Once, when Jesus was in Jerusalem, he went to the pool at Bethesda, near the Sheep Gate. The pool was reputed to have curative powers. There was always a crowd of the blind, the lame and the crippled waiting in anticipation of the moment when the waters would be “stirred” to do their healing work. If you were fortunate enough to get into the pool at that time, you might be cured. The Gospel of John relates that Jesus came upon a man (presumably a paralytic), who had been lying by the pool for 38 years without ever making it into the water. In explaining his predicament, the man says to Jesus, “I have no one” (John 5:7).

Our hi-tech culture promises that wherever we go, we will always have “the network.” We are led to believe that we will never be completely cut off; we will always have someone with whom we will be able to connect.

But in fact millions around the world and also close to home “have no one.” In city shelters and refugee camps, makeshift clinics and emergency rooms, the constant refrain is: “I have no one to help me”; “I have no family or friends”; “I have no one to care for me.”

The parable of the final judgment found in Matthew’s Gospel offers a list of people with whom Jesus readily chooses to identify himself: “I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison” (Matt 25:35 ff). It takes no stretch of the imagination to add, “I was alone.”

Having comforted the man who was alone, Jesus soon becomes that man. Both Matthew and Mark report that on the cross Jesus uttered the words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Not a confession of despair, these words, the opening line of Psalm 22, express a protest against abandonment. In the garden of Gethsemani, Jesus prayed to his Father to take away the cup of suffering. His prayer went unanswered. Jesus turned to his followers for the solace and support of their companionship. They had boasted that their steadfast loyalty to him could never be shaken. Nothing mattered, except to be with him. Yet in the garden, they were asleep. Upon his arrest, they fled for their lives—even Peter.

So on Good Friday the church prays Psalm 88, an unrelenting complaint about God’s inexplicable absence. Its closing line is haunting: “Companion and neighbor you have taken away: my only friend is darkness” (Ps 88:18).

The observance of the Easter triduum, from Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday evening, is not for the faint of heart. The somber ritual and the recital of bits of Scripture are the easy part; we can choose to be comfortable observers on the perimeter of the circle. But if we dare to let go of the small comforts of religion on the fringes and move closer to the blazing furnace at the center, holding ourselves accountable for our particular roles as would-be disciples of the Lord, we will need courage. As Jesus’ followers remembered it afterward, in their telling and re-telling of the story, Jesus had pointed out to them more than once the consequences of accepting his call to discipleship. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” The decision was theirs. But “if” they chose to be his companions, they could expect to suffer much. As the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in The Cost of Discipleship (1937), “When Jesus bids a man come, he bids him come and die.”

Frequently in prayer we find we are the ones asking the questions, making requests. Yet in the presence of Jesus crucified, we begin to realize that prayer is not only a matter of the questions we want to put to God, but the questions God has for us. Do we really want to be in Jesus’ company? Do we want to stay or run away?
Before us these days is the mystery of love that suffers, and suffers for us. As Christians we believe that the embodiment of God’s love is Jesus on the cross. We contemplate Jesus forsaken, in awe that love is willing to endure all things for the sake of ourselves. The poet Samuel Crossman, in verses that are often sung during the Easter triduum, expresses some of the wonder we come to know as disciples:

My song is love unknown,
My Savior’s love for me,
Love to the loveless shown
That they might lovely be.

Paul F. Harman, S.J., is the rector of the Boston College Jesuit Community in Chestnut Hill, Mass.

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