

Today is one of those days that Christians get to keep to themselves. The world at large is perfectly happy to get with Christmas – and even throw in a nativity scene to keep us happy. And there are all sorts of Easter decorations and confections everywhere this weekend, which the public at large seems to think has something to do with Christianity. But Good Friday? No – we get to keep this one for ourselves.

Even Christians are often inclined to avoid Good Friday. Churches will observe the day with special services, but they won't be expecting huge crowds until Sunday. The faithful few will pray solemnly in darkened churches, with all the decorations removed, and struggle with the sadness of it all.

And in many Christian churches today, the meaning of the day will be echoed in the words of the popular song "In Christ Alone." It's a lovely tune, with very heartfelt words: "In Christ alone, my hope is found. He is my light, my strength, my song." And then the second verse says, "Til on that cross, as Jesus died, The wrath of God was satisfied." That's how many Christians make sense of today.

There's plenty of precedence for it. Throughout human history people have believed that it was only possible to appease deities with human sacrifice. The Ancient Egyptians had an annual routine of human sacrifice, to make sure the crops would grow, and the same pattern was followed all over the globe.

Aztecs, Mayans, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Mongols, Scythians, Celts, Vikings, ... wherever you look in early human history there is evidence. Someone had to die to to save the people from the wrath of the gods.

And all over the world today there are people who believe that this is exactly what

Christians are remembering today. There, on Golgotha, an innocent man suffered a brutal death, to appease God; to buy redemption for everyone else.

It fits in well with human history, but it doesn't fit with what Jesus taught us about God. Did Jesus teach us that God could only be appeased by the death of someone innocent? Did he teach us that there can be no forgiveness without revenge? Did he teach us that God, the Great Book-Keeper, has to have every debt paid, before his anger could be appeased?

Jesus taught us that God is like the father in the parable, who ran to embrace his wayward son when he came back, and didn't even want to hear the boy's excuses, because he already knew them and had already forgiven. Jesus taught us that God's nature is not vengeful or vindictive; God's nature is to love, to create, to renew, to restore.

What we are remembering here today is not the death of a human sacrifice: an innocent human being put to death to satisfy the wrath of a vengeful God. God is not the judge in this tragic scene: God is the victim.

Jesus was the incarnation of God's love, the love that is willing to endure to the very end, to death itself. In Calvary's tragic scene, God is not the observer, waiting to get his revenge; God is the victim, willing to love to the end. God is not the killer, but the one being killed.

Jesus taught us that God loves us, without condition, without book-keeping, always and for ever, to the very end. Why is this so hard to accept? Why are we afraid of just being loved? Why would anyone prefer to think that the books have to be balanced and the sacrifice given? Why would anyone prefer to think of God as being like the old weather gods and fertility gods?

Why? Well, perhaps it has to do with control. If there are books to be balanced, and debts to be paid, then there is room to bargain, negotiate, even bribe. We can cut a deal with God. If there has to be a penalty, and the penalty has already been paid, then the benefits are already ours by right. If we can negotiate for someone else to be accepted as the sacrifice, then we are free to do as we please – this ticket is already paid for.

By that reasoning, if Jesus was the human sacrifice that appeased the wrath of God, we're off the hook. But if Jesus was the person of God, loving us to the end, no matter what we did, then people just like us killed him.

Like Judas, we might betray a friend if we thought he needed a little push to get him going in the direction we thought he should be going.

Like Peter, we might intend to follow and then deny that we even knew him when we were really afraid for our own lives.

Like Caiaphas, we might send an innocent man to his death if we were convinced that this one death would prevent a whole lot more deaths.

Like Pilate, we might be too afraid to interfere in case things got really ugly and we couldn't cope with the consequences.

Like the crowd, we might get carried away with the excitement of the mob and the whispers of the agitators.

Yes. We might easily have done any of those things. People just like us did those things then and do them still. But people just like us also do what Mary and John did: they stayed with him, standing by the cross until his last breath was gone. They promised him they would look after one another, and keep faith. People just like us do

what Joseph and Nicodemus did: they let themselves be counted with the faithful and did whatever they could to help.

We all have frailties and failings in our past, and there will be more in the future. But for today, let us be counted among those who stand by the cross; let us count ourselves among the faithful; let us promise to try to look after one another, and keep faith.

What we are gathered here to remember is not a transaction with an angry and offended deity. There's no deal cut here, no negotiation, no bribe. What we see here is the human capacity for weakness, wickedness, evil – and also faithfulness – coming face to face with God's capacity for endless love. In this frozen moment in time, eternal love met human frailty and forgave it.

Amen.