

WEEKLY SERMON

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Low Sunday

This Sunday is also known as Low Sunday.

Low by name, low by nature? It's been lovely hearing about elevated congregations and families returning to church last Easter Sunday. Sometimes the highs of the Christian life are very closely connected to the lows. Like Elijah after his fiery encounter with Ahab: "Take my life" ... then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. (1 Kings 19.5)

"It's all downhill from here".

Usually, I am pleased to hear these words. At the end of a long walk, a long meeting... they reassure me that the end is in sight.

But Holy Week - the same words applied– "It's all downhill from here". But not in a good way.

On Palm Sunday, we remembered the amazing, red-carpet welcome Jesus received when he entered Jerusalem. The crowds went wild, cheering him along the roadsides, waving palm branches. At last. Here's our long-awaited Messiah, our conquering hero – the beginning of the end of Roman occupation.

But it's all downhill from here.

By Good Friday, those same Romans have flogged Jesus. Within an inch of his life. Nailed him to a Cross – that perfected form of 1st century torture. Victims would die a slow, painful public death. Shamed, rejected, alone.

After six hours, eye-witnesses [in Mark's gospel] record his final, agonising cry: "My God, my God why have you abandoned me?" And there was absolutely no answer. Whatsoever. The skies were silent. Nothing left of those red-carpet hopes. His body was taken down, buried underground.

I find it's hard to talk about my pain. I like to bury it. Underground. Us British tend to pack up our troubles in our old kit bag and smile, smile, smile. Especially when pain and suffering seem so pointless. When I read the news from Ukraine, the atrocities that are coming to light as Russian troops withdraw, I scroll through my newsfeed to find a story with a happier ending. If God was in control, if God was real, this wouldn't have happened.

In my family we've had our fair share of bereavement. By the time I was 42, I was the oldest person on both sides of family. My experience is there is never an answer for why. Why this suffering? Why now? Why me? Sometimes life can seem all downhill from here. And not in a good way. My instinct is to bury my pain underground.

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But Christians believe that there's a new week coming. A happier ending. This time last week was Easter Sunday. The feast of feasts! Jesus's death is not the end of the story. Pain, shame, rejection don't have the last word. At dawn on Easter Day, a universe-shattering power brought Jesus back from the dead.

Yes it is all downhill from here... but if I keep reading to the end of the Bible, I find that with Jesus, it's downhill to a place where one day "God will wipe every tear from our eyes". Where one day "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain." (Revelation 21)

Bishop Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster