

How Can God Suffer?

A sermon for Good Friday

Introduction

Following the Christian liturgical calendar, we celebrated last Sunday as *Palm Sunday*.

Palm Sunday is a day set aside for reflection on the time when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, as a symbol of his kingship.¹ Seeing him, the crowds along the way that day chanted,

Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven! (Matthew 21:9)²

Looking back, we know the One and Only Son of God came to Earth, and rode into Jerusalem that day, declaring himself, in symbolic action, to be king. Just five days later, however, the crowd found out Jesus had no intention to be a political-king, or a bread-king, or a miracle-king, so they started to chant a different tune:

Pilate asked them, “What should I do then with Jesus, who is called Christ?”
They all answered, “Crucify him!”
Then he said, “Why? What has he done wrong?”
But they kept shouting all the more, “Crucify him!” (Matthew 27:22–23)

That was the bittersweet nature of that first Palm Sunday parade two thousand years ago.

Yet last Sunday has a second theme to reflect on, for it is also known also *Passion Sunday*. As such, it marks the beginning of *Holy Week*, being eight days that take us on a journey of meditation and worship through the final week of Jesus’ pre-resurrection life to Easter Sunday.

Ask yourself: What do you think about when you imagine “passion”?

Politicians defend their principles with passion during a debate. After injury, an athlete returns to training with a reinvigorated passion for success. A person may have a passion for a hobby like stamp collecting or knitting or for becoming a professional musician. Gamers have a passion for MMPORGs, those massively multiplayer online role-playing games. Residents will be filled with passion at their local council’s inability to cope with rising levels of crime.

Of course, the most obvious association of passion is the context of romance or sexual desire, though it generally implies a deeper or more encompassing emotion than that implied by the term “lust”.

When the Bible uses the word, “passion”, it has something in mind that is very different to what has become of our contemporary sensibilities. Our English word “passion” comes from the Latin words *pati* or *passio* which mean to endure suffering and pain —our modern

usages only hint at this underlying meaning, likely because suffering and pain make us comfortable.

Passion Sunday, then, encouraged us to reflect on the voluntary suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ by remembering the significance of all the events that occurred between his royal entry into Jerusalem through to his inglorious crucifixion.

‘But Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was a triumph, wasn’t it?’ you might be thinking. In the mind of his disciples, it was, but Jesus knew on that day where those days were leading him, as it is written,

As [Jesus] approached and saw the city, he wept for it, saying, “If you knew this day what would bring peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes ... because you did not recognize the time when God visited you.” (Luke 19:41–44)

Jesus wept as the crowd cheered for he understood they did not really see him, nor understand what he was about to do for them.

Holy Week invites us to remember the voluntary suffering and pain of Jesus which began with his so-called Triumphal Entry on Sunday, then continued as he travelled between the Temple to teach and then back to Bethany on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of that week. His message in the Temple consisted of this:

Jesus cried out, “The one who believes in me believes not in me, but in him who sent me. And the one who sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me would not remain in darkness.” (John 12:44–46)

Jesus’ teaching should have turned the hearts of all to him; instead, it resulted in the religious and political leaders plotting to kill him (Mt 26:3–5, 14–16).

On Maundy Thursday, we remember when Jesus washed his disciples feet (Jn 13:1–11), his New Commandment (Jn 13:34–35), his Last Supper (Mt 26:26–29), his pained prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:36–46), and his arrest (Mt 26:47–50).

Today, being the questionably named “Good Friday”, we remember the crisis of Jesus’ passion, the climactic point of his suffering and pain—in other words, we remember his trial and torture, his condemnation and crucifixion.

God Suffers

When we commit to our own journey of meditation and reflection during Holy Week, the first point for reflecting on Christ’s passion is to recall that our God—the God who walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth and ultimately raised himself from the dead; the creator-God, having created your life and mine; the One True God; that god is a God who suffers and cries and dies.

The suffering of our God is not imaginary nor fictitious nor make-believe. When we read the accounts handed down to us of Jesus’ life, and we note his suffering, the pain and tears of our God are as real as yours and mine.

*Ask yourself: When you see pain and suffering in a movie, how does that make you feel?
When you see pain and suffering in a news report, how do you respond?*

Our God suffers exactly like that. First, our God is the spectator, watching the suffering of his people. That God responds viscerally to our suffering. He doesn't just note our suffering rationally —“Oh, isn't that nice? My people are suffering”— rather he feels our suffering deep down and reacts instinctively.

Let me illustrate: Here in my hand is a mallet. You can see that I have this mallet in my hand, and I am now going to hit my fingertip. I am going to hit it, and when I hit it, my fingertip is going to be crushed. But it is not only my fingertip that will be affected, so will my brain. The brain is the pain centre of the body. It is not only that my fingertip will be crushed and my brain forced to endure pain, my brain will also make sure my mind takes note of the pain because my brain will not want me to do this to myself, to make a point, ever again.

So here goes...

In the Bible, Christ is described as the head of his body, of the Church (1 Cor 11:3; cf. Eph 1:10, 22). I know that passage is speaking primarily to issues of authority, but the image can be applied further to highlight for us that when any part of the body of Christ is hurt, the pain in the body goes directly and immediately to the pain centre in the head, and Christ is the head of the Church, the head of our church.

Any time a part of God's body is hurt, God hurts. God experiences the pain when any part of the body is hurting. He experiences it viscerally, and is committed to doing something about it.

Our Father God is not happy when we suffer and is thus moved to action. He did not create us to suffer, and so wants to do something about it, to help us out, to fix the situation in which we find ourselves (cf. Ex 3:7–10; 1 Sam 9:16).

Riding in on a white horse, however, would not have actually fixed the situation at all!

That's what we want, a triumphant king, a warrior to battle the forces of darkness and rise from the ashes with the body of his opponent brutally battered before him —has anyone else seen the *John Wick* movies lately?

The problem is that the suffering God witnesses in us is not primarily caused by an opponent we can identify —*He did it! She's said that! That's what caused my trouble!* The cause of our suffering is self-imposed —we did it to ourselves. The only way God can solve the situation that causes our suffering is to make himself vulnerable by riding onto the scene astride a donkey.

Thus, we become the spectators, watching the arrest, trial and torture, condemnation and crucifixion of our brother Jesus. The suffering Jesus experienced is so real we want to turn it off. The nails were long **and real**. The five wounds on his body **were real**. The thorns in his head were nastily sharp **and real**. The lashes across his body were painful **and real**.

Holy Week reminds us that our God —the God who walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God who became incarnate as Jesus; the creator-God; the One True God; that god is a God who suffers and cries and dies. The

cross cries out this message in graphic and gory detail as the innocent Jesus experienced all the excruciating pain that should be ours.

At the other end of the spectrum, when we read that at Lazarus' death, "Jesus wept" (Jn 11:35), and that he wept over Jerusalem as he rode in (Luke 19:41), that too was real. Our God truly suffers and truly cries, just like you and I.

You may be interested when I tell you Christianity is the only world religion in which its god gets hurt; who was whipped; who has five fatal wounds in his body; who writhed in pain on the cross; and, who shouted out in the midst of his suffering, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mt 27:46b)

Buddhism teaches that your suffering is all an illusion, not really real at all. Hinduism teaches that suffering is a result of your position in life and you should just 'suck it up'. Islam teaches that your suffering is just the whim of God; your lot in life is to simply accept it as his arbitrary, 'spur of the moment' will. Judaism teaches that suffering is punishment for evil acts. Not to mention all those religions worshipping lifeless idols of their own construction.

In none of the other world religions does their god suffer. Such an idea is abhorrent to them.

In contrast to these, Christianity declares a cross became a throne. God's suffering was not imaginary, it was not make believe, it was not fake. Instead, it was glorious! The passion of Jesus, remembered during Holy Week, reminds us of this fact and to commemorate it.

Ask yourself: What image of God do you usually have in your head?

For many Christian-adjacent people, their image of God is, "Our Father who art in heaven" (Mt 6:9), and that is where he lives for them: safely away in heaven, where there is no divorce, no cancer, no pandemics, no accidents, no bullets, no bombs, no climate disaster, no assassinations, no cancel culture. In our minds, God is like we are: we move away from our violent neighbourhoods on earth and God has himself moved to the Great Suburb in the Sky. That is where God lives —up there, up where it is safe— far away, removed from it all.

But Holy Week tells us exactly the opposite. Our God left the safety and sanity of heaven and came down to this violent neighbourhood called earth. God became a real human being, and therefore suffered and died, like the rest of us do. That is what Good Friday is all about. The passion of Jesus and his willingness to endure pain and suffering. Our God suffers and cries and dies because he knew it was necessary and, therefore, was willing to endure it.

God Suffers ... For Us?!

The uncomfortable reality of all this is that it needn't have been so. Our God is a god who loves his children so much he is willing to suffer, cry and die **on our behalf**!

The Almighty doesn't have to suffer —perhaps as a spectator he would suffer a little. But even more than this experience, **our passionate God suffers, cries and dies for us, and he does so in our place**. As it is written,

Jesus stood before the governor. “Are you the king of the Jews?” the governor asked him.

Jesus answered, “You say so.” While he was being accused by the chief priests and elders, he didn’t answer.

Then Pilate said to him, “Don’t you hear how much they are testifying against you?” But he didn’t answer him on even one charge, so that the governor was quite amazed.

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that a riot was starting instead, he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, “I am innocent of this man’s blood. See to it yourselves!”

All the people answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” Then he released Barabbas to them and, after having Jesus flogged, handed him over to be crucified.

Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the governor’s residence and gathered the whole company around him. They stripped him and dressed him in a scarlet robe. They twisted together a crown of thorns, put it on his head, and placed a staff in his right hand. And they knelt down before him and mocked him: “Hail, king of the Jews!” Then they spat on him, took the staff, and kept hitting him on the head. After they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe, put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him. (Matthew 27:11–14, 24–31)

This is the record of Jesus’ trial and torture, of his condemnation and crucifixion for a crime he did not commit.

We should be standing there. That should be us having to give account for the myriad bad attitudes and bad behaviours we have committed in the past, continue to commit in the present, and will commit in the future.

While it may be hard for us to comprehend, each error in judgement, each word misspoken, is an offence to the God who created us. He is perfect and holy and entirely within the right afforded his authority to expect the same from us, especially when he has shown us what is good and right and proper and offered to walk with us along our way.

Our God does not need to suffer. He could be like the gods of the other world religions and sit comfortable, far away from this mess and chaos called the human condition. But, not only does our God choose to **suffer with us** when we hurt, he chooses to **suffer for us** so that we will not have to endure the just punishment for our sin, which is eternal death.

Besides reminding us just how much God loves us and is committed to caring for us, Holy Week challenges us to bear with our own suffering. On that first Passion Sunday, Jesus willingly began the process of repairing the human condition and did so despite knowing what it would cost him on Good Friday.

Our suffering is not that honourable, but the least we can do is to be willing to seek reparation for our bad attitudes, our misspoken words and our bad behaviours. Christ’s death on the cross repairs our relationship with God, but what about with each other?

The apostle Paul wrote, “be angry and do not sin”,³ because, when we are angry, we very easily lose control of our words and our actions, and too often say or do something to one another that we regret later.

But, hey, why wait until you’re angry to think about this advice? I’ll admit that I too can say and do the wrong thing long before I’m angry. Try engaging me before my morning coffee and I’m sure to offend you! Put up a sign in your shop with grammatical errors and misspelled words and I’m sure to say something inappropriate that will get me banned for life ☹

I say that in jest, but the point is clear: When we’ve thought, said or done something wrong against another person, the right and proper thing to do is to repair the situation by humbly rejecting our selfishness and seeking forgiveness not only from God, but from those whom we’ve wronged, for as it is written,

For while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For rarely will someone die for a just person—though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6–8; cf. Matthew 5:43–47)

I’m not asking you to die for someone, even though admitting you were wrong might feel that way at the time.

Remember how you’ve been forgiven and forgive others; remembering how you’ve been forgiven and be willing to ask forgiveness from others.

Conclusion

The passion of Christ is the good news about, and delivered by, Jesus. Holy Week then is a series of eight days in which we remember and tell the world there was a man named Jesus, who stepped out from his comfortable place in heaven, and took upon himself the punishment for our bad behaviour, words and attitudes. Why? As Jesus himself taught, “No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). That is what Passion Sunday, Good Friday and Holy Week is about: God willingly suffering for his friends and showing us a better way to live by showing love for one another and for our neighbours..

As a way of saying, “Thank you”, the least we can do is to ask for forgiveness.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you reveal the truth about your people
and the ways of our world
in the suffering of the Son and his steadfast love.
Show us again the image of humility you desire for us,
and teach us obedience,
so that self-emptying may be our pathway,
through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.

Endnotes

- 1 “Jesus arrives at the outskirts city, Bethphage, probably to be located on the summit of the Mount of Olives. From there, he dispatches two disciples (James and John, who wanted seats of power?) to commandeer a donkey and a colt. The special arrangements all point to careful staging by Jesus to present himself publicly as the son of David, the king of Israel. It is not a triumphal entry. Nothing associated with triumphal processions is mentioned, no military trappings, no trophies of war, no captives, no white horse. It is, however, a royal entry. The heir of David who was to be anointed as king rode a donkey to his coronation. When Absalom’s hair got caught in the branches of a large terebinth, he was riding a donkey, which was symbolic of his claim to kingship (2 Sam 18:9). Mephibosheth rode a donkey as a symbol of his royal claim that he would make for the old house of Saul had the insurrection of Absalom succeeded (2 Sam 19:27). David, anxious to secure Solomon’s claim to the throne over that of Adonijah’s, instructs his comrades to mount Solomon on his donkey to ride to his anointing as king (1 Kgs 1:32–40; see also 2 Kgs 9:13). Jesus’ approach to the city from the east, from the Mount of Olives, is also suggestive, since some expected that the messiah would come from the east, from the Jordan valley (see Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.8.6 §169; *Jewish War* 2.13.5 §261; *Genesis Rabba* 98:9; *Qoheleth Rabba* 1:9; *Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin* 98a; 99a; and *Zech* 14:1–5).” —David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel*, Reading the New Testament series (Macon, GA, USA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2001), pg 213.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 3 Ephesians 4:26; cf. Psalm 4:4; Matthew 5:22.