

## Drawing near, by Max Halik

When it comes to getting into the Lenten mindset – I often feel that I fall short. What do I even do for Lent – I give up social media one year, give up chocolate another. It's meant to be a time of reflection and fasting – and to some extent I do that – but it can't be enough? How can that possibly compare with 40 days of fasting in the desert? There's no comparison of scale – it's completely different. This often unsettles me, and makes me sometimes feel like a bystander in Lent rather than a participant.

I think maybe part of my angst around this might be because of the idea of following Jesus is so strongly embedded into how I was raised – my experience with church. But it seems like maybe the disconnect is as we get through Jesus' life, there comes a point where I can't seem to follow. Feed the hungry, shelter the vulnerable – I'll try to do my best. But at the end of the day – at the end of Lent – when the answer to WWJD becomes “suffer and die”... That's a tough one to follow. It's really very difficult to get out of that mindset – to recognize that maybe there are places that Christ went to that we cannot follow. Christ is abandoned – by humanity at least - at Golgotha- he goes to his crucifixion alone.

In this vein, it's always been hard for me to really understand the suffering of Jesus – or really suffering in general. I haven't really experienced any significant tragedy or sorrow. I haven't been struck down by a life-changing accident. Thank God, I haven't lost really anyone close to me. I wasn't born into poverty, or a painful family situation.

I've mostly lived a pretty comfortable, soft-edges kind-of-life. So when Lent continues and we get closer to the crucifixion, it's difficult for me to wrap my head around the idea of Christ's agony in the garden, for example – where in some translations it says “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground” – he was in such stress and agony that he was literally sweating blood. How can I possibly connect with that? The knowledge of incredible impending suffering and death. Not even getting into the idea of actual pain of the crucifixion itself...

But my instinct – my spoken desire at least, is to follow Christ – to understand, to feel what he is feeling, to follow in his same path. I think -really- part of me feels that I'm cheating him, by not sharing that suffering – by not being there with him. I'm not earning it – as laughable as that sounds. I feel like a guest that's showing up to the Easter party without a bottle of wine. But obviously - the time I spend essentially wishing that I could earn my own ticket to the feast somehow - perhaps through suffering of my own is... misguided. It's a way for me to avoid feeling uncomfortably indebted to Christ. Or just uncomfortable in general.

I think is that this is the same trap that people in general fall into when we try to comfort the bereaved – those who are mourning. We encounter the discomfort of another, which makes us in turn uncomfortable. And so, the route that we try to tackle that pain is through claiming to understand, and assuring the mourner that everything's going to be okay – that there's a plan and meaning – because ultimately we're trying to comfort ourselves. We want to unburden, and distance ourselves from a world without clean, soft edges. But what the mourner wants is for us to stay there in their personal experience with them, not thrust a kinder meaning upon them. I think that maybe often the better response to human suffering – as someone who frequently stands on the outside of it – is to accept the vulnerability of the other, to offer yourself to remain in that discomfort

together. Maybe we can't claim to share or understand the experience that they're going through, but we can stay with them, and draw close.

We are all outsiders to Christ's suffering on the cross. I at least don't think I can hope to claim that same feeling, that same understanding. But I do think he grants us an opportunity – he does want us to come near – to share at some level. He gives us the chance, throughout Lent, and until Easter to come alongside – to dwell with him while he suffers, and while he is elevated.

So – what does that mean for me? It means - I'll have to be uncomfortable for a while longer. Uncomfortably aware that I can't possibly measure up – that I don't belong next to him on any cross, that I won't necessarily share in his suffering. That I don't need to. On this path, I am never assured that what I have done is enough to dismiss my guilt, my shortcomings. But in that willingness to stand in the discomfort, I am allowed to draw near to God. Not to share in his cross, but to stand at its foot.