

The Courier Good Friday 2014

WHY EASTER IS STILL IMPORTANT

The Easter story is full of counterpoints and questions: why is Good Friday 'good'? What does Jesus's resurrection mean? It can seem today as though the significance of Holy Week and Easter is forgotten or diminished under the sheer weight of Easter commercialism.

And yet, in so many ways the poignant 25th anniversary of the Hillsborough Disaster on Tuesday encapsulated the life and death story of human pain and hope which is the Holy Week story. In instinctive human empathy we remember a tragedy. We saw how impeccably the crowded football stadiums across the UK last weekend observed a silence to commemorate the 96 fans who died.

Happenstance found me there on the Hillsborough terraces in 1989 as a Nottingham Forest supporter and the experience has left its mark on me. It was harrowing watching people dying and this is something that you just cannot forget. My heart goes out to the Liverpool families who lost loved ones and still await answers about what happened and why.

Many felt the same way about the death of Jesus, a self-evidently good man. For Christians world-wide today is Good Friday, the day when we recall the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. Why 'good'? It's a question which puzzles not only children but many adults too. It seems such an odd way to describe a bleak and cruel first century tragedy. In Denmark it's called 'Long Friday', reflecting Christ's long and agonising death, while in Germany it is known as 'Sorrowful' or 'Suffering Friday'.

A simple answer is that Good Friday is good in the sense of a Holy Friday because Jesus's death was the final act of a good and holy person. Good Friday is good because the death of Christ, terrible though it was, led to the resurrection on Easter Sunday, which brought new life to those who believe.

When I was growing up Good Friday had a very special character – quieter and more restrained even than a Sunday. My mum forbade me to go out and play or ride my bike. It was not just a holiday but a Holy Day. Nowadays Good Friday is long overtaken as a normal working day and by shopping and sporting events - this year for the first time in Britain horse racing meetings will take place on Good Friday. This is not new: first century Jerusalem was also crowded and busy. For its Jewish community it was the religious Passover Festival. A time for family and friends. Roman crucifixions of zealots and criminals were nasty and all too common. Not a time to gawp.

We often do not make enough time or space for quiet and reflection in our lives. Good Friday provides a special opportunity for us to do so. I will be in St Pauls Cathedral in Dundee this afternoon for the words and music of the Meditation at the Cross. Popping into church for a while to be quiet, to hear again the story of Jesus's death on a cross and to ponder its meaning for us today can be a moving experience. The genius of Good Friday services is that you do not have to stay for the whole time, although many do. You can simply turn up or leave as you feel able

It sometimes takes a shocking moment, a catastrophe like Calvary or Hillsborough, to shake us out of our secure categories to realise that things are not as we assumed. The Good Friday Agreement, the historic peace deal signed in Northern Ireland in 1998, signalled an end to the infamous Troubles and against the odds announced a belief that good times can emerge even out of very bad times.

The resurrection story is for those who struggle with meaninglessness and loss, anxiety and regret – those fearful moments when we feel out of depth. The tomb is truly empty and the disciples did encounter Jesus risen from the dead. Resurrection is finding ourselves in a new world recognising light, hope and eternity in our faith in God. A world in which hatred and death can be defeated through the transformation of people's lives. The Welsh poet R S Thomas appreciated this when he wrote of the Cross sprouting leaves and, "not a crown of thorns, but a crown of flowers haloing it, with a bird singing as though perched on paradise's threshold".

Children in Primary 5 were doing the Easter story. They knew about Jesus, the Good Friday Cross and Easter Day and the real meaning of Easter eggs. 'So what do you think happened on the Saturday?' asked the chaplain. The class went quiet until a boy tentatively put up his hand: 'Please miss, I think Jesus went to rescue his friend Judas.' Even Judas Iscariot, weak disciple, cynical betrayer and whose pathetic suicide was, in Jesus's eyes, redeemable from hell's grasp. No death need be in vain and nobody is excluded from the possibility of resurrection.

However you are keeping the Easter weekend I hope it will give some time for personal reflection and a happy and peaceful time with family and friends.

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