

Today we remember the death of Jesus. The death of a great man. The death of God Himself. How do we wrap our minds, our hearts, around that?

The central claim of the Christian faith is that, in Jesus, the God who created and sustains the world was somehow also truly living within that world, as an apparently ordinary human being. But also that this man, who was God, died. He was taken by His country's leaders, given up to an occupying power, shamed, beaten, tortured and put to a cruel death.

This is somewhere the Christian story is messy. And inconvenient. And dangerous. Where the truth is so strong and so strange, that we must set aside these times to ponder, to become intimate again with that truth, and to let it change us.

And then to take that truth with us as we live the rest of our lives, so that we don't leave Jesus neatly in a manger, or cleaned up and respectable, meek and mild and unchallenging. And untrue.

What did Jesus go through on this day?

This was a man who had grown up knowing he was special. Who had taught in the temple before he was fully grown. Who was anointed by God at His baptism, and spent years in public teaching and healing and opening the way for people to enter God's true Kingdom. Who had gathered followers and presided over crowds of thousands and swept the moneychangers from God's holy temple.

But, today, he had been betrayed by a friend, arrested, and brought before powerful men who had plenty of reason to hate and fear him.

Then the soldiers take him, this Man who is God. They lay hands on him, strip Him, jeer at Him. They dress Him up like a child pretending he's Emperor. They weave sharp thorns into a mockery of the imperial head-dress and jam it onto His head, and they bow down and laugh at Him.

They bow in mockery of the Man who had been tempted once, in the desert, to proclaim His divine power to the entire world and to rule it as Emperor. Tempted to wield the political power that these soldiers now mock Him with.

They strip Jesus of His clothes but, much more, they strip Him of his dignity. Of His position. Of His own message of a true Kingdom. They stamp on His authority, crush His position in society, make Him as low as they can. Humiliate Him, beat Him, cut Him, and make Him unclean.

And then they parade Him through the city streets. The same streets Jesus had entered like a king only days before, cheered by crowds, festooned with garlands, road lined with cloaks. Now, He's wearing clothes stained by His own blood – the holy teacher and healer, now visibly unclean and therefore unholy before the people He has served.

The soldiers want the condemned to labour and suffer right to the end. But Jesus is so weakened by the abuse that the soldiers have to draft a stranger to carry the wood they'll use to kill him.

And then they reach the place of death, and they nail this man to a cross of wood. They hang the Creator of all things on a tree. A tree that had breathed life from its green leaves, but now brings only pain and death.

In this place, hanging above the people, Jesus suffers.

Physically, of course. He's been beaten up, had thorns pierce his scalp, been crushed by heavy labour. His arms and feet are pierced by thick iron nails, and his own weight squeezes the air from His lungs as He hangs there, suspended between pain and pain.

But, much worse, what must Jesus's spirit be like, there on the cross? This man who openly claimed to be sent by God, who believed Himself to be the Messiah sent to save God's people? Even those being crucified with Him insult Him. The gawkers jeer and mock, saying that He must have been wrong, couldn't have been the Messiah if he's there on a cross. They taunt Him with one final chance to save himself and convince them all, now. One easy thing – just come down from the cross! Change His mind.

Does He feel like a failure, as He hangs there? Was He wrong? How could it have come to this? He had told his disciples it was coming, but could He truly have believed in what is happening now? Is it still inevitable? Will His Father appear to save Him at the last minute, as Isaac was saved for Abraham?

And then, the worst of all.

Jesus was God, we say. But Jesus had lived it. Had known God, been God His whole life. Had a full and open relationship with God the Father, been taught and directed and loved, and known that He was loved.

And now, here on the cross, Jesus is cut off from God.

He is isolated, lost and alone.

No friends, no supporters, no tribe, no family.

No God. No kingdom. No mission. No legacy.

Utterly alone, for the first time in His life.

"My God", he cries. "My God, why have you abandoned me?"

And he dies.