

When Easter came to us

For **Clare O'Driscoll** and her family, witnessing a passion play whilst normal life continued all around them was particularly poignant

We were an unlikely rabble with our fleecy hats and designer shades, our scuffed converse and pink patent Doc Martens. Old men in flat caps walked with teens in branded windcheaters. An immaculately coiffed white poodle scampered alongside.

Dotted among us strode a handful of Roman centurions and the occasional stern high priest, while Galilean women scurried to keep up. Despite the sunshine there was a nip in the air, so the mother of our Lord wore leggings under her blue Marian robes.

And in the thick of it, head hung low, walked a sandal-clad Jesus.

Staying in Ireland for Easter, we'd driven down to our favourite West Cork beach on Good Friday morning to walk the expanses of sand and chase the crashing waves. We'd planned to find a nearby church service that afternoon; a few readings, perhaps some silence. Our requirements were modest, so noticing an advert for a street passion play a couple of villages away felt like stumbling upon gold.

We parked along the Courtmacsherry waterfront and hurried towards the distant shapes of soldiers' helmets, their red crests rippling in the breeze. We tagged along at the back of the

crowd where a couple of people smiled a silent welcome, unable to tell if we were chance passers-by, religious tourists or pilgrims.

Our little throng meandered through tightly built village lanes, where Jesus fell twice, then made its way back to the main waterside stretch. The wind chill was high but the sun shone warm on our faces. At low tide, the estuary bay was a wash of sparkly turquoise and wave-smoothed sand spits.

At times, the only sound was our steady footfall, but then we'd hear the centurions' angry shouts, the crack of a whip, Taizé chants competing with the roaring pull of a boat's starter engine and the revving of cars as they tried to edge through the blocked road.

Finally we arrived at our Calvary, a sloping lawn next to the church. A hush descended as the three men were raised up on crosses. And when at the point of death Jesus cried out, a recording of thunder clapped through the street and the fluffy white poodle howled along.

The culture-clash anachronisms made me smile, but they were also deeply meaningful. This happened for us today, in our fleeces and parkas, as much as it happened for them then. It was for everyone, and everything belonged in that moment, held within the centuries-wide hand span of the story. Our modern

paraphernalia and attitudes were not out of place. The boats fitted in, as did the people pushing past, seeing the whole thing as a nuisance.

I have been to professional passion plays, exquisitely stage-managed productions in remote surroundings. Beautiful though these were, they always involved stepping away from normal lives to contemplate Easter; whereas here on this Irish waterfront, Easter came to us, into the mess and noise of life, meeting us where we were.

Here, in a West Cork village, I was reminded what it's all about. Body broken. Blood shed. The wide open space of forgiveness. Its truth was a sigh of relief, embracing us with all our imperfections and inconsistencies; cutting through the fog that can build up when we 'do' church week by week.

Here the story unfolded while the routine and mundane carried on around us; wedging the mysterious reality of Easter into the busyness and indifference of our daily lives.

Every person walking there had a different story, a different relationship with God, or perhaps none at all. But that day we trod the same path: a path where the tangled branches of dusty religion and pretence are cleared back, letting the truth come through. ■