

# Walking towards the cross with Jesus by Deborah Sokolove

It seems somehow fitting that today, the day that the Church Universal has historically known as Palm Sunday, at least occasionally falls on the first day of April, as it does today. April first, of course, is a day widely known as a day for pranks, practical jokes, and general foolishness. The true origin of April Fool's Day is lost in time, but – like the date of Easter – it seems to be connected with both the spring equinox and an ancient debate over calendars. What is clear is that the urge to play practical jokes and make others look like fools transcends time and culture. Indeed, sometimes I think that God delights in playing tricks on us, hoping that when we realize the truth of our situation, we will laugh with God.

Of course, some tricks seem more cruel than laughable. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey while people waved palm fronds and cried Hosanna, seems to me to be in that category. Theologians and biblical scholars may debate whether Jesus knew what would happen next, but certainly those who were dancing in the street did not. They hailed him as their savior; as the heir to the great king, David; as the anointed one who would lead them in throwing off the yoke of the ruthless Roman oppressors.

And yet, just a few days later, the one of whom it was said "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Holy One! Hosanna in the highest!" was to die on a cross, as ingloriously as a common thief. It is painfully clear that the ordinary folk who had hailed Jesus as the messiah must have felt cruelly tricked and deceived. They must have cried out something like the words of the lament by my friend, Bill

Matson, that we sang just a few moments ago,

Where, O God, your presence find  
in this strange, unsettling time?

...

In confusion, grief and pain,  
call we, Lord, upon your name.

...

Hear the sound of faithful hearts  
crying for your healing word.

Only after the Resurrection, when the presence of Jesus was mysteriously once again among them, might they have been able to think that their own confusion, grief and pain was a kind of joke, a mirage, a passing storm on the way to joy.

But I am getting ahead of myself. And it is this tendency to get ahead of ourselves, to skip over the pain and get on to the good stuff that has led to the relatively recent renaming of this day from simply "Palm Sunday" to "Palm/Passion Sunday". Among the liturgical scholars who proposed this change, the theory is that in some mythical olden days, most people would live deeply into the reality of Jesus' journey to the Cross during Holy Week. For those with a neighborhood church only a short walk away from home and work place, it was probably easy, they imagined, to attend an morning prayer or noon mass daily, a long tenebrae service on Maundy Thursday evening, a three-hour or longer contemplation of the crucifixion on Friday afternoon, and an all-night vigil on Saturday night. Today, most people's church-going is restricted to Sundays, the scholars reasoned, and they tend to

treat the intervening days of Holy Week like any other time. Protestants, especially – with our empty crosses proclaiming the Risen Christ constantly before our eyes – are prone to go directly from the celebration of the Palms to the celebration of the Resurrection, taking no time to live into the reality of Jesus' Crucifixion in between. And so, even though many of us will in fact be here for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and/or the Easter Vigil, today the lectionary invites us to recall the Passion of Jesus together.

Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have a way to do that called the Stations of the Cross. In virtually every Roman Catholic worship space, there is a series of fourteen artworks placed at regular intervals along the walls. Particularly during Lent and Holy Week, but at other times of the year, as well, individuals and groups process slowly from one to another, stopping at each one to pray as they remember Jesus' final journey to the cross. While often these artworks simply tell the story in pictures, sometimes they are quite abstract. Indeed, sometimes there is nothing more than numbers painted on the wall to remind the faithful of each stage on the journey. With its roots in the Middle Ages, praying the Stations is a way to focus one's thoughts, to slow down, to meditate, and to listen for the voice of God.

Recently, I was asked to paint a set of Stations of the Cross for an exhibition in the chapel at the Washington Theological Union, just down the street from us, on Laurel Avenue. For an artist, this is a somewhat daunting task. It takes a certain kind of sustained attention to create any set of fourteen panels, linked stylistically and thematically. When these panels must recount a story that has been rendered by countless artists both famous and unknown, it becomes an even more formidable task. For a long time I wondered if I was up to it. Did I have the skill? Did I have the vision? What could I add to a pictorial tradition that already stretched back hundreds of years?

Finally, I began to work in mid-February, right around Ash Wednesday. For me, Lent has been quite literally a walk with Jesus towards the Cross. As I worked on the basic designs, I had to ask myself what each moment meant to me, what gesture could best convey that meaning to someone who was coming to pray with these images. Later, as I began to fill in the details, I came to understand that I, too, was walking towards the cross; that I, too, had to give up more and more of myself to God.

As you see, most of the paintings are still unfinished, not unlike the state of my soul. Although Jesus proclaimed "it is finished" as he died, I expect to be working on these Stations throughout the Great Fifty Days of Easter. And I certainly don't expect my soul-work to be finished by Pentecost, or at any time this side of Heaven. I rather suspect that, in that regard, I will always be walking towards the cross with Jesus.

Knowing that my understanding is only provisional, that the questions I ask today may not be the ones I ask this time next year, I would like to invite you to join me in this work-in-process, to journey with me in my meditation at each Station of the Cross.

## 1. Jesus is condemned to death

Jesus is bound. His hands are tied. He can do nothing but accept what is coming. The word "passion," I recently heard, comes from the same root as our word "passive." The passion of Jesus is not so much in the agony that he endured, but in his acceptance of it, in his willing refusal to return evil for evil.

Where are my hands tied? How much do I struggle against what cannot be changed? How do I know the difference between what I can change and what I must accept?

## 2. Jesus receives the cross

Jesus lifts up his hands as if in prayer. He receives the burden of the cross as gift. He carries it lightly above his head, a banner proclaiming his solidarity with those who are outcast and forsaken.

What am I carrying, and what is its message? Is it a heavy burden? A gift? A banner? For whom, and to whom, do I carry it?

### 3. Jesus falls the first time.

The cross grows heavier with time. Jesus stumbles and falls. He puts one hand on the ground to steady himself, to find his balance, to touch the firm ground at his feet.

What trips me up? How do I react when I lose my balance, or when something gets in my way? What restores me to a firm footing?

### 4. Jesus meets his mother

Mary is helpless as she sees her son stumbling under the weight that he is carrying. Jesus sees her praying for him. He raises his hand in blessing and thanks. The knowledge of her love gives him hope and strength.

What are my parents' roles in my life today? Can I forgive their human frailty? Can I bless and thank them for their hopes and dreams for themselves, and for me?

### 5. Simon of Cyrene carries the cross

Jesus is unable to carry his burden alone. The soldiers press a bystander, Simon of Cyrene, to help him. Simon's strong hand lightens the load, giving Jesus a moment to catch his breath.

Why do I think I must do it all myself? Why is it so hard for me to accept help from friends and loved ones, let alone strangers? Why is it so hard for me to reach out and help others?

## 6. Veronica wipes Jesus' face with her veil

Jesus' face is covered with dust and sweat as he makes his way through the winding streets, upward towards Golgotha. A woman steps from the crowd and offers a piece of cloth. When he hands it back, she sees his picture imprinted on it—a vera ikon, a true image of Jesus.

Can I allow others to see my true face? Can I take off the mask that hides my real thoughts and feelings? Can I bear to see my own true image, the vera ikon of my soul?

## 7. Jesus falls the second time

Even with the help of Simon, Jesus stumbles again, burdened with the fear of what is to come. Dizzy and reeling, he reaches out with both hands, searching for something solid to lean on.

What or who do I lean on when I am weak? Where do I find the strength to go on when I am too tired to think or move? Whose burdens do I help to carry?

## 8. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

The women of Jerusalem greet Jesus with prayers and tears. He has lived with them in community, teaching them how to pour out their lives in love. They have believed in him, trusted him, and now he is to die. They feel bereft. He blesses them, but warns of more trouble to come.

It is easy to get swallowed up in grief. How shall I live when people I love leave me? What should I do when the morning news makes me weep? Will my sorrow and prayer heal the sorrows of the world, or only add to the anguish?

## 9. Jesus falls the third time

Unable to continue, Jesus falls to his hands and feet, kneeling in the dust of the street. He knows that he is made

of dust, and to dust will soon return.

What does it mean to be a creature of the earth, finite and mortal? Is it giving in to know my limits, or is accepting them a sign of maturity? How does the knowledge of my death make a difference to how I live today?

#### 10. Jesus is stripped of his garments

Jesus is left naked, exposed, and as vulnerable as a new-born baby. With no power, no ability to change the course of events, he blesses even those who torment him.

It goes against the grain to love my enemies. I want to fight back, to argue, to build a wall of defense around my vulnerabilities. How can I learn to love those whom I fear?

#### 11. Jesus is nailed to the cross

As the soldiers nail him to the cross, Jesus opens his hands, accepting even this pain and indignity as gift. With no choices left, he chooses to love God and neighbor, saying, "Holy One, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

When someone hurts me, I lash out, wanting only to protect myself by building walls of rage. How would it feel to open my heart at that moment? What would happen if I simply accepted the pain with love?

#### 12. Jesus dies on the cross

At the moment of death, Jesus makes a sign of blessing. His hands uplifted as if in prayer, with his last breath he yields his spirit to God.

What does it mean to pour out my life for my friends? Am I willing to give up anything at all for the sake of justice and peace? What am I willing to die for?

### 13. Jesus' body is removed from the cross

After Jesus dies, a well-connected friend gets permission to take his body from the cross. Tenderly lowering the body to the ground, he wraps it carefully in linen cloth, and takes it to his newly-prepared, rock-hewn tomb. Even in death, Jesus offers a blessing to the one who tends to his body, although this caring gesture comes too late to bring him any real comfort.

Why is it easier for me to mourn the dead than to bring comfort to the living? Why is it so difficult for me to call a friend who is in trouble, to give genuine assistance to someone who is ill, to give of myself before it is too late?

### 14. Jesus is laid in the tomb

Like a grain of wheat which has fallen to the ground, the body of Jesus is buried, hidden behind a large, heavy stone. Time has no meaning for the one who has died. Outside, his friends believe that all is lost, that God has forsaken them. In the shadow of Jesus' death, they wait for dawn, not believing that they will ever hear any good news again.

In my darkest hours, I want to believe that God is with me. In my darkest hours, I want to believe that God will heal the world. In my darkest hours, my only hope is the Body of Christ. Though the world may call me an April Fool, in this time of timeless unknowing, I wait with Jesus for Resurrection.