

Intro to Holy Week

Is there one who would not weep,
 whelmed in miseries so deep...¹
 "Stabat Mater"

Whereas Advent can generally be described as an ascent to light, Holy Week, by contrast, moves us in the opposite direction – in a descent into darkness. Even though we, by faith and hindsight, might see past the darkness of Good Friday to the bright dawn of Easter morn, we are invited to enter imaginatively into this time, suspending our foreknowledge of the Resurrection so that we, like Mary at the foot of the cross, may stand in solidarity with all those who know of no such hope, and for reasons that may surprise us.

Since the beginning of this project, when I set out to write something helpful on the spiritual tradition of the Christian calendar year, I have been dreading coming to this sequence of reflections on Holy Week. This is partly because I already have a difficult enough time keeping a lid on the various sorrows of my own experience – traumas and griefs that are yet raw – and partly because I find the whole matter and necessity of Jesus' suffering and death to be incomprehensible. If you are like me, the temptation is to want to theologize our way past human suffering, thereby diminishing its horror in an attempt to shield ourselves from it. When our attempts to do so fail, we don't like it.

The story, briefly and flatly stated, is that shortly after Jesus made the bold statement "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), and after encouraging his followers to therefore follow him, he went and got himself killed.

It's a little abrupt, but that's what happened.

There's more to the story, but it's not hard to imagine how any claim to Jesus' messiahship would be considered "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23). Indeed, most of us would expect and prefer our saviours to save us from death, not lead us into it.

In a dream, I once found myself at the end of a scowling pirate's sword, being pushed to the edge of a gangplank that cantilevered terrifyingly over a baited swirl of hungry sharks below. A sense of horror mixed with the deepest sadness overwhelmed as I realized that all hope was lost and that my untimely end would also be friendless, painful and unmarked. Suddenly, swinging in on a rope, came a swashbuckling saviour – a heroic Robin Hood figure – dashing and brave and sure to save, and I was overjoyed at the sudden possibility of an unforeseen way out of my

¹ "Stabat Mater" (Latin for "the grieving or mournful mother") is a 13th-century hymn to Mary based on Simeon's prophecy "and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35). You can listen to various recordings of the hymn on YouTube.

calamity. But then, to my disbelief, rather than engage the menacing pirate in battle, my rescuer loosed the rope with a flick of his wrist and then wrapped it around the two of us before rushing us both headlong off the plank into the feeding frenzy below. All I could think as we tumbled to our bloody doom was (pardon my language) “What the hell?!”

The dream was almost comical in its absurdity. But there you have it. Inasmuch as the dream reflects our own faith, the cornerstone on which the Christian story turns is understandably both foolishness and a stumbling block to anyone of reasonably good sense.

Here I am reminded that our story, the Christ story, is not first and foremost about good sense. Rather, it is a mystery to be pondered and not a problem to be solved or a calamity to be avoided. Our orientation towards it is more appropriately that of prayerful, patient attention than anything else. For, incomprehensibility aside, I am also convinced there is a gift here.

During Holy Week, the tempo of our attention slows to a walking pace as we, with Jesus, turn our face towards Jerusalem, that most puzzling city where practical good sense is lauded and love is religiously opposed. We enter into the *passion* of Jesus who, after three years of active ministry throughout Galilee, suddenly and surprisingly turns *passive* (which is the archaic meaning of ‘passion’). He is no longer commanding seas, no longer healing limbs, no longer challenging powers. Instead, he becomes increasingly mute and docile as he allows himself to be humiliated and led where no one would ever wish to go.

What then should our posture be as we enter reflectively into this week? John’s Gospel gives us a clue in its reference to Mary, the mother of Jesus, with these simple words: “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother...” (19:25).

The scriptures say little about Mary. However, given her significance in the drama of salvation, we should perk up and pay attention when they do. In the darkest hour, Mary – the blessed *Theotokos* (God-bearer), the first Christian and mother of the Church – simply *stood near the cross*. Her response to the tragic circumstance, before anything else, was proximity. The agonizingly beautiful 13th-century Latin hymn “Stabat Mater,” which commemorates Mary’s co-suffering presence at the cross, opens with these lines:

At the Cross her station keeping,
stood the mournful Mother weeping,
close to her Son to the last.

This is true compassion: ‘com’ meaning *with*, and ‘passion’ archaically cognate with the word *passive*, which reveals true compassion to be more of a *suffering with* the helplessly suffering rather than feeling sorry for them or actively seeking ways to alleviate their suffering.

Sometimes, before anything else, presence is the most important thing. I have a personal story that may help to uncover the reason why.

Years ago, my wife, Nanci, and I decided that, besides having our own biological children, we wanted to foster as well. So, one day after we passed through the appropriate procedures for becoming foster parents, six-year-old Ruby Lynne came into our lives. She was of Oji-Cree descent and as such bore the profound wounds of a people who had endured five generations of cruel and dehumanizing trauma under a religiously sanctioned colonialism that tragically is a significant part of my nation’s (Canada’s) foundational story. Ruby had physical problems as well. We soon discovered she had a tumour in her left leg that was slowly eating up and

displacing her calf muscle. It would have to be removed, and the doctors couldn't say how much the removal would affect her ability to walk after the operation.

My first response was that this simply must not happen. There *must* be an alternative to an 80-stitch scar and permanent disability. We needed another opinion, another procedure. We needed prayer and miracle. Certainly a loving God would not put a child who had already suffered through so much through further miseries.

But the day came for the operation. Little was left to do but submit to it. This was to be her passion and our passion.

After the surgery, Ruby needed someone to sit with her through those first long nights when unmanageable pain often caused her to cry out, begging for relief. I've never felt so helpless, and all I could do was to stay near, hold her hand and cry with her. However, something else was going on... something I hadn't foreseen. Before the operation, I can't say I loved her in a personal sense... not the way I loved my own children, at least. She wasn't my child. We didn't have a history. And she could easily be taken back home or to another family at any time. There was a natural and appropriate distance. But somehow through those nights, and through those tears and the shared helplessness, I fell in love with Ruby, deeply and irrecoverably. Awful as it was, I got a daughter out of the deal, and she got a dad. That Ruby later got full use of her leg is the lesser miracle and gift.

If you have attended to the story of Jesus' crucifixion in John's Gospel, you should be sensing a resonance here.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (John 19:26, 27)

Also standing nearby (*with passion*) was the beloved disciple. His and Mary's shared helpless suffering created a new kinship – a new family. There is a profound mystery here that I am unable to fully articulate, but that I suspect has something to do with the inbreaking of the "kin-dom" of God which, in the end, is the strange promise of a crucified Messiah.

In the face of hopelessness and loss, let love overcome our horror. Let us with Mary and the beloved disciple stand near. Let us ponder these things in our own hearts and bear with patience the sorrows that the fruit of our compassion and love will transform into communion and joy.

THE RIDDLE SONG²

music and lyrics by Ken Medema

I'm on my way on a long, long journey
And I don't know where the road ends
I'm on my way on a long, long journey
Surprises await me around the bend

Take my hand and walk beside me
The road is long and brief the rest
Take my hand and walk beside me
The answer to this riddle is a quest

² For more on Ken Medema and his body of work, visit www.kenmedema.com.

And the riddle says:

Finding leads to losing
Losing lets you find
Living leads to dying
But life leaves death behind
Losing leads to finding
That's all that I can say
No one will find life any other way.

Listen to the above song at www.pilgrimyear.com/songs: Holy Week, Chapter One.