

MAUNDY THURSDAY REFLECTION

By Rev Petra Elsmore

There is one aspect of the story which depicts the last days of Jesus, that drew my attention today, and it is the loneliness of his suffering.

Surrounded by the crowds of Palm Sunday, those who were hoping to get a glimpse of the new king, he was with others, yet lonely.

Surrounded by his followers, all those intrigued by him, those who tried to get close, hear his teaching, see him perform miracles, challenge the authorities, he was with others, yet so lonely.

Surrounded by his disciples, his friends, those who were so intimately known to him over the past three years, now with him on the Mount of Olives while he prayed, he was with others, yet lonely.

Surrounded by those who stood along the road to Golgotha, those who witnessed as he stumbled along, carrying his cross, he was with others, yet so lonely.

Surrounded by his family, the disciple he loved, the women who cared for him, at the foot of the cross, he was with others yet lonely.

There is something about suffering that it makes a lonely experience.

We may have sympathy for those who are going through hardship, yet we can't really participate in their suffering, there is a distance that we cannot cross.

We often say that we feel other people's pain and sometimes witnessing the suffering of others can evoke almost a physical feeling of

despair and pain within us. I suspect such pain perhaps comes from our sense of helplessness more than anything else.

Suffering is a lonely experience.

Tonight I think of the disciples as they accompanied Jesus through the last few days.

After supper was over they sang a hymn and went out to the mount of olives and Jesus asked them to wait with him. Stay awake with me, keep me company, he asked them.

But one by one they fell asleep.

Not, I believe, because they were lazy or didn't care... but because they cared too much. It was all too much. Sitting there with Jesus while they waited for the inevitable to happen. Not understanding quite fully what was happening and not knowing how could they prevent the tragedy taking place.

It was all too much. And one by one they fell asleep.

They could not share in the suffering of Jesus. Suffering is a lonely experience.

What do we do, when we get overwhelmed by the news full of stories of suffering and injustice taking place all around the world? We turn off the tv, or skip the news, we occupy ourselves with activities that take our mind of the pain always present in the world. Why? Because we try to protect ourselves, because we can only take in as much as we can bear.

Suffering is a lonely experience.

We cannot carry the suffering of others upon our shoulders, it's something only Jesus could do.

What we know about Jesus is that he never turned away from human pain. The lepers, the outcast at the well, the prostitute, the women with the haemorrhage, the dead child of the roman soldier... Jesus went where the pain was.

That's what the cross means.

The cross is Jesus's refusal to turn away from the pain of the world
The cross is where God, in Jesus, accepts the pain of the world and bears it.

Christians are shaped by the cross.

That doesn't make us Jesus - it doesn't mean we can bear all the pain of the world.

But it does mean that there are times when we will at least, not turn away,

Jesus asked the disciples to stay awake with him and to pray.

We may not be able to carry the pain of others, but we can acknowledge the suffering, stay alert and vigilant. By doing so we may find ways of easing or even resolving difficult situations.

And if it gets too much, if there is no resolution, we stay awake, watch and pray in the hope that by doing so we offer comfort, solidarity and love, and so, we convey the love of God who in Jesus bears our pain and shares in our suffering. Amen.