

Holy Week Sermons at Holy Trinity Headington Quarry, 2021
Love, Loss and Life, explored through the writings of C.S. Lewis

Good Friday: Loss

In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis writes: 'pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world'. That is to say, pain has an insistence about it that cannot be ignored. It stops us in our tracks; it disrupts our plans; it calls out to be attended to in some way. At no point does this mean that God is the one who causes pain; what it means is that God can speak through our pain to reveal something important.

Yesterday we reflected on the theme of love, and the love language expressed in some of Jesus's last moments with his disciples. Today, the focus is on loss—and in particular, the pain of loss attached to suffering and death. Love and suffering, it seems, are connected. Lewis puts it this way: 'Of all the arguments against love', none makes so strong an appeal to my nature as "Careful! This might lead you to suffering.'" To love another person is to open up the possibility of getting hurt. To love the entire creation opens God up to that same possibility. That is the mystery we ponder on Good Friday.

I need to tread carefully and gently over territory that may be raw for many of us. Some of us may be recently bereaved; all of us are aware that in this country alone there are around 150,000 sets of families and friends facing bereavement because someone they love has died from Covid-19. This is no moment for empty platitudes or lengthy preaching. It is a moment to stand still and to ponder the mystery of the Cross—God's great act of solidarity with a suffering and wounded and grieving world.

Jesus, the crucified one, carries this mystery of universal suffering—the consequence of universal love — within himself, and he carries it in order to change it and change us. 'Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases' (Isa 53.4). The pain of the cross acts as a kind of megaphone: revealing something about our worst human tendencies: to blame, to scapegoat, to lie, to hurt and betray others, to remain silent in the face of injustice. How far we can fall from the path of great love that we are asked to follow. On the Cross, Jesus the divine and human one, somehow holds and carries the very worst that is in us, and invites us to confront it and change — not blaming or walking away, but facing up to the truth of things: 'For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth'. The truth that nothing in creation is beyond the scope of divine love and transformation.

The pain and loss of this pandemic has also, in a way, acted as a megaphone: crying out for our attention, stopping us in our tracks, disrupting our plans, and enabling us to hear things that were perhaps only half-heard before—about our society and government, our pace of life, our work patterns, our attitude to the natural world. As we gaze on Jesus the crucified one today, we might call to mind the very worst of what we have experienced this past year, all that we have lost, all the suffering we have witnessed or felt, and allow Jesus to hold and carry it, and change us through it. After all, the pandemic has enabled us to see that suffering really is universal, and that our own individual experiences of suffering and loss are somehow part of the one great suffering of all. The suffering of the pandemic has connected us and increased our awareness of our shared human predicament. The sadness and loss that I feel now is part of something bigger than me. As Lewis puts it: 'pain shatters our illusion of self-sufficiency'.

The recognition of our shared suffering is, I think, a step towards solidarity with all who suffer, and brings us a step closer to the foot of the Cross: God's great act of solidarity with a suffering and wounded and grieving world. This not just something God does for us, but something we are invited to participate in, too. Each time we gaze on Jesus the crucified one, our hearts may just become a little bit softer, a little bit more forgiving, a little bit more compassionate towards ourselves and all who suffer. Each time we gaze on Jesus the crucified one, we may just be changed a little, and better able to confront the suffering of this past year.

In his published journal of grief, *A Grief Observed*, Lewis comments: "Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape." As we gaze on Jesus the crucified one, who carries the mystery of universal suffering within himself and within the heart of God, we reflect on the long, winding valley of this pandemic, and we pray for the grace to face up the truth of things — to hear the megaphone — and to be changed. Amen.

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