



TREASURES OF DARKNESS

REFLECTION WEEK 4 - PAIN

BY THE REVD DR SHARON PRENTIS

◆ About this reflection

This reflection explores the experience of living with chronic illness and long-term pain. It draws on the speaker's personal journey with Multiple Sclerosis.

Some of the themes in this reflection may feel difficult or close to home. Please engage at your own pace and take care of yourself as you read. Where possible, this reflection is best explored prayerfully and in community.

◆ Scripture

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

Matthew 27:45-50 (NRSV)

◆ Reflection

Good evening. Before I share my journey, I want to convey a couple of points.

First, my experience of living with a long-term condition, Multiple Sclerosis, and chronic pain is unique to me. I do not want it to become a measure of what we generally should feel about everyone's experience.

Second, if this session presents something difficult, that's okay. I think during Lent we are called to journey through and face the challenging, uncomfortable, and uncharted in order to find something precious.

A diagnosis that changed everything

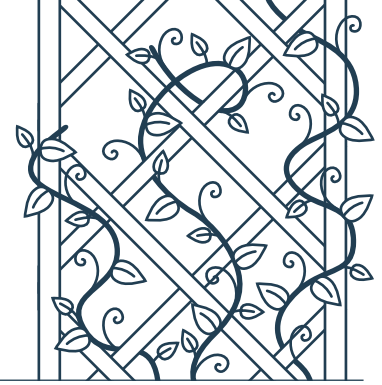
Twenty-three years ago, I woke up and literally fell out of bed. I didn't realise at the time, but I had lost sight in one eye. Slightly disconcerted by that, I went to see my GP, who sent me to the hospital and told me I needed some investigations. After tests, I was told I had some optic nerve issues, and the doctor asked if I had ever heard of Multiple Sclerosis.

That was a huge surprise, and it turned out I had probably been living with it for several years without symptoms. Later, I started experiencing relapses affecting my movement, eyesight, and memory. At the time I was a mother with a child in primary school, and I was



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studying for a PhD. Suddenly, my world felt like it was falling apart.

It wasn't obvious at first that I was also experiencing what would become persistent neurological pain, mainly in my back, and later in my hands and head. Often I had very low energy, or none at all. They considered putting me on powerful disease-modifying medication and controlled drugs, but I was reluctant due to my circumstances.

Learning to live with change

What was crucial for me was learning to accept that my body was changing and that I was experiencing new things. It taught me how to cry when needed, to attend to my needs with compassion, without trying to fix everything immediately.

After a long time, I learned to accept it rather than fight it, and to live with it rather than succumb to it. It also taught me that it's okay to ask for help. I realised that asking for support is nothing to be ashamed of.

I had been very independent. But for weeks I couldn't drive. I needed to pick up my child from nursery, and I kept dropping things – sometimes dangerously tripping over the slightest obstacle. My legs felt weak, and I had to learn how to balance and rely on God's presence.

Learning to articulate my vulnerability was another lesson, as well as understanding that vulnerability was now a permanent part of me. I realised that placing myself in God's plan was essential, and that pain is carried not just in our bodies but also in our minds. Sometimes these pains are unresolved, but I knew that God can use even those things we cannot resolve. Pain is often a symptom of something deeper happening. My experience involved being transformed, learning new ways to function and becoming.

The experience of chronic pain

I learned that long-term chronic pain is a feeling that pulls you into yourself, so everything becomes focused and particularised in a moment, in a second, in a millisecond. It is a constant background noise, a foreground experience, and the in-between. Thoughts are overtaken. They feel overwhelming and subsumed, giving way to sensations. This happens without any particular pattern – no time, no rhythm, just constancy. A constancy that can be unsettling and unnerving.

What do you live with in that moment? I learned to focus on my breathing and remember that this, too, shall pass.

Finding echoes in Scripture

I remember wondering: does the Bible talk about pain? Yes, it does. In Matthew 27:46, on the cross, Jesus cried out in a loud voice: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

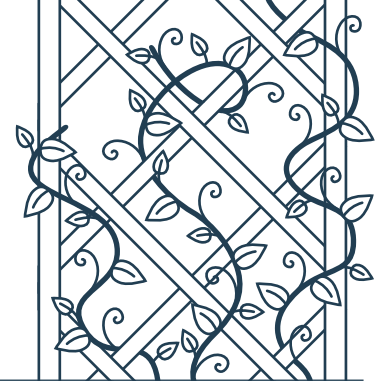
This statement captures a deeply human moment in Jesus's suffering, calling attention to both his vulnerability and the weight of humanity's sins upon him. Jesus's extreme anguish illustrates how he experienced the deep sense of separation from God that sin can cause.

By quoting the opening line of Psalm 22, Jesus connects his suffering to the prophetic scripture, which not only describes his pain but also his mocking and persecution. Although Psalm 22 begins with sorrow, it ultimately concludes with a message of hope and triumph. Christ, in expressing his suffering, is seen as declaring a message of victory and redemption.



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The cry from the cross is seen not just as despair and a deep expression of human suffering, but also as a promise of redemption, because God has never truly abandoned him.

For me, this knowledge of Christ's experience represents a profound grace and highlights the complexity of faith, pain, and hope.

Walking toward pain

When I start to feel forsaken and lost – sidelined, overwhelmed, focused on the next thought or the next sensation that stubbornly refuses to go away – when I want to disappear, I remember that I am not alone.

Over the years, I have begun to understand that walking towards pain is part of the struggle. What is very clear is that the anticipation of pain can be as challenging as the pain itself. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. But in walking towards pain, I have found that fear can become courage, and pain can be transformed into a sacrificial offering of praise. In the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Joshua, God commands Joshua several times: "Fear not; be courageous, for the Lord your God is with you."

And yet Jesus cried out.

Pain can be worsened by feelings of loss, feelings of abandonment, and the struggle to understand the depth of human anguish – the twilight zone of true comprehension, accompanied by fear, anxiety, and all those other difficult emotions.

Christ was called to experience it all – not just to find meaning, but to offer it up like something precious for all of humanity.

Suffering and discipleship

The apostle Paul's theology is shaped by his experiences of confinement, specifically reflected in the Prison Epistles, which come from situations of restriction and opposition. Rather than seeing these as a failure, Paul views everything through the lens of Christ's cross and resurrection, presenting a Christ-centred vision of his life and ministry where suffering is essential to discipleship.

Key passages, such as Philippians 3:10 and Colossians 1:24, highlight that suffering participates in Christ's call and is connected to our calling and purpose within the church.

Pain that is shared

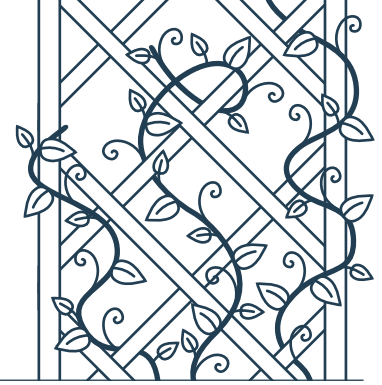
Recently, I was on the Operation Mission ship Logos Hope, which docked in Bermuda for two weeks during February. There I heard first-hand about the persecuted church across the world. In one region of the Near East, a Christian pastor was made to eat animal dung in an act of humiliation. In other parts of the globe there have been arson attacks, beatings, and rejection by families. Many of us were taken aback by what people were suffering all over the world because of their faith.

Over the years, I've learned that we all carry pain, not just in isolation, but together. Collective pain is experienced through acts of violence, misogyny, and socioeconomic injustice. It may begin with wounds inflicted on one individual, but it affects a whole group of people who share that individual's experience.



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Living with pain

As we wrap up this element of my reflection about living with long-term chronic pain, I want to acknowledge how deeply this experience has shaped us.

Dealing with constant pain changes who we are and how we interact with the world.

It often makes us pull back and focus inward, sometimes at the expense of our relationships. Even when we try to push through and ignore the discomfort, it is always there, influencing how we engage with others.

It is crucial to understand that pain does not have to carry a grand narrative of purpose. It is okay not to find meaning in our suffering.

Instead of defining us, pain is just one part of our journey. It can prompt us to check in with ourselves and consider how we relate to those around us.

Hope that remains

Physical healing is not the ultimate destination. Life is a journey filled with ups and downs, where grief and hope often walk alongside us.

Hope can sometimes feel fragile and quiet – like a song in a dry, weary throat, as the poet and priest Pauli Murray writes – something that often goes unrecognised but is always present in small moments of connection and resilience.

Maya Angelou beautifully expressed this in her writing when she spoke about finding joy in struggle. Writing of her mother Vivian, she says: "She comprehended the perversity of life, that in the struggle lies the joy." These notions resonate with me. They remind me that even amidst our challenges there are glimmers of joy and strength.

Finding meaning in pain is not always straightforward. Sometimes it remains vague at best; at worst, it doesn't seem to make sense at all. But living through it allows you to see something. If you stay with your pain, that is where light begins.

Closing

As we each continue on our paths, we seek to hold space for pain without letting it dictate our lives. Together we build understanding and support within our communities, reminding one another that it is okay to lean on each other through the challenges.

Thank you for sharing this journey with me today.

Sharon Prentis, March 2026