

Good Friday 2020

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last.

⁴⁷ The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, 'Surely this was a righteous man.' ⁴⁸ When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. ⁴⁹ But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

(Luke 23:44-49)

It must have been a tremendous crowd. It was a public holiday after all. Jerusalem was full of pilgrims, but being on pilgrimage wasn't going to stop people making the most of what there was to see. Even horror and cruelty draws crowds, and a public execution was a spectacle. Not something you'd see in a quiet fishing town on the shores of Galilee so it was worth having a look to see what was really happening. Of course, with all these crowds there had to be extra policing as well. The Roman army was out in force, most of them not having a clue why the crowds were in Jerusalem and certainly even less of a clue as to why a layabout carpenter should have deserved capital punishment.

But things got even more sensational. It went dark. The veil of the temple fell apart. Strange times, strange happenings. Then Jesus died. He handed himself over to the Father and the life went out of him. Show over. It left its mark though. The centurion knew that this man shouldn't have suffered as he did. The crowds dispersed beating their breasts, maybe as a show of guilt, of remorse or perhaps grief. Whatever the reason the sightseeing rabble were moved to demonstrate feelings.

But what of the people who really knew Jesus, his acquaintances, the people who had been with him on his journey from Galilee, the women who supported him and his mother, Mary. They were there but they stood at a distance watching these things. Yes, at a distance. They didn't dare come close. They didn't dare show that they were his friends. How it must have hurt.

I think this year more than ever before we can understand what it meant to stand at a distance. The country is in lockdown. We have to keep two meters apart from anyone who isn't a member of our household. We can't travel to see friends or relations. We're doing it to keep ourselves safe. At the same time, we're looking on, we're watching as people succumb to the virus. We know that should any of us require hospitalisation our families wouldn't be allowed to visit. We would be kept separate, even those treating us would seem faceless as they work in protective clothing. What we also know is that not everyone will survive. There are deaths every day. Deaths that have to be mourned at a distance.

So this year we stand alongside the acquaintances and the women, in their bewilderment, not knowing what was ahead of them, not understanding how the one who promised them the eternal kingdom should be taken from them in such a harsh and cruel way. But despite their grief, their shock and their horror they still remained, they remained in faith. That is our task today too, to remain firm, to remember the promises of Jesus and in the midst of uncertainty to hold to the faith that God's Son was sent to save humankind and to bring us to eternal life. Amen