

Reflecting on Good Friday, the poet Denise Levertov found herself asking why Christ's sufferings on the cross should be more significant than the suffering of countless thousands of others over the centuries. Many other people, men and women, young and old, she reasoned, have suffered similar humiliation, torture and squalid execution. Some like Jesus, were good people trying to serve others, others, also like Jesus, died to save others. What is it, she asked herself, that makes the torture and execution of Jesus so significant. Maybe you've asked yourself similar questions.

Well, she's a poet, so Levertov explores her question in verse. She writes:

*Six hours outstretched in the sun, yes,
hot wood, the nails, blood trickling into the eyes, yes—
but the thieves on their neighbor crosses
survived till after the soldiers
had come to fracture their legs, or longer.
Why single out his agony? What's
a mere six hours?
Torture then, torture now,
the same, the pain's the same,
immemorial branding iron, electric prod.
Hasn't a child dazed in the hospital ward they reserve
for the most abused, known worse?*

But then she gets a flash of insight – the coming together of the divine and human in Jesus, she realises,

*. . . opened Him utterly to the pain of all minds, all bodies
from first beginning to last day. The great wonder is
that the human cells of His flesh and bone
didn't explode when utmost
Imagination rose in that flood of knowledge.*

*Unique in agony, Infinite strength, Incarnate,
 empowered Him to endure inside of history,
 through those hours when he took to Himself
 the sum total of anguish and drank
 even the lees of that cup:
 Within the mesh of the web, Himself
 woven within it, yet seeing it,
 seeing it whole. Every sorrow and desolation
 He saw, and sorrowed in kinship.*

Leverlov is suggesting that, because he is truly God and truly human, Jesus is the only human being who has ever lived who can grasp the sheer enormity and pervasiveness of human sin and its consequences. We might see a small part of the suffering caused by human wilfulness, especially if it's put before us by the media or in some other way. Sometimes we don't want to see because we just can't cope with the awfulness of it but, as God with us, Jesus sees its entirety - in all its present and historical ugliness. He is, as Leverlov puts it, 'Unique in agony.'

I read this week of a new wave of violence which is sweeping the already poverty stricken region of Darfur in western Sudan – and I'm talking about murder and rape and pillage on a scale we can't imagine. The UN estimates that over 150,000 people have died in the last 18 months - 500 people in one refugee camp alone are said to have been murdered, including the 10 staff members of the last medical clinic remaining in the camp. The news article was tucked away on an inside page at the foot of the page, not deemed by the editor as being that important. I noticed it almost by accident, had I missed it I wouldn't have known about it. But God knows about it, and Jesus, as the Word of God made flesh – he knows about it too.

As truly God, Jesus sees the awful enormity of human sinfulness. He sees its attendant suffering and destructiveness; he sees also the judgement which it must bring – for the suffering of the powerless cries out to God for justice and, in the end, without divine judgement there is no justice. As truly human, as one of us, yes, but also the only human being who is innocent of it all, he takes upon himself the task of accepting the consequences of human evil, including the evil we ourselves have contributed, and thereby to defeat the power of sin and death. All of this, of course, comes to a confrontation on that lonely cross outside Jerusalem.

The writers of the Gospels constantly try to get across to us the immensity of the sacrifice which Jesus makes on our behalf: Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; he is the Son who dies so that those who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life, he is the suffering servant who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many; he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep; he is the friend who breaks bread and shares wine with the words, ‘this is my blood, shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins.

Immediately before he dies Jesus utters the words, ‘It is finished.’ It’s possible to take these words to mean that Jesus had realised that death was imminent and thus his ordeal was over but it’s more likely that he made the painful effort to speak in order to convey something important to those with the ears to hear, and what he wants to convey, to hearers then and now, is that his mission is complete. The words are not a cry of defeat but are a cry of victory. As the great missionary bishop Lesslie Newbiggin put it: The cross is not a defeat followed by the victory of the resurrection - rather victory lies in the cross and that victory is joyfully affirmed by the resurrection.

In Greek the words ‘It is finished’ are one word – the word ‘tetelestai’. In troves of ancient documents from the time of Jesus that, one word ‘tetelestai’ has been found scrawled on countless receipts to signify that all debts have been paid in full. In other words, the work

for which Jesus, as the Word of God entered the world – is complete, it is finished, Jesus has paid the debt – that awful debt that our sin has accrued - and he has paid it in full. Now, he offers this redemption to us as a gift and in his love for us, earnestly desires that we will turn to him and trust him.