

Some Reflections for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Faith and Suffering

In our church year, this Sunday is marked out as the beginning of 'Passiontide'. This may seem a strange term to use, but, in this context, the word 'passion' is derived from the Latin word for suffering, as our focus turns to Palm Sunday and Holy Week, and the suffering of Jesus on the cross.

The gospel reading for Sunday is a long passage from chapter 11 of John's gospel, the dramatic account of the raising of Lazarus, which is a story of hope and new life discovered through suffering, grief and loss.

Any experience of suffering raises questions for our faith, about where God is, and how we may discover that God is present and at work, in the suffering that we and our loved ones experience. In the midst of all that is going on in our country, and around the world, we may be particularly aware of those questions at the moment.

I have a short book about the Psalms as a guide for prayer, written by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His faith compelled him to join the resistance to the Nazi regime in his country, and this led to him being imprisoned and eventually executed in 1945. A few years earlier, in this book he had written:

We now know that there can be no suffering on earth in which Christ is not with us, suffering and praying alongside us, the only one who can help.

It is in the nature of human life that we are hurt, we struggle, we suffer – all of us, in some measure, at some times. So there are times when a suffering God is 'the only one who can help', when we need the assurance that God who knows the depths of our suffering, and that is what God offers us in the suffering and death of Jesus, which is the way of hope, of resurrection and new life.

Revd John Waller

Lord Jesus Christ,
you have taught us
that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters
we do also for you:
give us the will to be the servant of others
as you were the servant of all,
and gave up your life and died for us,
but are alive and reign, now and for ever. Amen.