

I heard of a high powered CEO of a large multinational. How do you cope with all the stress she was asked? “At my door I have a stress tree. When I come home I give all my stress to that tree and then I am free to greet my family unencumbered. The next morning I can pick up my burdens again if I choose too.”

Christian’s too have a burden tree. We call it the cross.

This year as we always do we gather around the cross. We recall the terrible death Jesus died and not just the death but the total physical and emotional torment that lead up to it. We dare to call this day good because we dare to believe that Jesus died for us. I think we gather in a different headspace this Good Friday than we have other years. In my pastoral work I have found people much more fragile since the mosque shootings. It's as if everything has all got too much and people are finding offence and getting upset much more easily. I was having coffee with a local counsellor and thought I'd check out my impression. They confirmed that their clients too were very fragile.

As we gather around the cross today we come with our burdens and our fragility and all that troubles us.

In another parish where I was a Scout Chaplain they told me that part of my job was to explain to a group of about 100 teenage boys on an Easter camp the meaning of the cross. I thought long and hard how to make it real for them. So I got them to bring forward a pack weighed down with large stones. I got the skinniest boy to carry it on his back. Then one by one I invited them to come forward and remove a stone and place it before the cross. I had a huge cross there at the front. As they put the stone down I asked them to name the burdens they were giving to the cross.

It sure was interesting. Their burdens were different from mine. Burdens of passing exams, burdens of looking good (as you can tell I gave up worrying about that years ago), the burden of finding a girlfriend, the burden of finding a job, and then one I hadn't been expecting: the burden they carried for the planet and for our environment. One by one they placed these burdens at the foot of the cross.

I'm not the first to think like this. Bringing our burdens to the cross is a long standing practice. One of the great classics of literature is called Pilgrim's Progress and was written by John Bunyan in 1678. I was a strange child and I had a cartoon version of Pilgrim's Progress beside my bed. Long before I could read I use to look at the pictures of his bulging knapsack and his struggle to carry it all.

Listen again to what John Bunyan wrote. The hero, Christian, is trudging along weighed down with a huge burden. Eventually he comes to a place on his pilgrimage:

*There stood a cross and a little below, in the bottom, a tomb. So I saw in my dream that just as Christian came to the cross his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from off his back and began to tumble and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the tomb where it fell in, and I saw it no more ...*

*Then was Christian glad and lightsome and said with a merry heart, "He hath given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death." Then he stood a while to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden."*

I wonder what burdens you bring to the cross today. As we gaze on the cross again, we see pure love: a love that wants to set us free, a love that suffered for us, a love that suffers for us still, a love that holds nothing back. "Come to me," said Jesus, "All who are heavy burdened and I will give you rest."

I can only guess at the burdens you carry. Maybe you fear for the future, maybe you are in the midst of your own personal struggle, maybe like the young scouts you fear for our planet. I can only guess at your burdens but this I'm certain of. Jesus on his cross wants to take them for you. We are all latter day Barabbases set free from crosses of our own making because Jesus takes the cross that should be ours.

We have today set before us unbridled love. Jesus gave it all and he did it to set you free. The cross is our burden tree. When you come, come as the pilgrim Christian did: *"He hath given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death. Then he stood a while to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him, that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden."*

May it be so for you too.