

Good Friday Sermon 2020

As you look at the cross what do you see?

We have journeyed through Holy Week and we have arrived at Good Friday. By faith and through the holy gift of imagination we have waved palm leaves and rejoiced as our king rode on a donkey into Jerusalem, we have watched Mary anoint Jesus with oil and love, we have tried in vain to keep awake in the Garden of Gethsemane, we have recoiled in horror and disbelief to see our Lord arrested and nailed to a wooden cross. Now here we are standing by that cross.

As you look up at the figure on the cross, I wonder what you see?

Pontius Pilate saw an obscure Jewish teacher; the chief priests saw a trouble-maker finally dealt with; passers-by saw a common criminal dying a shameful death; Mary saw her first-born son; the beloved disciple saw his closest friend; the other disciples? maybe they were trying to work out *who* it was they saw.

As you look up at the figure on the cross, I wonder what you see?

As I look up, the image that comes to my mind is the figure on the enormous cross that hangs above the altar table in our church. It's been more than three weeks since I actually laid eyes on it, but in my mind's eye I can see it clearly. I see the head bowed forward – closed eyes, thorns pressing into flesh; I see the blood trickling from the wounds in his hands and the nails in his feet. When I first came to SJOJ, I really struggled with this cross. When I looked at it I saw a distressing, violent, image that spoke of death. I almost wanted to apologise to visitors to our church – I didn't want this huge, sombre figure to define their impressions of the Christian faith – it seemed to be the opposite of God's life and joy.

And yet, this figure of the crucified Christ hanging on the cross in our church, which I see so clearly in my mind's eye, has helped me journey through this Holy Week.

This Holy Week has been for me, and maybe for you too, a Holy Week like no other I can remember because of the effects of COVID-19. As a deacon I have been dislocated from my church, as a mother I have been distanced from my children, and as a hospital chaplain I have absorbed the distress of the very ill and their families who can't visit them, the fear of staff as they work with highly infectious patients every day, the stress of a pressurised and rapidly changing hospital environment, and of course the ever-present shadow of death. The emotions of these experiences: separation, sorrow, powerlessness, grief and death have resonated powerfully with the emotions of Holy Week.

The figure of the crucified Christ in our church has helped me. Last Sunday morning, as I listened to the service Andrew had recorded in his house, deep feelings of grief over events at the hospital began welling up within me and tears started pouring down my face. Unexpectedly, the image of Christ on the cross appeared in my mind. As I looked at his face and his outstretched arms it was as if I was pouring out my grief directly to Him. Gradually my tears subsided. I felt calm again. It was as if Christ had taken my sorrow Himself. I looked at the figure on the cross and I saw comfort and I saw love.

One of today's bible readings from the book of Isaiah tells of God's suffering servant, a 'man of sorrows, familiar with suffering' who will 'bear the sins of many' – a figure we now recognise as Jesus Christ. One of the verses says: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows". That was exactly how I felt – Jesus carrying my sorrow. Carrying the sorrows in the hospital. Carrying the sorrow we all are experiencing at the moment.

This Good Friday, as I look up at the figure on the cross I see one who understands our suffering – because he suffered. I see one who knows what it is to feel the depth of sorrow – because he himself knew 'sorrow like no other sorrow'. I see one who has compassion for our weakness and who has borne the consequences of our misdeeds. I find one who helps me bear the burdens I carry and who comforts me. And knowing as I do that after Good Friday there is Easter Day, I also see that after sorrow there will be hope, after separation there will be reunion, and after death there will be resurrection.

Today is Good Friday. We stand by the cross. As you look up – what do you see?