

Session 3: The Suffering Christ

The third of a series of four podcast reflections on the life of St Ignatius Loyola as seen through The Spiritual Exercises.

Isn't it a little strange that for many Christians the central image of their faith is a man being tortured to death at a public execution? The comedian Lenny Bruce suggested that if Christ had come today, we'd all be wearing little electric chairs on chains around our necks. Jesus brought a message of universal love, compassion and acceptance. Within a year or two, this led to him being brutally killed. How do you begin to make sense of this?

Those closest to Jesus hoped that his suffering could be avoided. His disciple, Peter, tried to dissuade him from taking roads that might put him in danger. But Jesus seemed to think that the suffering was necessary. Not that he sought it out. But he wasn't going to stop living the life he had chosen just because it might lead others to threaten him. Most people probably experience something like this, in ways great or small. When have you had to be true to yourself, even when others disapproved?

Throughout the centuries, many Christians have found that their own painful experiences can in fact unite them more closely with Christ. They wouldn't have chosen those experiences. But afterwards, they can see something of how God has shaped and formed them through the suffering they have undergone. Perhaps, as you look back now at some of the darker areas of your life, you can catch a glimpse of how God was alongside you even there?

Once, on a journey to Rome with some of his friends, Ignatius of Loyola heard God say to him in prayer "I will be favourable to you there". Afterwards, Ignatius said "Perhaps we will be crucified together"! He didn't expect God's favour to be a bed of roses. An element of suffering, of opposition, of failure, is part of what it means to be a disciple of the crucified Jesus. What keeps you going when you meet that in your own life?

During the third major section of the Spiritual Exercises we are invited to walk alongside Jesus as he journeys from his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to his death and burial less than a week later. It's not an easy journey. In fact, most of those who had been closest to him ran away during the course of it. Can you, in the last few minutes of this prayer, ask Jesus for whatever you need to stand by him in those times of real suffering that he shares with you?