

Friday, 7 April 2023
Good Friday Reflection
The Gospel of Matthew 26.47-56, 69-end; 27.1-2, 27-31
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'Wish you were here'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

When I was young, I loved travel programmes. I still do, but as a child and teenager it opened up vistas for me, cultures, unfamiliar practices, different languages. Between the television programmes 'Holiday' on the BBC and 'Wish you Were Here' on ITV, I was planning all my world adventures, who I would fall in love with, what I would buy, and of course what I would eat when I arrived in each country. It didn't matter that I rarely saw anyone who looked like me on the screen. It didn't matter that I didn't have any money to even get to the airport. I wished I was there.

Wishing you are elsewhere can be both an exercise of the imagination and a matter of life and death. For the child migrants missing from hotels, wishing they were elsewhere is all they have as they face the horrors of becoming invisible in a system that does not really want them there in the first place. Wishing that an adult is there when you are stripped searched as a child by a member of the London Metropolitan Police Force is not too much to ask for. It was revealed this week that "Black girls [are] three times more likely to undergo [an] invasive strip-search by Met police".¹ Judas's kiss is played out and replayed in so many ways in our society, within and beyond our shores. Betrayal plays a part in our suffering and the suffering of others.

The crowds did not just wish that Jesus was there, they knew that he would be. They were prepared for confrontation. The quiet of the garden meets the noise of an ambush; friendship and love meets what must have been the incredulity of the disciplines at what they were seeing; public acts of healing and inclusion meet hidden plans to destroy and isolate. Do we wish we were there to see all this unfold? And if we were there, how long would we have stayed if our lives were also being threatened?

Being there is Peter's downfall, but also his humanity. Of course, he *had been* there. Of course, *he knew* the Nazarene. He had wished to be there every step of the way. He had left his family business and walked, laughed, eaten with Jesus. And even now, he was still there waiting, hoping, anxious and probably terrified.

¹ The Guardian, 6 April 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/apr/06/black-girls-three-times-more-likely-to-undergo-invasive-strip-search-by-met-police>

And when the truth of choosing between being here with Jesus or there denying Jesus, he denied him three times. Peter's accent, mannerisms, reputation, stature and gait had probably given him away. Peter no longer wished he was there.

And he went out and wept bitterly.

Jesus, too, was stripped, this time by soldiers,

and [they] put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' 30 They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31

Given our modern understanding of corruption, we can be sure that there were probably some soldiers who would have loved to be there, taking part in this brutality. This was history being made, this was a big deal. So being part of it mattered. Any soldier worth their rank would have wished they were there.

Wish you were here? On this day of unimaginable cruelty. Wish you were here? On this day of victimisation and abuse. Wish you were here? On this day in which an innocent man was condemned to death? There is no need to wish. Our retelling of this story sharpens our mind and gaze and turns them back to our world. The suffering and death of Jesus Christ stands as a singular moment in history, the shadows of which fall on our everyday systems, and institutions, and authorities. We do not need to wish that we were there to be an authentic witness to inhumanity. We have so many examples from our daily lives that we can name, call out, and for which we can seek justice.

In Caravaggio's exquisite painting 'The Taking of Christ' (1602) Christ is looking down while Judas grabs him to kiss him. There is whirl of scarlet robe above Christ's head and the arm of a soldier across the canvas. Behind Jesus is a disciple looking upwards, hands in the air, mouth open shouting as the scene unfolds. I bet he is not saying "wish you were here". His words are ours to own. We cry out today because we remember what happened, and we hold on to what this means for our world and our place in it.

Amen.