

Palm Sunday
April 8, 2017
The Rev. Mark B. Pendleton
Christ Church, Exeter

The Cross as Cross Road and Breaking Point

A crossroad is, as the name suggests, a place of intersection of two or more roads. It can also mean a crucial point -- especially where a decision must be made.

Crucifixions in the ancient world were intended to make a brutal statement about who had had power and who was powerless. John Dominic Crossan (Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography pg. 123) reminds us that Romans inflicted this sentence on the lower classes, slaves, criminals and anyone who was unruly -- carried out at the crossroad of a town or outpost. It was meant to be a deterrent: public and humiliating. Often there were no proper burials for its victims.

When we read and hear the extended passion, or suffering, of Jesus on the cross, we confront in the hardest part of the Christian story. Who among us would not want to choose a crèche over a cross? A baptism over public torture? We fill the bulk of the church year with the stories of healing, wisdom, miracles, parables, teaching -- Jesus gathering up a rag tag group of followers that would one day grow to become the universal church. Today, after the palms are put away, and again on Good Friday, the focus is on death.

The turn to the cross is jarring and disturbing. It is also unavoidable.

The death of Christ on the cross was both a turning point and a breaking point. It was, in the moment, a shattering defeat. This man whom they followed, was brutally killed by the State and all that his mother and friends could do was to watch and weep. In the moment it signaled the end of their movement -- for who would they follow?

We have not yet created a world where suffering and loss can be avoided. It is a part of our human condition as much as breathing, sleeping and eating.

For many of us, suffering is rarely public and on display. It is often private and deep, but no less real.

Jesus is the Christ; the one sent by God to be for us the face of God. And Jesus died on a cross. God died on a cross. The apostle Paul knew the whole idea was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to all others (1 Corinthians 1)

As we say, mid way through our communion service, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again: God's story does not end in death and neither does ours.

For those who visit me in my office know that I have many crosses hanging on my wall. I have collected from my travels and have received them as gifts. Some are plane crosses and others are crucifix – with the body of Jesus affixed. When I look at and into the crosses, I see how God lost something God loved dearly – for all the world to see.

And that for me is my breakthrough. It is my cross road.

This shattering defeat of the cross is meant for us, even today. For when we lose something we treasure and value. If someone ever betrays us we trusted. Have our hearts broken. Suffer illness or physical pain – or have to watch someone we love suffer. When people disappoint. When we are blamed.

The message of the cross is that here is where loss, defeat, shame, brokenness, illness, disappointment is turned into something different and holy. Where we cease to be defined and known by the hurts we carry and the losses that pile up, but are set free to imagine a different kind of life.

The one thing I hope we pray and think through this week – especially before we gather again to celebrate the Resurrection on Easter Day – is to consider the crossroads in your life.

Each day offers us a moment to decide how we are going to live and what it is that we really care about.

What are the values, the concerns, and the ethics that shape who we are?

In the shadow of the cross: What matters to us today? Love, health and wholeness, goodness, compassion for the victim and the power-less, healing.

We hear regret and confession in the last verse of the gospel reading: Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" May regret recede from our thinking.

We are told that when a fever finally breaks, it is then that your body begins to cool itself down.

We have breaking points – some small and some anything but. If and when they come, we say today: that is not the end of our story. It is the beginning.

New life and resurrection awaits. We might not believe it in the moment – those who stood at the foot of the cross had no idea. Wait for now.