

2020 04 05 Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 27:11-54, Matthew 21:1-11
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Palm Sunday – Sunday of the Passion in the time of Covid19

Today we enter the days, times and events that are at the heart of Christian faith. Long before there was a Christmas celebration there was an Easter.

I was talking to someone this week about why Good Friday was so important in our faith; we both struggled to find the exact words to explain it, and yet there it is: a day that stops us in our tracks. Maybe the reason it's so hard to speak of these matters is because the mind of faith is grounded in story more than mere chronology. Faith lives in the emotion of the heart more than reasoned logic.

Seen from the perspective of story and emotion the events of Holy Week beginning with the Palm Sunday Parade into Jerusalem and culminating with the Resurrection are high drama that sweep the believer along and opens our hearts to deepest sorrow and greatest joy.

Today, Palm Sunday, Jesus' story – our story – picks up with the Triumphal entry. This itinerant teacher and revolutionary has captured the imagination of the people who most need hope: the crowds, the sick, the poor, those who chafe under the yoke of Roman rule and religious strictures. We join that parade that aches for a just ruler. The crowds seem oblivious to the foreboding threats around them. Do we share their oblivion? To climate change? To pandemics?

But this hour of worship has scarcely begun and our eyes and hearts are pulled in another direction. Our gaze is turned to betrayal, power plays, crucifixion and death of the innocent one. We who were in the crowds shouting Hosanna, "Save us, Oh God" suddenly find ourselves shouting "Crucify him." The oh so recent King dies crying out, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" A Roman centurion has a foot of the cross conversion, confessing, "Truly this man was the Son of God."

The words of English poet Phineas Fletcher, set by Orlando Gibbons that we just heard evoke the pathos and emotion of the believer's heart, addressing the Crucified one:

In your deep floods,
drown all my faults and fears;
nor let his eye see sin,
but through my tears.

And the reversals don't end there! The pathos of the cross will itself be transformed into confusion and ecstasy of the empty tomb.

But for now, let us pause on the cross. In my view the most profound depiction of the crucifixion is the Isenheim Altarpiece painted by a contemporary of Luther, Matthias Grünewald. It hangs in a former monastery in the small city of Colmar, France, not far from the Rhine Valley. I've been able to make two pilgrimages to this painting, once in 1984 and a year ago, last March. Hear how art commentator Jonathon Jones describes the painting:

Christ dies in a terrible, empty desert place, with low massifs in the distance, and a lightless light, a depressing, dreary, empty darkness. His yellowish-grey, rotting flesh is covered with red sores, and the dead Christ's green corpse in the panel below is perforated and running with bodily fluids. It's horrible. Why did a medieval artist paint Christ in this shocking way?¹

The monastery that commissioned the painting specialised in treating a mysterious, painful disease that was common in the Middle Ages, "St Anthony's fire", a sickness modern science now knows as ergotism, caused by eating rye flour infected by a fungus. The horrific appearance of Christ's flesh on the altarpiece is not pure fantasy, but portrays symptoms the monks were trying to treat – and an illness that was readily recognized and feared.

With Covid 19, the pathos of Good Friday is happening countless times all around the world, and indeed in Canada: people are dying suddenly, painfully of a mysterious illness. In Italy and Spain the scope of death has been as medieval as Grünewald's painting. As people die alone or grieve for loved ones, the cry goes up: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" As the body of a dead parent or grandparent lies wrapped in cloth in a living room, sons and daughters plead for someone to take the body. Jesus dies again.

We hear the stories of nurses and doctors not hesitating to go into intensive care units to save the lives of Covid19 patients, only to die of the illness themselves. With the centurion we confess, "Truly these are sons and daughters of God.

The great hymn to Christ in Paul's letter to the Philippians celebrates the breadth and depth of this cosmic drama: in six short, soaring verses it moves from incarnation to Christ in glory and but not without plumbing the depths of self-giving redemption and reconciliation.

For Christians who've been practicing their faith for many years this pattern is familiar. We know the journey begins on Ash Wednesday with its reminder of our mortality and culminates in Easter joy. It is our story, and we live our lives in its rhythm, marking our own times of death and resurrection.

The Covid19 news and restrictions really began to hit us at the beginning of Lent. Those in tune with the church year might have thought, better Lent than Easter. As the isolation and physical distancing began one could be forgiven for thinking, that the enforced solitude

might not be so bad for the Lenten disciplines of prayer and self-denial. But the pandemic is not timing itself to be neatly over for Easter. It's a much messier, more disorderly and unpredictable journey that we've been forced to take. Is Covid19 forcing us to be more introspective, to spend more time at the foot of the cross than we would have chosen?

If that's the case let us not forget, that the message that came from the cross then, and now: is love, self-sacrificing love, for the whole world, and for the neighbour, for ourselves. AMEN.

Footnote: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2007/dec/12/art>
(altered slightly)