

How do we sit with the complexity of the passion narrative – a story of political unrest, civil disobedience, death, compassion and unmeasurable love?

It is the central story of our faith and yet it raises so many questions for us, about God's love and our complicity as humanity when faced with injustice.

Matthew's Gospel has several unique components which are confronting to us as an audience. Matthew doesn't make anything more of the crucifixion than what it is - but the Gospel does show us how it looks when Jesus' followers cannot endure witnessing it¹. It is always hard for us to watch and listen to. Matthew also confronts us with Judas and the consequences of his actions – though the other named disciples also hide from what is happening. Matthew also highlights that Jesus offers himself willingly – and as a result we are left having to watch this narrative play out.

The story we hear today is one that is an atrocity, but it is a narrative we are asked to sit with as we move into Holy Week and ponder the God who remains with us, even when it makes us uncomfortable.

There is a Passion hymn – a poem really - which I find very powerful written by Brian Wren, that encompasses many of these questions.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sunday-of-the-passion-palm-sunday/53132>

*Here hangs a man discarded,
a scarecrow hoisted high,
a nonsense pointing nowhere
to all who hurry by.*

*Can such a clown of sorrows
still bring a useful word
when faith and hope seem phantoms
and every hope absurd?*

*Yet here is help and comfort
for lives by comfort bound,
when drums of dazzling progress
give strangely hollow sound:*

*Life, emptied of all meaning,
drained out in bleak distress,
can share in broken silence
our deepest emptiness;*

*And love that freely entered
the pit of life's despair,
can name our hidden darkness
and suffer with us there.*

*Christ, in our darkness risen,
help all who long for light
to hold the hand of promise,
till faith receives its sight.*

One of the reasons I find this poem so powerful is because it helps me sit with the frustration and depth of story which this Holy Week confronts us with – and which we heard from Matthew's Gospel this morning. It does not move us quickly to the resurrection, but rather it highlights the loneliness and emptiness which comes with sitting with those who suffer. Like with any tragedy or time of suffering or illness, personal or global our human response is to ask 'why'?

What purpose can there be in suffering – why hasn't God stepped in? Are we being punished?

The story and pattern of Holy Week reminds us however that, no matter what God does humanity will choose to hurt creation. Even in the midst of the passion story Jesus says clearly that he is God's son, and wants to bring peace and change – but humanity will not listen. Our desire for power, for control – often globally and personally is such that pain is caused at times. If not to ourselves, but inadvertently to others. Jesus' death bears witness to that – as do many of the atrocities we have seen in the past week and months. Even pain that we experience ourselves is so often as a result of the consistent collective damage to the natural order of the world – the damage to all creation, throughout all time and space.

But at the heart of this Holy Week message – which is the message we will hear over and over again as we hear the story of Holy Week and Easter – is that in the midst of all this - is the fact that God is with us. God is with us in our joy and in our suffering. Whatever we have to face – we never have to face it alone – God is with us.

How then do we sit and journey then in the coming week?

Uncomfortably I suspect.

But in this most important week of our year let us ensure we take the time to recognise that God with us in the uncomfortable journey. And as we journey, let us listen for what God is saying to us now. And as Matthew reminds us, let us find the courage not to hide from what is in front of us, but rather to join Jesus' most faithful disciples who found God's love at the foot of the cross.

God will embrace us whatever we encounter – that is the promise of Holy Week and of the Resurrection. That God is always... always surrounding us with the strength we need for the journey ahead. Amen.