

**Sunday 23rd March 2025**

Practicing the Way – Week 5 ‘Meeting with God in Pain and Suffering.’

Ruth Rhodes on ***Matthew 26v36-42 The garden of Gethsemane [Luke 2v34-35]***

And so this morning's talk is entitled, "Meeting God in Pain and Suffering," and that might seem to strike a jarring tone on what is traditionally such a happy “flowers and sunshine” sort of a day. In fact, Tom Yacomeni did call me in advance and say, "The talk in the sermon series is on pain. Shall we just cover it in the evening?" And I said no, because in so many ways it felt to me that God had planted this a long time back and that it was timely.

Mothering Sunday can be a day of great joy and love and happiness, but it's not always. It can be a day of reflection, of sorrow, of anger, of grief, of remembrance, of regret, for all sorts of different reasons. Our responses will be different, but our God is just the same. And he longs to meet with you in pain and in suffering, right where you are. I hope we might learn a little more this morning about how he meets with us in pain and suffering. Because whether you are someone who is suffering acutely today, whether it's hazily in the background; whether it's suppressed and bubbling under the surface; or whether pain is non-existent for you this morning - the thing is, we will all at some point experience pain and suffering.

And we don't necessarily talk about it or prepare for it enough. It feels only right this morning on Mother's Day to start with Mary, the mother of Jesus. I mean, even for Mary, motherhood didn't come without its trials. Although we don't know a lot about her daily experiences of motherhood, we know she was unmarried and very young when the angel Gabriel dropped the bombshell of her pregnancy. And she faced social stigma. We know that, heavily pregnant, she faced an enormous journey across Israel, and then she gave birth in a stable, or what was possibly a cave, because there was no room in the inn. We know she became a refugee as she and her son fled Herod's tyranny.

And then we know there was that extraordinary moment when she and Joseph lost Jesus, age 12, after a Passover festival, and took three days to track him down. For me, it's like that moment in the '90s TV sitcom *Friends*, where Joey and Chandler leave the baby on the bus. And if you've ever left a child somewhere, I think there's some comfort in that Mary did too, the mother of Jesus.

But I really bring her up this morning for that moment in our first reading, when Mary, with a week old baby Jesus in her arms, goes to the temple to offer the required sacrifices and meets Simeon, who is full of the Holy Spirit and has a prophetic word for her from God. What joyous, helpful word does he have to strengthen and equip this new young mother? "And sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart." Not helpful...but true.

Mary was going to experience sorrow like a sharp sword. She would be left broken-hearted. Like many mothers, she would come to know the unspeakable agony of seeing pain inflicted on her child. For many of us, we can just about bear pain and suffering when it's inflicted on us, but we fall to our knees when it touches those that we love. We would give anything to lift that burden. And being unable to lift it, it is heartbreaking to watch. So, Simeon gets it spot on for Mary. And that moment that he's referring to, when sorrow like a sharp sword will break her heart, is the moment of Jesus' crucifixion, the very moment that he's facing in our second reading.

But the thing is, Simeon's words ring for each one of us, too. "Sorrow like a sharp sword will break your own heart." Not one of us is exempt from this. So how do we deal with it?

There is a whole other talk in the root causes of pain and suffering. And one thing is for sure, we were never promised that we wouldn't face pain. If you have brought into 'the prosperity gospel' (that, as long as you're a Christian, life could only get better and better for you), then you were sold a lie. And Jesus deals in truth. Jesus said, "In this world, you will have pain." And he was right. Martin Luther King Jr. puts it powerfully this way. He says, "Honesty impels me to admit that transformed nonconformity, which is always costly, never altogether comfortable, may mean walking through the valley of the shadow of suffering, losing a job, or having a six-year-old daughter ask, 'Daddy, why do you have to go to jail so much?' But we are gravely mistaken to think that Christianity protects us from the pain and agony of mortal existence. Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear."

One of the reasons I think Luther King Jr.'s quote is so powerful is that we know he lived it. His daughter asks the question because he went to jail 29 times before he was assassinated. And one of the reasons that Jesus' teaching on pain and suffering is so powerful is that he lived it too. In our second reading today, we meet Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. And how is the Son of God? He is distraught. Grief and anguish came over him. He says to Peter and James and John, "The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me."

This is our God. When Jesus goes to Gethsemane, he knows that the cross is next. In this moment, we are allowed a glimpse into the suffering of the Son of God. We know we will suffer in this world. Jesus warned us that we would. God himself is not exempt from the painful torments of this broken world. So, in the passage, what Jesus teaches us here is how to cope when we suffer.

So, let's look closer.

Firstly, in this passage, Jesus shows us that when he's faced with anxiety and exhaustion and dread and fear, he needs to connect with friends and his closest community. Jesus, the Son of God? I mean, surely he would have the strength to go it alone, to brave a stiff upper lip and approach it all with calmness and poise, solo and strong.

On the contrary, Jesus knows that what he faces is torture, and so he turns to his friends. They let him down repeatedly. He finds them asleep. He urges them to keep watch. He finds them asleep *again*. And then a third time (I think there's more than a little hint of annoyance as he says on this third occasion - "Are you *still* sleeping?" Here's the thing. Have you ever been let down by friends in a moment of crisis? I bet you have. I know I have. I also know that I have also been that friend that lets another person down in their moment of crisis, and almost certainly so have you.

We're weak humans, and we don't always know how to respond in a crisis. Sometimes we ourselves just feel too overwhelmed. But the thing is, no matter how faulty us humans are, Jesus models that we still need to reach out to faltering human friendships in times of sorrow. *We need that support*. So, whether that's your home group, family, friends, colleagues, whether that's also professional support services, counselling, your GP, wellbeing charities, whether that's coming for prayer ministry at the end of the service here, the message is clear. *Do not try to get through moments of crisis alone*. When you are in your own Gethsemane, get together with others.

And secondly, Jesus shows us that when faced with deep, deep turmoil and a desperation that things could be different, we need to pray and we need to be honest with God. These prayers are some of the hardest because they are raw, they can be bitter, they can be angry, they can be despairing. Jesus, facing the cross, did not pray, "Well, this will be tough, but I pray you give me the strength I need to see it through." Jesus did not pray shallow. Sometimes I do. I pray shallow prayers because they're safer and I can avoid the risk that God won't answer how I wanted and I'll have to face that.

But Jesus prays deep. Jesus, the Son of God, prays to God, "Take this cup of suffering from me." In other words, "I don't want to do it anymore. Can we change the whole divine plan from the beginning of time and not undo this broken world? Can you make it stop?" If Jesus, who the Bible clearly says never sinned, can pray like this and it's okay, it's not sinful, it's simply honest, then so can we. We can fire our doubts, our anger, our fury, our pain at God.

I've got two examples. The first is from Gerald Manley Hopkins (I'm an English teacher). It's called "Carrion Comfort" and it begins, "Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee". It is Hopkins facing terrible thoughts and doubts and fears. The last line is, "I, wretch, lay wrestling with (my God!) my God." It struck me that that image of Hopkins wrestling with God is powerful. Because although he's fighting God, to wrestle someone you have to be really close. It's an image of fighting and of closeness at the same time, two in one.

Possibly at the other end of the literary scale, my second example is from Adrian Plass. "I suddenly seem to know exactly what to say. I mean, there must be some of us who want to climb up onto God's lap like small children and bash at his chest with our little fists and say, 'I hate you. I asked you to help me and you didn't. You knew what I was feeling. You knew what needed to happen and you didn't do it.' You say you love me, but you don't. If you did, you'd have done something but you didn't."

God doesn't mind you being angry with him. Honestly in my life, I sometimes avoid these deeper prayers but when I've prayed them, it's often been when I felt closest because I'm not holding up a barrier of polite acceptability. I'm praying like I really, really mean it. It's when I'm desperate. Jesus taught us to pray like this, honest, heartbroken, desperate. But there is a little bit more to Jesus' prayer because immediately after his raw honesty, he prays, "Yet not what I want but what you want."

If you've been following Jesus for a while, if you've been apprenticed to this rabbi for a good while, if you've got relationship with God, then you'll know this. This is the hardest bit and also the bit where you surrender the whole situation to him and pray his will over it all. It's where you pivot your prayer from your deepest longings to a longing that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We think God is sealed and strengthened in these moments of pain and suffering because exhausted, we pivot away from our pain and into his arms of grace. And we trust in him for all that we can't see. We take the darkness of our situation and place it into his light, and we leave it there with him.

This might be a plot spoiler if you're new to the church, but Jesus did not get the reprieve from the cross that he was praying over. He was crucified. We will remember it at Easter. But Jesus on the cross is a critical picture of where God is in pain and suffering. People have often asked this logical dilemma, "If God is good, is he not powerful enough to prevent pain? And if God is all-powerful, is he not good enough to care?" They say God cannot be both good and all-powerful and let the world be this broken. It's a good point. For me, the answer is held at the cross.

Dying on the cross, does Jesus look good? No. He's been convicted. He's dying on a criminal's cross. It doesn't look like good. But God has sacrificed his innocent son to counteract the evil of the world. It doesn't look like the work of a good God, but it's the biggest act of love the world has ever seen.

Dying on the cross, does Jesus look all-powerful? Absolutely not. He's been betrayed by one of his closest friends. He has been mocked, stripped, whipped, and nailed to a cross. To die in the cruellest form of execution the Romans could come up with. And spiritually, he faces separation from his father. And Jesus could have called time on it at any point, but he doesn't. He submits to death. Because he is brokering for us a new triumph over death and suffering. He is, once and for all, making it possible for our broken, broken world to be healed. For good to triumph over evil, and pain, and cancer, and death.

It doesn't look like goodness or power, but it's *both*.

I mean, the question of where God is in suffering was the absolute crux of my coming to faith. But it's also something I still wrestle with. To tell you the truth, this is not just academic theory for me right now. It's something my family are living, processing, walking. Our hearts are breaking. We're in Gethsemane prayers, and they're brutally hot.

But one final thought, and I'm coming into land.

Jesus went to Gethsemane to pray, to the garden. And you know, apart from the benefits of nature and natural surroundings when we're in pain, I think there's another reason that Jesus leaves the upper room, heads east through Jerusalem, goes outside the city walls, across the Kidron Valley, and into the garden of Gethsemane. This moment, this crux moment in history is when Jesus will face the choice, the chance to restore the world, to begin to restore what was in Eden. Eden was the garden where the perfect world God had planned was born. Gethsemane is the garden where Jesus makes it possible to restore that vision that God had always intended.

And so this morning, as is the tradition, we will give out beautiful flowers. This morning though I pray that they may be more than a sign of pretty spring petals. May they be a sign to you of the garden, of a good God's perfect vision for the world, and of God's plan to restore that world. May they give you hope as you face the situations that you and your loved ones face. And as you see them in your home this week, may you be reminded of Jesus' pattern for facing pain. One, reach out to friends, draw close those you love and share your pain with them. And two, fall into God, pouring out honest, deep prayers that pivot from pain to trust, to pain, to trust, to pain, to trust. Gethsemane to Eden, Eden to Gethsemane.