first Good Friday - there were only disparate, terrified disciples who had deserted Jesus out of a desire for self-preservation. Jesus' followers scattered after his arrest 'Then the disciples all deserted him and ran away' Matthew's gospel starkly states. John's Gospel tells us that a small number of women stayed faithfully to the end: 'his mother, was standing with her sister, Mary, wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala'. No church as we have come to understand it marked the events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

And there was no co-ordinated declaration of the Good News of Easter Sunday, only different snapshots of experiences which defied understanding - the women at the tomb who found it empty; Mary Magdalene who at first thought her beloved Master was the gardener; the disciples at Emmaus who did not recognise Jesus until he vanished at the breaking of bread; the disciples in lockdown and despair though whose locked door Jesus appeared through to stand among them. It would seem that our Church this Holy Week and Easter more faithfully witnesses to the foundation on which it was built than could ever have been imagined.

Today, the institutional church marks Good Friday. On Sunday, the church calendar will mark the seismic shift from death to resurrection: it will be Easter Sunday; the purple mourning of Lent replaced by the celebratory gold of the Easter Season. Yet, here, in our own lives, the suffering from Covid 19 will not change: for so many, it remains Good Friday. Church time seems strikingly out of kilter with 'experienced' time - the lived reality of the present. And we cannot abjure the truth of what we are living through; there is, as Ecclesiastes reminds us 'a time for mourning and a time for dancing... a time to weep and a time to laugh': it is a denial of truth to try or pretend to feel other than we do. And yet...the seasons of the Church speak infinitely more deeply than to a concrete set of dates. Today is Good Friday and we do not know for how long: but the church declares another truth upon which our faith is founded: Easter is real too: Good Friday was not, after all, the end, but, literally, the crux - of transformation. The worst happened, and yet suffering did not have the last word ; love absorbed it. 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it.' The disciples were to be transformed by a truth to which the limits of language could not do justice.

It is also true that this greatest time of widespread suffering has also seen some of the most powerful acts of selfless and disinterested love - among the healthcare and other key workers who ceaselessly and at considerable personal risk look after the sick and dying; among those who have willingly sacrificed contact with their loved ones and isolated themselves: for to be unable to 'do', but only to 'be' and 'done to' is surely the greatest of spiritual challenges. Even on the Cross, Jesus still seeks to mend and to heal, entrusting his mother and beloved disciple to one another's care. There is a resonance

here, it strikes me, in the doctors and nurses who, in the gaping absence of family being able to see their loved ones, have poured out their own love and compassion on their dying patients, seeking to be the best 'stand in' they can, so that those who are suffering and dying will know they are not abandoned, but loved, cared for; of infinite value.

And though today it is Good Friday, the Christian hope is that 'for everything there is a season' and Easter Sunday will arrive; for after the horror of Good Friday, when it seemed the mending of the world was not now possible, came the astonishing series of resurrection experiences - disclosures so overwhelmingly powerful that Jesus's followers, so recently utterly desolate, were now certain that 'with God, nothing is impossible'. Amen.