

Why would I want to be a Christian, when Christians are all hypocrites? How can I believe in a good God in a world where innocent people suffer and die horrible deaths? Why would I ever get involved in a church, when the church is all so full of fighting?

If you have ever asked any of these questions, then today's scripture is for you. Today's scripture shows us two men hanging on crosses beside Jesus. One of them keeps deriding Jesus and saying, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

Today we mostly think of crucifixion as something that was done to Jesus, but it is important to keep in mind that in the first century, the government crucified criminals on a regular basis. Thieves, murderers, commoners who challenged the government were put to death in this painful and humiliating public way. The society which Jesus enters is a society whose method of solving its problems is to take human beings, flog their skin apart, drive nails into their flesh, and hang them up in excruciating pain until their bodies are so broken that they can no longer even breathe.

If you were in that situation, hanging helplessly in the worst suffering of your life, and there were a man beside you who claimed to be God, what would you say? "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

And so it is with us. We suffer pain, sometimes extreme pain. We see other people suffer: both the people who, in our opinion, deserve to suffer, and the people who do not. We see people inflicting terrible cruelty on each other. We see that it is religious people as well as secular people who inflict terrible cruelty on other human beings. And we call out, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

Since shortly after Hurricane Katrina, volunteers at St. George's Episcopal Church in New Orleans have been providing meals on Wednesday and Thursday evenings to anyone who wants them, whether they can make a donation or not. Some of the people who come are homeless, some are not.

When I was there, I sat down at a table with people I didn't know and tried to engage them in conversation. One was an older man with weatherbeaten skin and broken teeth. The other was a young man with skin and teeth that looked well-cared for. I asked

them how long they had been in New Orleans. The old man had been there all his life. The young man was just there temporarily. I asked the young man what had brought him to New Orleans. He frowned and said he had a job working as a cook, learning Cajun cooking. When I brightly said that sounded interesting, he scowled and made a few sarcastic remarks. He asked what I was doing in New Orleans, and I said I was with a group to help with the rebuilding through the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana. He frowned and asked whether we'd been out doing all the tourist stuff. I said we kept intending to, but never actually got around to it. He asked what was the difference between the Episcopal Church and all the others. That is a hard question to answer with someone who seems suspicious or hostile, so I said something about how helpful I found the prayer book, and then said that I thought all churches believed mostly the same thing about the importance of loving God and loving our neighbor. The young man launched into a diatribe about God's indifference to the suffering in the world, and the places in the Bible which say that God caused suffering. He then went on to say that he thought his parents were probably doing something like what I was doing, only with a Presbyterian group. He scowled again and said, "They'll help anybody. Except me." As I sat there trying to figure out how to respond to his anger, and the pain it came from, the older man chimed in. "Yes," he said. "I think all churches believe basically the same things, but the Baptists have the best hymns!" I asked him what his favorite hymns were, and he gave me a rather impressive list. I realized that most of them had to do with God's presence in times of suffering, hymns such as "Precious Lord, take my hand" and "Abide with me."

"Abide with me" is one of my favorite hymns, too. It is sometimes used as an evening hymn because it talks about coming to the end of the day, and the deepening darkness, but mostly it is about coming to the end of life, and asking God to abide with us when we are dying, when we are helpless and need God most.

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide
 The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide
 When other helpers fail and comforts flee
 Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes
 Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies

Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee
 In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

When I read about the two men in today's gospel lesson, I couldn't help but think of the two men I met in the basement of St. George's Episcopal Church. The angry young man in pain who derides Jesus, is, I think the part of each of us that cries out, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

But the old man had a different response to suffering. He returned to the beloved hymns that ask God to abide with us when we are helpless, and in pain, and dying. It was as if this old man were saying, like the other man on the cross, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

The main message today is this: Jesus does not save us from suffering; Jesus saves us in suffering. When you are in the deepest pain, hanging helpless on your cross, the almighty God comes down from heaven and takes on all the limitations of humanity, including vulnerability to pain and death, so that he can join you in your crucifixion, and die on a cross right alongside you.

When you are in pain, people's natural response is to turn away. They may deny your pain, telling you it's not so bad. They may tell you that you shouldn't feel pain. They may toss off advice. Or, most common of all, they may simply avoid you and ignore your pain. So you know what a treasure it is to have a person who is able to stick with you in your pain, who is willing to be with you when you suffer, even though it means they suffer too. That is the person who is able to love you through the pain. That is the kind of love that saves you.

God is willing to come into a world in which religious people are hypocrites, and God is willing to suffer from their hypocrisy, that is, our hypocrisy. God is willing to get involved in a church that is full of fighting, and to let us inflict our anger and violence on him. God is willing to come into a world where innocent people suffer and die horrible deaths, and God is willing to be the innocent person who suffers and dies a horrible death.

When we suffer, there is a part of each of us that calls out to Jesus, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" I pray that there will also be a part of us that says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus saves us in suffering, and replies to us, "Truly I tell you, you will be with me in paradise."