

Reflection for Good Friday 2020

Yesterday I was reflecting on Holy Thursday and saying that it seemed a particularly strange day for us to be separated, because the nature of the celebration is so essentially communal – the Last Supper recalled, feet washed, a procession to the garden. But, while Thursday is essentially communal, Good Friday fits in much better with our present circumstances. Good Friday is a day of isolation, of separateness. Jesus is alone in the garden, with his disciples at a distance; he walks to the cross surrounded by a hostile crowd, but essentially alone; he is alone on the cross – just the two thieves beside him, but being nailed to a cross and lifted up out of reach leaves you as alone as it is possible to imagine. No-one can touch you, comfort you, whisper to you: he dies alone, and then as the stone is rolled across the tomb he is wrapped in darkness and silence, totally alone. In the whole of the Church's year there is no day that more clearly mirrors our present situation than today. It is a day apart, a day alone.

I had a very powerful sense of this last night, after The Mass of The Lord's Supper, as I sat in the dark, silent and empty church. It was a very disturbing time, and I had a sense that I was being led to look into the darkness of Christ's isolation for a moment before, thankfully, being drawn back from having to share it. Perhaps that sounds a bit fanciful, but it felt very powerful, and it gave me this clear understanding of how it is that, on this day, in his isolation Christ bears for us the pain of a whole world's isolation, a whole world's loneliness. I am constantly aware at this time of how lucky I am. I don't live alone, and by nature I am quite content with quietness and silence. But I do know that on this Good Friday, as never before in the history of the world, isolation and loneliness are a real burden for so many people. There are lots of people who live on their own, and dare not go out because their health is fragile, who long for company and for connection with other people. For many people loneliness and silence are a real burden, a source of distress and spiritual pain. Much as we try to keep in touch with one another, to phone and write and message and email, there is still no substitute for being in the same room as another, and picking up from them all the tiny little gestures and signs and communication without words that make us feel a sense of belonging to one another and with one another.

All of this brings us back to the aloneness of Jesus on Good Friday. He has sunk to the very depths of human isolation: the isolation of God betrayed, rejected and denied. There is no aloneness, no isolation that he doesn't know. Any person's aloneness is already known to him. In the garden, on the cross, Jesus has already been into the darkness. In a sense he has already carried the isolation and the loneliness of every person throughout time, and this is part of the great burden under which he falls on the way to the cross. We must not let up in our attempts to stick together in these troubling times; we must renew our attempts to stay connected. But if ever the isolation or silence or darkness or aloneness does start to get to us, let's remember that Jesus has been there first: he feels that isolation with us, and he will not leave us there on our own now. In the darkness there is not complete silence, there is the sound of his breath beside us, the beating of his heart close to us. There is no isolation greater than that of the crucified Son of God, and that isolation has already been conquered.