

We just read the telling of the events of the first Good Friday by St John. I want to think about two features of the passion of Jesus to help us reflect this morning.

We are going to return to think about the crown of thorns and about Jesus carrying the cross.

As I have thought about these things, I have also had in my mind the Gospel according to St Mark, which has been part of our Lent readings, so you will notice that I refer to Mark a little from time to time.

Crown of Thorns

The flogging would have left Jesus agonised and weak from loss of blood. Many people didn't survive a Roman flogging.

Now we see him surrounded by soldiers. Possibly hundreds of them; St Mark adds the

telling detail, “the whole company” of soldiers. Jostling. Mocking. Placing a purple robe on Jesus’ raw back.

And that crown.

Ever since childhood, I have understood the cruelty of a thorny crown and the beating of it, pressing it down on Jesus’ head.

It is the point in this whole awful account that has always got through to me. So that every time I am snagged by a rose or bramble or get scratched by a prickly branch when walking, I remember those thorns adding pain to the humiliation of Jesus in the hall of soldiers.

Can you imagine the scene?

I read a comment on this part of the story of Good Friday which said that the soldiers behaved “typically for the rough men of the time”.

I can see what they mean but I disagree with the implication that people were only capable of this sort of behaviour 2000 years ago.

The world was different, of course it was. But I don't believe that sin was somehow worse in first century Palestine than it is today.

Cruelty and the tendency to bully and humiliate is alive in our world today.

Parents forced to watch as their child is dismembered.

Young people groomed and exploited for sex and slavery.

Powerless minorities trampled on by regimes too "strategically important" to be challenged.

It is shocking where people will go with brutality. We know it.

And what happened in the hall of soldiers was not worse because it was done to Jesus.

Every act of malice, cruelty or indifference committed in the world in all time is felt by Jesus as if it were being done to him directly. He was quite clear about this.

“What you did to the least of my sisters and brothers, you did to me...”

Jesus’ identification with human suffering was an act of unbelievable humility which was to lead very soon to his ultimate sharing in the human condition in death.

Carrying the Cross

It is less commonly heard these days, but people in our time still refer to dealing with a difficult situation as it being “a cross I have to bear”.

Much earlier in the story of Jesus, long before the events of the first Good Friday, we read

that Jesus had referred to carrying a cross as a mark of discipleship.

(Mark chapter 8, v 34). *Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

Was crucifixion so familiar to the people of the time that "carrying the cross" was a common phrase to mean the willingness to suffer?

St Mark tells us that Jesus had said this just after teaching his friends for the first time that he was going to suffer and die.

Perhaps he had in mind the cross that would certainly be the manner of his own death.

On Good Friday, it is not the followers but Jesus himself that is carrying the cross.

Jesus was probably too weak to bear its weight.

We have all felt the weight of something at the limit of what we can manage.

Imagine the beam that was laid on Jesus' back and the roughness as well as its heaviness.

Can you imagine the sight? The view of the Messiah staggering and stumbling through exhaustion and pain.

And the weight of the wooden cross was a fraction of the crushing force that was bearing down on the Son of God.

Jesus' identification with human suffering was an act of unbelievable humility which led to his ultimate sharing in the human condition in death.

Exactly how the death of Jesus achieved atonement for humankind has puzzled theologians ever since.

That this is the way in which all people are reconciled to God is a profound mystery.

The Bible commentator David Garland said this: “God’s power absorbs the toxin of human sin and hatred and turns it into salvation...God who loves this much and works in this way.”

This darkest of days in the history of the world is the day when the cross became more than a burden and a symbol of death and dread.

The cross is our symbol because it represents hope and life.

God who loves this much...works in this way.