



A Holy Week reflection by Archbishop Justin

The Way of the Cross

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This reflection is taken from a series of Holy Week 2019 talks delivered by the Archbishop of Canterbury at Canterbury Cathedral.



There is no good biblical record of Jesus falling while he carried the cross. But right back to the earliest times it was part of the legend, the folk story, and with good reason. It's a story that is easily believable.

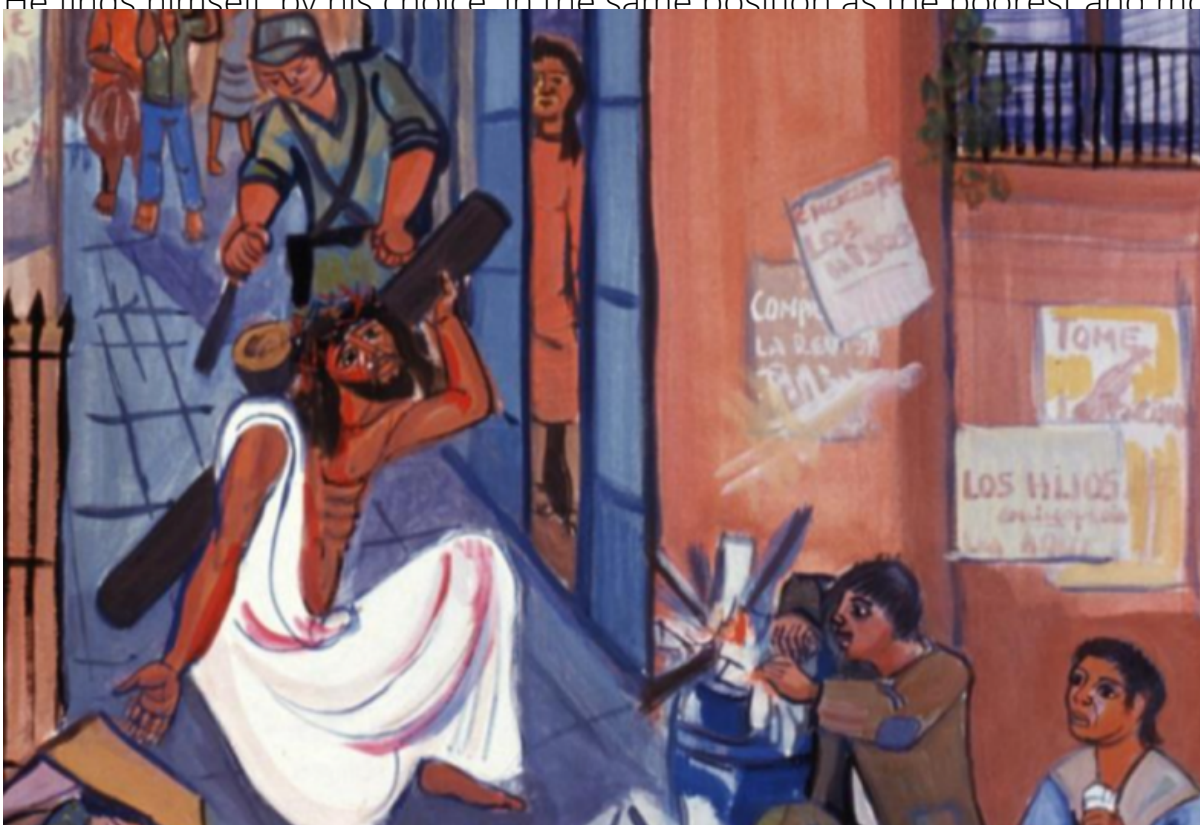
Consider how Jesus had been treated. He'd lost a night's sleep. He'd been savagely beaten. He was psychologically under more strain than it is possible to imagine. He was bearing a heavy weight on uneven and steep slopes. He was blinded by blood and sweat.

Most people would fall.

To the onlookers this is normal. Perhaps more normal than they wanted. Can God fall? Can the Christ reach the limits of his strength?

To collapse in a public place is a humiliation for any ordinary human being. Jesus falls; his strength is at an end. God has reached the end of his tether. He cannot maintain the pace, and the humiliation he experienced in his judgement before Pilate is deepened, for he cannot continue.

He finds himself, by his choice, in the same position as the poorest and most vulnerable in society. The destitute, the beggars, the rough



Of course, the culture in which Jesus lived was an honour/shame culture. The watchers from the ruling class feel they have won conclusively, not because he is yet dead, but because he is shamed.

Yet this is truly God. How absurd, can this be God?

It is a sight that defies all that we know or think about God, or for that matter, heroes and leaders. Gods stand and conquer – but what do we see when we look at this pitiful figure with his head turned back over his right shoulder in agony as he is struck?

Blood is on his clothes. He's at the same level as those sleeping in the street. Breath comes out of him in grunts. He tries to wipe his eyes without dropping the cross. The soldier curses and kicks.

Isn't it remarkable that in the Stations of the Cross, not only those based in scripture but also those based in story, Jesus is fully and unequivocally human. Not just sort of human, so that he can keep going when we couldn't, but utterly human.

The burden he is bearing is extraordinary. He is taking on the deepest, most intimate part of being human. Of being embodied with bodies that we share. The cross is his throne and he shares it with us.



Do we like that?

For sharing his throne is to carry a cross. That's what he says. And when we look at him, we see what it means to carry a cross. We are to be misunderstood, if we carry the cross. We are to be reviled and hated. The cross is too heavy to bear and involves pain – and we baptise babies with its sign and coo warmly and say, “How sweet.”

A priest makes the sign and we reciprocate, forgetting what it means. It is a blessing, but the blessing we receive when the cross is made over us is to follow this stumbling and despised figure.

We do not want to join Jesus in falling, and so with the crowds we watch him become one of the poorest. We admire, perhaps – but the call of discipleship is to share. To participate. To join. To follow.

So where do we stand?

We are called to accept that this was for us. We are called to be those who also carry that cross.

For me it is a thought of unimaginable size and difficulty. But as we go on, we see that it is a cross presented to us by Jesus, who sank as low as anyone may. And when he gives us the cross, it is because after sinking so low he rose so high, and after taking on all of our humanity, he knows our human frailty – and we are promised he will never give us a burden that we cannot bear.

A prayer for Holy Week

Almighty and everlasting God, who in your tender love towards the human race

sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ

to take upon him our flesh

and to suffer death upon the cross:

grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility,

and also be made partakers of his resurrection;

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,

who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.

Amen.