

Session 3: The Suffering Jesus Transcript

Hello everyone and thanks for making it through to the third session of our Lent Course, Knowing Jesus. Let's just recap where we have got to so far.

In session one we looked at Acts 1 and the Ascended Jesus, discovering how the whole book of Acts is played out in the light of that cosmic event, one which releases the Holy Spirit into the Church.

The disciples were sent with the Good News, so in session two we explored the Sending Jesus, using our imaginations to dig down into the story of Philip in Acts 8 to see how it is the saving work of Jesus on the cross that motivates us to live the Christian life and share our faith.

But that sending was tough for the apostles. Almost without exception they endured hardship, persecution and martyrdom, some of it engineered by Saul. So in this third session we will explore the Suffering Jesus.

This may be a challenging session for some of you, particularly those who have lived through times of suffering or who are doing so now. We will most certainly end up in a place of hope and of life. But if the journey there is a hard one for you, please do make sure you look to your church to find the support and care you need.

Why does a good God allow people to suffer? That is probably the toughest question we have to address either in our own lives or when we are sharing our faith with others. And it is particularly acute against the current backdrop. A seemingly endless crisis in the NHS means that many struggle to access the support they need, especially those living with poor mental health. The recent global pandemic still carries hard memories and has confronted us with the fragility of human life. The world seems such a dangerous and unpredictable place right now with endless rumours of war and no one sure what is going to happen next in places like Iran, the Holy Land or South America. Then there is the constant backdrop of events that shake our faith: bereavement, crime, natural disaster. As people of faith, we are bound to ask, 'Why does God allow all this? Couldn't he have engineered a world in which suffering does not exist?'

The answer is – suffering is not God's intention for his people. That question in itself suggests that he has somehow permitted suffering or wants it to be, as if it were part of his design. But God hates it when his people suffer. Most suffering is a result not of God's neglect of us but of human decision making. People suffer because we live in a fallen and sinful world. People suffer because we make decisions based solely on our own greedy desire for power rather than on the common good. People suffer because sin has brought disunity and death into the world.

The Father does not *allow* suffering. The Father does not want you to suffer, ever. He hates suffering. Which is why the Father sends the Son. Jesus was born to deal with human sin and pain. Jesus was born as part of God's plan to bring about a new creation where suffering exists no more.

And the way Jesus deals with suffering is by entering into it. I remember many years ago running a young people's residential for some really challenging children from a North East estate. One night two of the boys, two cousins, started fighting. I told them to stop from a distance, but they took no notice. So in the end the only way to stop the fight was to get down to their level, to interpose myself between them, literally splitting them up. I was the one getting kicked punched instead of them and it hurt. But it stopped the fight.

That's how Jesus deals with human suffering. He doesn't stay distant and aloof and command things from on high. Rather he comes down to our level, he gets involved, he deals with suffering by suffering himself.

In the Incarnation, Jesus takes from the Virgin Mary a body that is capable of suffering and capable of death. One of the most influential of the early theologians was a man called Athanasius who lived in the fourth century. He argued that only what is truly suffered can be truly healed. It is by living amongst us and entering into our suffering that Jesus heals us.

So in Jesus we have a God who suffers. He's not faking it. He feels genuine grief when his friend Lazarus dies. In the Garden of Gethsemane as he anticipates his death, the words that Mark uses to describe his anguish and terror are incredibly strong ones. He is distressed, he is agitated, he sweats drops of blood. This is desperate, terrible suffering whilst his friends sleep.

And then the reality of the cross is even worse. Unspeakable emotional and physical pain, the abandonment of his friends, the humiliation of mockery and public nakedness, the agony of the nails. God lies bleeding in the dust. God is stripped bare for all to see. God is hung on the wood, spat upon, abused, laughed at. His suffering is so dreadful and profound that he even feels abandonment as he quotes the psalm and cries out, 'Why have you forsaken me?' This is our God. This is Jesus.

And it doesn't stop. Still, today, Jesus suffers. When he appears to the disciples after the resurrection he bears the terrible wounds of the cross. Still he bears those wounds. Still he suffers with and for a suffering world.

But this is God. Suffering may afflict him, but it cannot hold sway over him. Jesus rises from the dead. He is triumphant over suffering. And so by taking suffering to himself, Jesus transforms suffering. He gives it sense and purpose. And that means two things. First that our suffering is never pointless. Second, that the reign of suffering will one day end.

To see what I mean, let's look at Stephen in Acts 6 and 7. Like Philip he takes the stage, plays his part and then drifts off again. But crikey, what a part he plays. Stephen is one of those in whom the Good News of Jesus cannot be silenced. All sorts of Jewish leaders try to out-argue him, but he just won't shut up. *'This man never stops saying things!'* the leaders complain. So he is dragged before the Council in Jerusalem. You'd think he might have the sense to shut up now, but not a bit of it. In Chapter 7 he preaches a sermon that is like an AI summary of the whole Bible and concludes, *'You stiff-necked people are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit.'* So they stone him.

But look what happens when he dies. He gazes up into heaven and sees Jesus standing – not sitting this time but standing to welcome him. Like Jesus he prays for those who are persecuting him. Like Jesus who said from the cross, 'Into your hands I commend my spirit, Stephen prays 'Lord Jesus receive my spirit.' The death of Stephen is an echo of the death of Jesus. In fact it's more than an echo. In his suffering and death, Stephen is united with the suffering and death of Jesus.

That uniting of our suffering and the suffering of Jesus is a big theme in St Paul's letters. Paul knew full well what it meant to suffer and his letters try and make sense of it all. In Philippians 3, 10, Paul writes, *'That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.'* In Romans 6, 5 he says: *'If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.'*

This is exactly what is lived out in the suffering and death of Stephen. First his suffering is not without purpose. It is united with the suffering of Christ and so becomes part of the mystery of how Jesus is saving the world. Secondly his suffering is not the end of the story. In the heat of it he gazes up into heaven where Jesus welcomes him home. Suffering is defeated through the cross of Jesus Christ. It's days are numbered. One day we like Stephen will know the beauty and glory of being saved from pain and welcomed home to Jesus to gaze upon his face for ever.

So does God allow suffering? No he does not. Instead he sends Jesus to deal with suffering by entering into it and overcoming it. So let's move on and ask, what does it mean to know this suffering Jesus? What does it mean for us to be in intimate relationship with the Christ who bleeds and dies and cries out in pain and gives away his life for us? I think we can say three things about that.

First his suffering is the proof of his love. There is a powerful story about a Franciscan priest called Maximilian Kolbe who was sent to Auschwitz. One day, the Nazis announced they were going to punish the inmates by murdering one in ten of their number, literally decimating them. One of the men who was chosen, a father of children, burst into tears and pleaded for his life. Maximilian stepped forward and volunteered to die in the man's place. He was led off and starved to death. That is an incredible act of love because Maximilian suffered on behalf of his fellow prisoner.

That's what Jesus does. He didn't need to step into this world of pain. He did so out of love. He didn't need to experience the abandonment of the cross. He did so out of love. He didn't need to experience the pain and suffering you feel. He does so out of love. You are loved by Jesus beyond your wildest imagining, loved so much that suffering with you and dying for you is a small price to pay.

St Catherine of Siena is one of a number of spiritual writers who have meditated on the wounds of Jesus, and she makes particular play of the wound inflicted by the lance which reaches through to the heart of Jesus. That wound, she says exposes and reveals the profundity of his love for us. It lays it bare. To be a Christian is simply to say yes to that love, to believe yourself worthy of such love. A love proved by suffering.

Second his suffering gives our suffering purpose. When we suffer, we share in the suffering of Jesus. We don't suffer alone, he is our companion. The Christian life is not an escape route from suffering. That is a mistake that many Christians make. They are offended if suffering comes their way after they have given their lives to Jesus, as if faith were some sort of vaccine from the world's pain.

But suffering is not something we can simply escape from or avoid in this life and in this sinful world. It is inevitable. It is part of the mystery of our humanity. Yet if we stay close to Jesus, our suffering is not pointless. It unites us with the suffering of Christ and so becomes part of the story of the world's salvation.

St Catherine talks about the Christian bathing in the wounds of Jesus. As our suffering is united with his, we are washed clean and our pain is ministered to. Our life in Jesus may not be a vaccine but it is most certainly a medicine.

And third his suffering destroys suffering for ever. Jesus takes on human suffering in order to overcome it. After the resurrection his body carries the wounds but it is gloriously and wonderfully alive. By being drawn by Jesus into the life and being of God, suffering is overcome through the power of love.

This is why sometimes those who pray for healing do indeed find extraordinary and miraculous healing which is something I saw from time to time in when I ministered in a place of pilgrimage in Walsingham. In such supernatural events Jesus is reassuring not just the healed person, but all who believe in him, that his power is stronger than human pain and suffering. He is pointing us to his kingdom where pain and tears are no more and where all are one in Jesus Christ.

And that sure and certain hope in the future can strengthen us to live with suffering in the present. However deep it may be it cannot last and will not last for Christ is all in all and his triumph has already been won.

So in this session, in our 'knowing about' Jesus we have seen how by taking on a body, he can enter into human suffering in order to overcome it. And in our 'knowing Jesus we

have seen how we can be in relationship with the suffering Jesus, one that makes sense of our own suffering. So when you are living with pain, or supporting another person in a time of suffering, look to the suffering Christ, look to the wounds of Jesus. Let's end this challenging session with a beautiful and ancient prayer to Jesus:

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O Good Jesus, hear me.
Within your wounds hide me.
Permit me not to be separated from you.
From the wicked foe, defend me.
At the hour of my death, call me
and bid me come to you
That with your saints I may praise you
For ever and ever. Amen.