

WORD IN ACTION

Jesus will teach you

I am a parish priest and belong to a religious order in a big parish in Lancashire. I am increasingly aware of what a wonderful Dominican in Florence said to another religious. The Dominican had a terminal illness that made him weaker and weaker over a period of years. Many people went to visit him. One religious, seeing him helpless in his sick-bed a few weeks before he died, and seeing in him the face of Jesus crucified and forsaken, confided to the dying monk that he personally felt he had never ever understood Jesus forsaken.

Father Jonathan Cotton shares his experience of going beyond his own tiredness during the busy time of Holy Week.

How would the dying man advise him?

The Dominican did not reply for a minute or two: and then he said: 'Don't worry at all; Jesus himself will teach you!'

I think Jesus is also teaching me a little bit about his forsakenness as life goes on. I am growing older, and the pace of life seems to be as intense as ever. I find myself quite often doing things without quite knowing how to face the next challenge. I pray to the Holy Spirit and he inspires me to find some way through in that new situation.

To give an example: on Good Friday we had the ecumenical walk of witness. It meant this year walking about three quarters of a mile from an Anglican Church to ours. Each time on Good Friday we start with a short service in the first Church and then carry a huge cross, our big Churches Together banner and an ecumenical processional cross to the second Church where there is an appropriate short service.

On Maundy Thursday night, because of events, we finished after the 'vigil of watching' at 10pm. Then there was the tidying up to do after the evening mass. By 11pm I was in my room and I still had no idea what to do for the Good Friday service in the morning.

After invoking the Holy Spirit it came to me: 'Why not produce the Morning Prayer of the Church with a couple of Good Friday hymns?'



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The whole meaning of Good Friday: God is Love and Love is God.

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I managed to produce a six page version for everyone to have in front of them – one hundred and thirty copies. Bed came late once again – about 1am, but sleep was deep and refreshing.

At the first short Good Friday service in the Anglican Church the curate, with great conviction, pointed out it was ‘God’s Love’ that kept Jesus on the cross: not the nails that pinned him there physically. That point struck home when a man from the congregation banged huge nails into the wood of a cross during the short service. The noise of the nails being driven in was a vivid reminder of the physical and mental agony of Jesus.

During our service, which followed after the walk of witness, I was able to refer to Love as the whole meaning of Good Friday: God is Love and Love is God. During the service, after the set prayers of intercession I felt inspired to ask if anyone would like to come forward to the microphone and add their own spontaneous prayer. About eight people came forward, all laity, from each Church represented: Methodists, United Reformed Church members, Catholics and Anglicans.

Afterwards, the Anglican vicar of the Church in which we began the walk said to me: ‘That was a risk: perhaps nobody would have come forward and most people are not used to praying spontaneously! It was worth it today.’

People were very happy with the whole event. After the Good Friday walk and services we have traditional ‘hot cross buns’ and a hot drink. Various people came to me and said they found the Morning Prayer, produced in a rush the night before, very moving. About one hundred and fifty people were present. Apart from the beautiful words of the psalms and canticles that everyone recited together, and the readings, they loved the sincerity and goodness of the peoples’ own spontaneous prayers.

In all this pace of life, people say to me: ‘Father, you are looking well!’ I sometimes am so tired I have to stop and rest as my mind and body is so weary.

What have I learnt from this experience? Let Jesus among us teach us how to move forward in our own respective situations. In order to accomplish this we have to embrace Jesus crucified and forsaken in all that life throws at us and then get on with loving the person next to us in each present moment. For me it is the pace of life that I must embrace. 🍌

Illustration: Eglise Saint Hugues Musée/Arcabas