To many people in Britain today, the Gospel story is so unfamiliar they do not even know what Good Friday commemorates. Perhaps the opinion surveys that tell us this exaggerate. Perhaps these people are a minority, but they are certainly a growing minority. The Christmas story is much better known than the passion story, partly because it is still thought suitable for children (and therefore also for parents). But no atheists here have to fight to get crucifixes removed from school classrooms, as they do in Bavaria. Increasingly, the cross is a symbol that tells no story.

This situation is not much appreciated in the churches, where we have a quite different problem. For many of us in the churches the cross is all too familiar. There on that green hill far away (why should anyone have thought Golgotha was green?) Jesus died to save us all. We know the story so well, or at least we think we do. We think we know what it means, at least until we think about it.

Nothing could be further from our experience than the sheer horror and incredulity any first-century person felt on hearing the Christian claim: that the death of a crucified criminal was God's act of salvation for the world. Nor is our faith in the crucified Christ much like the faith those first Christians reached by means of their horror and incredulity. They knew the truth of the crucified God in the abhorrence he provoked. We too easily miss it in the familiar piety he evokes.

So, while there are many in our society who need to hear the story of Good Friday for the first time, there are many of us in the churches who need to hear it as though for the first time. Perhaps, if we can do that, we shall then be able to tell it to them.

Our need is to de-familiarize the cross. Only if we attend to the story afresh can its meaning break through the conventional perceptions - of piety or doctrine - we bring to it.

There are two converging ways in which we can do this. We can read, reflect and meditate on the story in such a way as to enter it. By finding ourselves within it, we find its meaning for us. Many well-known devotional practices are ways of doing this.

But the passion story is not only a story we can enter. It is also the story that tells how God entered the depths of the human condition. It narrates God's identification with human beings in the extremities of the human plight: in culpable failure, in meaningless tragedy, in abandonment by God. It completes the Gospel story of how God made all human stories God's own stories, by loving identification with people in all human situations. In taking that identification as far as it could go lies the bleak and offensive horror of the cross. The crucified God hangs where not even human beings should have to come, though many do, sinking or pushed into the abyss that threatens all human life.
This is not where one could expect to find God. It is where ancient people recoiled from God's palpable absence. It is where even modern secular people can feel the loss of God. It is where the most religiously serious of modern atheists pronounce God's death.

So the second way of de-familiarizing the cross is to enter some of those other human stories which the crucified God himself entered on Good Friday. Of course, we all live such stories as our own lives. There are times when we all glimpse the abyss. But the extent of God's identification with the human plight can reach us also through those stories of human extremity which provoke the atheistic verdict: God is dead.

One such story which has become almost classic in modern writing about the cross is by the great Jewish novelist Elie Wiesel. It occurs in his memoir of his own survival of the holocaust: Night. In Auschwitz he watches the excruciatingly slow death agony of a Jewish child being hanged. Behind him he hears someone ask, "Where is God now?" It is, of course, the same question thousands of people recently asked when the news of the massacre of the innocents of Dunblane first reached them.

In response to the question, Wiesel hears a voice within him answer: "Where is God? Here he is - he is hanging here on this gallows..."

Christian interpreters have been too quick to read this as an affirmation of God's presence in or with the dying boy. Then the connexion with the cross is easily - but too easily - made. The story is really much more ambiguous than that. Its most obvious meaning, in the context of the whole book, is that this event marked the final stage of Wiesel's loss of faith in the God of traditional Jewish belief. God hangs on the gallows because the possibility of faith in God is dying with every moment the child suffers and the God of Israel fails to deliver him.

But the story is open to interpretation, as Wiesel himself acknowledges when he tells a new version of it in his latest novel Twilight. Twilight, written some forty years after Night, conveys, in a fictional form, Wiesel's hard-won, post-holocaust faith in God. Here the interpretation so many have put on the original story - that God suffers with God's people in their sufferings - is allowed. But not as an obvious or too readily accessible meaning. Not in a way that by-passes God's faith-shattering abandonment of the boy. Only as an understanding of God's presence after God's death. Only as God's presence in God's absence.

At this point we are indeed close to Jesus' dying cry of abandonment. Jesus does not lose faith in God. But he cries to God out of that very abandonment through which God is lost to many others. Only when we recognize the godlessness and godforsakenness of the cross can we recognize in it God's presence with all abandoned human beings. As the Italian theologian Gérard Rossé puts it: "Jesus in his abandonment is the God of those without God." It is no accident that in our post-holocaust world, which is also the world of Bosnia, Rwanda and Dunblane, Jesus' cry of godforsakenness has again moved to the centre of theological reflection on the cross.
Does this also mean, as Rossé suggests, that the crucified Christ "presents himself in a special way as the response to contemporary atheism"? When we have de-familiarized the passion story to this extent, do we find ourselves side by side with those to whom it has never been familiar?

I think we must be careful in interpreting the atheism or the much vaguer non-religious consciousness of many contemporary people. The problem of suffering plays a part. There is an atheism which, in the face of Auschwitz and Dunblane, takes the problem of God deeply seriously and feels the loss of God. This is not identical with Jesus' godforsaken cry to God, but it is not so very far from it. The step from incredulity at the crucified God to seeing in the crucified God the only credible God is a short, though momentous, step.

Entering the stories of Auschwitz, Bosnia or Dunblane cannot, of itself, enable that step. In the absence of God we may well find only the atheistic perception of God's death. Why not? But to enter the story of Jesus' passion is not to enter just another such story. It is to enter that story in which God enters the situation of all who know God's absence. It is to enter the story that makes all the other stories God's own.

The philosopher Ernst Bloch, a religious atheist if ever there was one, asked: What about the many thousands of other victims of crucifixion who died just as horrible deaths in that period? Why focus on this one death among others? It is the right question, of course. It reminds us that the early Christians knew plenty of other stories of human abandonment. This was precisely the offence of the cross. It was incredible that God's story should be such a story. But if it was indeed God's story, then it made all the difference. A Jesus who was just one more hopeless victim would make no difference. The Jesus who lived God's loving identification with all human beings and therefore ended up alongside the most hopeless of them made all the difference. He is God's presence in God's absence.

But contemporary lack of religious belief has many aspects. As well as a serious sense of the loss of God, there is also a more pervasive forgetfulness and repression of all the issues that raise the question of God. Our culture does not enable people to face radical evil and meaningless tragedy. It gives them no ways of crying out to God, or for God, or even against God. In the no-longer-felt absence of God, people are only allowed to have problems that can be solved. This can be seen in some of the response to Dunblane. We must busy ourselves with issues of school security and gun laws because there is nothing else to be done with such a thing. The issues matter, but the urgent need to be busy with them - evident, for example, in some of the media - stems from a deep cultural forgetfulness of God.

The crucified God solves no problems. To find God's presence in God's absence is not a solution to a problem, but something infinitely more important. This is what the story of Good Friday surely says to a culture which suppresses the sense of God's absence just as much as it ignores the possibility of God's presence.