

Lent 3 Why did Jesus have to die?

The Dean reflects on the age old question of why good people suffer.

When the crowd questioned Jesus about the suffering of the Galileans martyred by Pilate, they were asking the perennial question, “Why does God let bad things happen to good people?”. It is a question closely linked to another that might be on our minds at this time of year, “Why did Jesus have to die?”.

When we ask the second question, it is often predicated on an assumption that there was something special about Jesus, some aspect of his behaviour, his prophetic teaching or the size of his following, that made him a target for the authorities. But to assume that is to lose sight of the human and social structures that need victims and identify them at random.

Human and social structures that are just as much at play in our own time as they were in the time of Jesus.

Think of the regimes that need to engender fear in the general population in order to remain in power, or those who take a stand on the maintenance of good order, or the moral parameters of social benefit, and thus exercise authoritarian power “for the good of the people”. It is not unknown for such regimes to claim exceptional favour in the eyes of God.

Innocent individuals become randomly identified figures punished by the state, not because they are special, but because they are not. Consider the stories of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in Iran, Jagtar Singh Johal the Scottish Sikh man held on terrorism charges in India, Mahmoud Khalil the pro-Palestinian student denied his migration rights in the USA. We know their stories. How many such victims suffer, remain hidden or perish because there is no-one to take up their story?

Was not Jesus such a victim?

But what about the cruelty of his punishment, the pain of torture, the ghastly method of execution? Was that not exceptional?

We know that crucifixion was not an exceptional punishment in the Roman Empire.

As hanging would become, throughout Europe in the early modern period, it was a convenient, public and painful punishment that was intended both as a deterrent and as a visible sign of the exercise of authority and the maintenance of good order.

To us, both crucifixion and hanging seem primitive, cruel and vindictive.

We may look back in history, or across national boundaries, and thank God that we are “not like them”.

Yet, surely it is only a matter of degree?

Our overcrowded, drug-ridden and squalid prisons and detention centres serve as places of punishment reinforcing a sense of social order. They are places where we incarcerate thousands of young men, disproportionately those who grew up in the care system, are addicted to drugs, have black or brown skin, are mentally unwell.... I'm sure I don't have to go on.

We might ask ourselves how much moral agency those individuals have?

To what extent are they the random victims of our society's failure to provide safe, secure, places of flourishing – homes, schools, hospitals for those left behind by the system?

Have they become the pain-bearers of our society, just as Jesus became the pain bearer for all of us?

In one of the poems in his series following the monastic times of prayer during the day, the poet W.H. Auden reflects on three people's role in the system on Good Friday. The title of the poem, Terce is the prayer marking the beginning of the working day.

The hangman walks his dog,
the judge wonders about the case he will hear,
the poet takes a walk around his garden.
Each is just getting on with life,
yet by the end of the day
there will have been a death.
There will have been a “Good Friday”
and the only person who
has a completely free choice on that day is Jesus.

Everyone else is caught up in a tangle of choices and responsibilities.
Pilate’s search for calm,
the priest’s desire for power,
the soldiers following orders for the sake of a salary, none is exercising
unfettered free will.

We are no less caught up in a world of social, commercial and legal
frameworks that constrain our choices.

Many of them depend on others paying the price for our privilege,
whether it is the migrant worker in the factory where our clothes are made;
the farmer whose land has been strip-mined for the rare minerals in our
phones;
or the van dweller who can’t afford local rents while we benefit from the rising
value of property.

What does it mean to be repentant
when we are caught in this trap?

We might feel sorry or ashamed,
but that isn’t going to change anything much.

We might resolve to make changes,
but we know that our single actions
will have little impact.

But repentance is not just about feeling sorry,
or changing our behaviour,
it is about changing our sense of self.
It is about turning away from self
and turning towards God.

It is a recognition that we are not in control,
which in turn brings questions

about the righteousness of God
who is supposed to be in control
and yet allows all this suffering to occur.

Can we let go of the illusion of choice,
of the illusion of control,
of the illusion that we are individual selves?
Can we let go even when we doubt
whether God is really in control,
or doubt God's goodness?

Look at Jesus on the cross.
That is what he did.
He let go of everything.

The gospels describe his suffering in the moment when this happened,
at the moment when Jesus was paradoxically most human,
because it is the point at which he did not know,
the point at which he handed himself over to us
and to God,
the point of his death,
when he entered the great unknown,
that which is hidden from us all.

It is hard for us to enter this darkness fully,
because we know, or at least we think we know
the end of the story.
If we are courageous,
we may be willing to look at the sin in the world
and acknowledge our part in it.
But, we need not reflect on our sinfulness
as if it were a terminal diagnosis,
because we live in the "now and not yet"
of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Yet, perhaps Lent is the time to become
more fully human
as Christ was full human on the cross.
Sometimes and in some lives, there is no choice. There is no choice for the
pain-bearers in our society, those suffering from chronic illness, those shocked
by bereavement, those trapped by circumstances.

If you are lying in hospital, prison, care-home or hospice, with little or no autonomy, there are few choices.
But most of us have a choice.

We can seek out silence, darkness, stillness, and those situations where we are closer to our own dependence on God,
those situations where we face our own fragility.
We can seek to practice humility, compassion, gratitude, faith.
We can take up our cross and follow Jesus.

May God give us the grace
to know ourselves more fully,
to see ourselves as God sees us,
and to take up the cross,
as we continue to journey through Lent and Holy Week.
Amen