

There's been a series of programmes recently on the BBC i-player showing home movies from the Second World War, one largely of the conflict in and around Burma and two of Germany at war from 1939 onwards. All contain disturbing scenes of human suffering but the latter two, especially, of the fate of Jews. There is a commentary by various historians of the period and watching their faces as they watch events unfold is instructive and says something about our own 'uninvolved' suffering. The programmes end with shots of the local population being taken to see the reality of the camps for themselves. They too walk away with faces distorted with shock and horror. It's a deliberate lesson, perhaps, in the hope of preventing such a thing ever happening again – but it's still only a suffering at one remove.

My commentating on the suffering of Christ can suffer also from this deficit of true involvement and one can readily become yet another Job's comforter, espousing all sorts of theories about why such suffering has come about and how it can be redeemed. Or, in the words, once more, of David Ford

*The friends offer an untraumatised wisdom, not rooted in fearing
Good for nothing amidst suffering or in facing the particularity of who
Job is and what he has suffered.*

When Thomas says, at the news of the death of Lazarus,

Let us all go to die with him,

and Peter says,

I will lay down my life for you

they were also still speaking at one remove. True wisdom will only come when the trauma is truly their own. This is not an invitation to seek suffering for its own sake, to rush out and experience the Coronavirus in order to 'understand it', but it is an invitation to wait on God's mercy when suffering comes, not in order to understand it or measure it even in terms of 'good' or 'bad' or 'reward' or 'failure' but to cry out to God for God's sake, or, as David Ford goes on:

*Through debating with them (Job) finds himself stripped down
and transformed-above all through his hope against hope in God.
Then he hears the message of God from the whirlwind, in which
the wisdom of fearing God for God's sake is
transposed into wondering at and celebrating creation for
creations' sake, and a realisation of God that can even be described
as 'now my eye sees you' (Job 42:5)*

(p.102 Christian Wisdom)

None of us can take the place of Christ in his suffering – and that's precisely the point for his suffering is uniquely, unlike ours, for us all.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour