

I've found that the story of Good Friday has taken on a new significance and depth for me in this time of pandemic. I've noticed that there are elements of the Good Friday narrative which I've overlooked before in a different context. In these brief reflections I'm going to explore three aspects of the pandemic experience that we see playing out in the story of the crucifixion.

Let me begin by drawing your attention to the significance of the passivity of Jesus in the story. We've been fighting for a year now, this war against this virus. We've been told over and over again that the most helpful thing we can do is to stay at home and do nothing. We've all been encouraged to be passive. In this context, I was drawn to what I've noticed again is the passivity of Jesus in this story. It's no coincidence that we call this the passion. It's the same root as the word to be passive. There's a huge shift in the gospel narrative from the moments in the Garden of Gethsemane when Judas hands Jesus over to the authorities. I use that phrase handover deliberately.

The word that's often used to describe what Judas did in the garden is betray. But that's actually not the best translation of the Greek word that is used here. It's not the best translation of what Judas actually does. There are 33 references to what Judas does to Jesus in the gospels. Only one of them can properly be translated as our word betrayed. The other 32 are better understood as handed over. Judas handed Jesus over.

The shift that happens in the story at this point is that up to this moment in the story, Jesus has been the center of all the action in the gospels. He heals, He teaches, He casts out demons. But from this point onwards, all the verbs associated with Jesus are passive. He was scorned. He was bound. He was questioned. He was stripped. He was pierced. He was beaten. He was crucified. Every single verb is passive. Jesus was done to. He went from being active to passive. He went from being the subject of all the verbs in the narrative to the object.

Jesus was handed over. That phrase comes many times in the passion narrative. We see it in what we've just heard when Pilate handed him over to be crucified. And yet John would have us know that just as Jesus becomes passive and His actions cease, so His glory is most fully revealed. His glory can be most fully seen as He is lifted up on the cross. There's a great lesson here. Even God could be passive. It's not all about action and being. It's

all about being. Jesus in this passion story reveals the God who Himself of His own will is handed over from action to passion.

Good Friday is a day to respond to what God has done for us in Christ Jesus and His sacrifice for us by simply handing ourselves back to Him.

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Excruciating is a Good Friday word. It comes from the Latin word "out of the cross". The Latin speaking Romans went out of their way to devise the most vile form of public execution. And it was them who came up with this idea of crucifixion. They didn't just want to kill those that they deemed criminal. They wanted it to be a painful, slow, excruciating death. They wanted it to be a public spectacle and a deterrent to others. They wanted it to totally humiliate the victim. It was a slow and deliberate stripping away of someone's pride and humanity. This year for us has involved a stripping away.

I remember one frivolous example from this time last year when my son, Jacob came to visit us. He got the last plane from London to San Diego. This was the early days of the pandemic before we realized how serious it really was. And on the way back from the airport, we talked about all the fun things that we could do whilst he was with us. The day after he arrived, we had a beautiful round of golf at Torrey Pines. The very next day, the courses closed. Then we played a game of tennis and the next week the tennis courts were closed. Well at last we consoled ourselves, we can always have a run on the beach. Sure enough, the next week the beaches were closed. And all the things that we'd plan to do together were stripped away. We'll all have stories like that from this last year.

And crucifixion is all about stripping away, it was designed to strip away all of the victim's humanity. It was designed to shame and degrade them, so they had nothing left. As Joel Green says, "executed publicly, situated a major crossroads devoid of clothing, left to be eaten by birds and beasts, victims of crucifixion were subject to optimal, unmitigated vicious ridicule." No Roman citizen was ever crucified. It was reserved for the lowest of the low.

That's why it was much harder for the early church to come to grips with the idea of a crucified savior than

perhaps it is for us. We're not so aware of the shame and the degradation that was involved in crucifixion. When St. Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." He's saying that because lots of people thought that he should be ashamed of worshiping a crucified savior. People would have said, how can you possibly worship someone who was so degraded, who was stripped of everything? But St. Paul recognized that the stripping away of everything that Jesus had was part of his message. That's why he says that Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

It's significant to St. Paul that Jesus was crucified. It's not just that he died for us. It's the manner of his death which St. Paul sees as significant. No other form of execution would have been commensurate with the extremity of humanity's condition under sin. Jesus went to the furthest most godless, most godforsaken place in order to redeem it. He was stripped of everything in order that God can be clearly revealed in what looks like the most godless place on Earth.

So this Good Friday as we come before the cross once more, I invite you to respond to the savior from whom everything was stripped by thinking about what needs to be stripped away from our own lives. The nakedness of Jesus on the cross highlights our own love of hiding behind masks and costumes. All of that has to go, the religiosity with which we like to surround ourselves needs to be stripped away. The hardest sin to forgive is the sin of self-deception, as the self-deceived do not know the radical need for forgiveness.

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One of the most shocking aspects of this pandemic is the fact that so many people have had to die alone. You'll have heard the stories I'm sure of people pathetically crying out for their family as their life ebbs away. Saying goodbye on Zoom just doesn't seem adequate. How sad and how terrible to pass away in such circumstances.

As I read the Good Friday story again with those images in my mind, I noticed that Jesus himself befell a similar fate. Jesus's mother couldn't hold him as he lay dying. She could offer no final words. And Jesus could not take any comfort from his Heavenly Father it appears. He cries out from the cross though, quoting those words from Psalms 22, "My God, my God, why hast thou

forsaken me?" Notice how Jesus doesn't use the more intimate word for God that he uses elsewhere in the Gospel, a word like Abba. No, he calls out to God, a sign of the separation, the sense of estrangement that he's feeling here. Jesus dies alone, forsaken.

The story of the Crucifixion is shocking. And this year I've discovered even more profoundly shocking elements, things that I hadn't noticed before. It's just impossible to imagine the pain, the horror, the sheer bleakness of crucifixion. It's impossible to imagine a more stripped down, excruciating, and forsaken way of dying. It speaks to me of how God in Christ was prepared to win us for himself, the lengths he was prepared to go to win us for himself. He redeemed even the furthest extremity of human experience. There is nowhere we can go that is a pain greater than the pain that he experienced on the Cross. There is no horror that we might face, that God in Christ has not already tasted. Jesus has redeemed even the darkest extremity of human suffering.

Let me close by reading some familiar words from Isaiah, "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

Amen.