I was taken unawares. We don’t expect to be ‘shaken and stirred’ by anything religious these days. Bored perhaps. But not turned inside out as I was at a performance of Bach’s St Matthew Passion by the Dunedin Consort in Perth Concert Hall last week.

I sat in a mist of tears thinking - testing and exploring why this might be. Some of it was the music and the way in which the performers approached it. Some was the pain of the story of the last days of Jesus’ life. The heart of my calling to Christian ministry is in that story of loving and obedient self-sacrifice – but in reality it’s easier to avoid it and get on with the business of running the church.

I began to cast my net more widely, asking myself why it would be now that this story and the music would have this impact on me.

I’m getting older and I know more – or maybe less. The younger person’s certainty about immortality has been replaced by the older person’s more realistic understanding of vulnerability and the vagaries of chance and fate. Two good friends lost to cancer in the last month. A young mother in my former parish – I’ve known her since childhood – caring for her three young children and living each hour on the edge of an emotional precipice as her husband serves in Afghanistan.

And then I thought about my daily life and work. We try – how hard we try – to build church communities into places of love, acceptance and encouragement. But not far below the surface we are the people of the Holy Week story – in denial like Peter, betrayers like Judas, cowards like Pontius Pilate, mockers like the jeering soldiers. We yearn to be done with what threatens or challenges us – even if it is transparent goodness and integrity.

‘What is God doing?’ we ask in the face of war, famine, tsunami, anger, blame, division. My tearful answer is that God is doing this obedient, forgiving, cross-bearing shuffle to the hill of Calvary. And somehow that is stronger.