

Today we find ourselves in the middle of Holy Week as we make that sacred pilgrimage with Jesus to the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter morning. It is indeed a privilege to walk with Jesus and experience with Jesus all that this week means for our faith and our call to faithfulness. We are blessed as followers of Jesus intimately connected with Him and seeking always to follow Him every day of our lives.

In a very real way, we are walking the way of the cross ourselves throughout this time. Like Jesus, we are carrying the burden of Covid 19 and all that this pandemic has laid upon us. Our experience today of pain, suffering and grief is as real for us as it was for Jesus.

At this point in Holy Week, for almost 20 years of my ministry, on the Wednesday of Holy Week I have led worship services in the church that have centered around the stations of the cross. This year, although dispersed in our homes, I invite us to observe the Stations of the Cross with Jesus with a particular emphasis on our own Stations of the Cross experienced today in our lives and in our world.

The cross is central to our faith in all that God accomplished for us ... sending His Son Jesus to die on that cross so we would know the depth of God's love for us and God's desire to forgive us and be in a right relationship with Him.

I invite us to focus on the way of the cross for Jesus ... to recall the stations of the cross along His journey that have significance to us on our journey too, especially in the context of Covid 19.

In our time of reflection today, as we walk this week we call holy leading to the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter morning, we remember the overwhelming evidence of Love's ultimate sacrifice. Who would have guessed that the height and depth, the length and width of God's love might look like this: a forsaken savior on a cross? Certainly not us. Not us, who are too often lost amid the world's distractions and responsibilities. Not us, for whom such love was offered without cost.

Let us follow the way of the cross and commit ourselves to remember the price paid. Let us live our lives in a way that indicates why this week is called holy and this Friday is called good. Thanks be to God, who opened the gates of heaven, that we might have the faith, hope, and love, witnessed in Christ's sacrifice for our salvation.

Jesus told his disciples, *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'*

Let us pray.

Almighty and everlasting God, who in your tender love towards the human race sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death on a cross: grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal one, have mercy on us.
Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal one, have mercy on us.
Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal one, have mercy on us.

Song: *“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”*

First Station ... Jesus is Condemned to Death

We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world.

“When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people met in council to bring about the death of Jesus. They had him bound, and led him away to hand him over to Pilate, the governor... He ordered Jesus to be first scourged and then handed over to be crucified.”

What a moment when we're witness to an experience of Jesus' true humanity. As much as He was God, He was and is just like us in every way. He faced abuse ... accusations ... and would now ultimately experience death as a human being. He identifies with us even as we identify with Him. In the angst of this moment on his journey this week, what a gift it is for us that forms us more and more in our discipleship as we take up our cross and follow Him faithfully in all we experience in our lives.

I am very aware, right now in the year 2020, that there are an extraordinary number of individuals who are being condemned to death because of Covid 19. That's a stark reality as we hear the statistics and the number of Covid 19 deaths reported each day. The journey for them isn't any easier or less traumatic even though they

have faith through Jesus. There is consolation in knowing that Jesus walked this very road and was himself condemned to die as unjust and undeserving as that was for Him. It is unjust and undeserving today too. Yet it is reality on the way of the cross we walk in such a time as this.

Let us pray.

Jesus, your death was every bit as human as our experience of death. Through Your sorrowful journey, help us in our journey as we confront the reality of death in our lives, our families, our neighborhood and community and throughout the world. Amen.

Second Station ... Jesus carries the Cross

We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world.

“Then they took charge of Jesus, and carrying his own cross he went out of the city to a place of the skull or, as it was called in Hebrew Golgotha...”

There's no doubt that the burden of the cross was heavy for Jesus, and not just the cross, but each of us too and our sins that He carries for us. But Jesus shouldered the heaviness as He walked the way through the Holy City. He didn't begrudge us or blame us. Out of compassion, care and love Jesus took up His cross as an example and witness of how we too are to take up our cross as we follow His way.

It also strikes me that He took up that cross on his own. What a lonely journey it must have been. All those whom He loved ran off for fear of their own lives leaving Him to fend for himself. And even His beloved Peter denied knowing Him or having anything to do with Him. Oh the isolation Jesus must have felt.

The burden of Covid 19 is real and is a heaviness we carry as we go about our lives. That burden may be in the reality of being socially isolated from those we are usually in regular contact with. It may be in the precautions we need to take to keep ourselves safe and healthy. It may be in the anxiety we feel within ourselves about what is yet to lie ahead of us in these days and weeks. Covid 19 is the cross we carry today. May we know and trust that Jesus carries that burden with us especially when we are weary.

And like Jesus, so many are having to carry the burden of facing Covid 19 alone, socially isolated from family and friends, those who would usually support them

and hold their hand. But that isn't so in such a time as this when we are separated and distanced even from those we love most and those who equally love us too.

Let us pray.

Jesus, we live today embracing all the suffering that weighs us down because of Covid 19. We live amidst all that social isolation means when we face diagnosis. With you as an example as you bear your cross, help us to carry our own crosses, even and especially when we're on our own. Amen.

Third Station ... Simon helps Jesus carry his Cross

We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world.

“On their way out, they came across a man from Cyrene, Simon by name, and enlisted him to carry his cross”.

Jesus, as you walked the way of the cross you became weary, fragile and vulnerable. The cross you carried was heavy and you fell under its burden. Simon of Cyrene helped you as he helped in carrying your cross along with you. You needed him. And for Simon this was a ministry that he could offer you.

I can't help but think of all those who are Simon of Cyrene today for those who are afflicted by Covid 19. Especially I think of those who are on the front lines in our hospitals ... doctors, nurses, cleaning staff, technicians and chaplains. I think too of those offering essential services ... those who work in grocery stores, police, paramedics, funeral directors, garbage collectors, firefighters. They help the rest of us carry the load we feel these days. We ask God to bless them in their ministry and vocation and to keep them out of harm's way especially around Covid 19.

Let us pray.

Jesus, help us to help you carry the burden of your cross as we reach out and serve one another especially during this time of Covid 19. Thank you for the self sacrifice of those called at this time to serve even as it may put themselves in harms way. Bless them and keep them safe. Amen.

Fourth Station ... Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.

We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world.

“Large numbers of people followed him, and of women too, who mourned and lamented for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep rather for yourselves and for your children.”

Think about the look on their faces as they grieved for Jesus and all He was going through. He had touched their lives in ways that were real and they were transformed because of that. Were they complicit in condemning Him to this moment ... yes. But their hearts and souls called them back to seeing in Him the grace and mercy of God who brought good news of hope and salvation to them.

Jesus looks at them with pity that they might not weep for Him, but for themselves. He knew their experience was no different than His own. And like Him, they had no choice but to walk the way of the cross and live with the consequences of the lives they chose to live.

Let us pray.

Jesus, we are sorry for our sins, for the ways we don't always live out our baptismal identity as your disciples, for the sadness, pain and grief we cause you. You love us so much that you look with pity on us as we walk our journeys of life and especially now in our experience of how Covid 19 is weighing us down. Help us to turn from our ways toward you and know your grace poured upon us. Amen.

Fifth Station ... Jesus is stripped of his garments.

We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world.

“They dressed him up in purple, twisted some thorns into a crown and put it on him; and they went down on their knees to do him homage. And when they had finished making fun of him, they took off the purple and dressed him in his own clothes.”

Jesus was stripped of all his dignity as he was put on trial, mocked, beaten and paraded throughout the city on display. Imagine He was the same one who was welcomed into the city just a few short days ago with a parade and festival. Things have changed in such a short time.

I think today of those who lose their dignity during this Covid 19 pandemic. And for them it can come upon them so quickly, without having symptoms. I don't know first hand what people diagnosed go through. I am aware, though, that they need to be cared for when it comes to even their basic needs. They have no choice but to accept what others now need to do for them. That can be such a loss of dignity. We pray for them and how this virus affects their lives.

Let us pray.

Jesus, you know what it's like to lose your dignity because of what others have done and what people continue to do to you today. As so many today also lose their dignity, may they know you restore their worth and value as children of God. May they know they are always worthy of your love. Amen.

Sixth Station ... Jesus is nailed to the cross.

We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world.

Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Nails have been hammered through Jesus' hands and feet. He is bleeding. As the cross is lifted to a standing position, Jesus feels the weight of His very life hanging on those nails. He struggles to breathe as slowly his life slips away. Huge nails are hammered through his hands and feet to fix him on the cross. He is bleeding much more seriously now. As the cross is lifted up, the weight of his life hangs on those nails. Every time he struggles to pull himself up to breathe, his ability to cling to life slips away.

In that horrendous pain that went through His body, He cried out in despair wondering where God was; why had God abandoned Him; why was He now alone to face this moment, especially when He had been faithful in what God had sent Him to do, the proclaiming of the Kingdom and God's promise of redemption and salvation.

How many today as we face the realities of Covid 19 have cried out similarly to God ... why is this happening ... where are you ... why are we left alone ... we've tried to be faithful even as we know we've sinned. With Jesus we are in good company when we doubt and question. This was such a human moment for Jesus that reminds us He was exactly like us, especially when he faced directly injustice,

cruelty and death. May his cry bring us consolation and the realization our cries of despair and question don't diminish our faithfulness.

Let us pray.

Jesus, help us to be close to you as we experience these days and the pain of our crosses, especially during this Covid 19 pandemic. Even as we ask our questions and cry out at times in despair, help us to know deep within ourselves that God is present with us, crying with us even as we cry, grieving as we grieve. Amen.

Seventh Station ... Jesus dies on the Cross.

We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world.

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. With these words he breathed his last.”

Behind the sheer silence of this moment as Jesus breathes his last breath. He's been through so much; the agony; the exhaustion. And this is what it all comes down to ... he commends his soul to God ... he breathes his last. If we haven't run off like many of his disciples, we stand at the foot of his cross and witness this most holy and sacred moment. The agony is over. It is finished ... it is truly finished at least for the moment.

Covid 19 is leading to such a moment for so many people ... the breathing of their last breath. And undoubtedly it's been agonizing and enhausting all that's happened to their bodies. It may be that a ventilator has helped them breathe. And even now, a ventilator can't alleviate death. For these people, life as they knew it is finished; the agony is over; the struggle to breathe has ended. But with faith in Jesus, their death isn't the end. They have crossed that chasm from this life to eternal life. May the rest in peace because of and through the cross of Christ.

Let us pray.

Jesus, your death on the cross gives us hope even as we face our own death and the deaths of those we love. Give us grace to trust in you even as we breathe our last and all as we know in this world is finished. We entrust our souls, and the souls of all we love and care about into your hands. Amen.

Eighth Station ... Jesus is placed in the tomb

We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world.

“When it was evening, there came a rich man of Arimathea, called Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. The man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Thereupon, Pilate ordered it to be handed over. So Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean shroud and put it in his own new tomb which he had hewn from a rock. He then rolled a large stone across the entrance of the tomb and went away”.

The body of Jesus was taken down from the cross, wrapped according to the burial custom and laid in a brand new tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea. A huge stone was pulled over to seal the tomb shut.

Jesus’ tomb represents all the graves we gather around when someone we love has died. There’s a finality in that moment as the body is lowered into the ground, or the urn with the ashes, and covered over with dirt. And those familiar words ... “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust”.

These days, the rituals we have embraced in the burial of someone important in our lives has been compromised by Covid 19. These days we simply gather with as few people as possible at the grave where the prayers of committal and interment are said. There is no fanfare ... there is no celebration of life ... another grief that adds to so many other griefs we are already experiencing.

But we must also remember how the prayer of committal begins from our Anglican Book of Alternative Services ... “In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ ...” Even at the grave we are called to hold on to the faith God has blessed us with as we commend our loved ones to God’s care and keeping in that place He has prepared for them and for each of us.

Let us pray.

Jesus, as you are placed in your tomb, the story doesn’t end there. The journey that is holy and sacred to this moment will continue in a way that brings us hope as we have faith and trust in you and promise to us of eternal life. Even at the grave may we make our song of praise to you, “Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!!” Amen.

Let’s take a moment of silence to ponder and reflect on the journey we have taken with Jesus