

# The Passion according to St John

## A Meditation for Good Friday

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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*1 Hail king of the Jews  
John 19v3*

*Hail king of the Jews*

Jesus of Nazareth is on trial before Pontius Pilate the Roman Governor of Judea accused by the Jewish authorities, ostensibly of fermenting insurrection against Rome. The crowd having rejected Pilate's offer to release him as a gesture of good will at Passover, Jesus is taken down to the Praetorium where the soldiers will prepare him for execution.

*Hail king of the Jews*

Soldiers; members of the Roman army; famous for their effectiveness in fighting; conquerors of the known world. Like some of our soldiers in Iraq, such men, were not noted for their gentle treatment of prisoners. At this time, human rights are unknown. The individual is not an individual, a person with rights. Paul was a Roman citizen. He had a certain standing in law which protected him in theory from casual mistreatment. Not so Jesus. He was a Galilean Jew; a troublemaker; an itinerant Rabbi. Worse, he stood accused of being a freedom fighter. The Romans had had more than their share of trouble from Jews and there would be more to come. And here was another one, this Jesus of Nazareth, it was said, opposed Roman rule, a self-proclaimed king opposed to Caesar.

*Hail King of the Jews*

The greeting is simple mockery, a chance to degrade the prisoner by beating him up with words. They have already flogged him and now you can almost

hear them, spitting the words in his face. The words in themselves should be said with respect. King means leader of the people, someone worth respect. But as they greet Jesus, these words are contemptuous, full of sarcasm. As he stands there, dressed in the purple and crowned with thorns, Jesus cuts a poor figure. Beaten, bruised and bleeding, he is the silent victim of their mistreatment.

*Hail king of the Jews.*

But the words are not only sarcastic, saying one thing and meaning another, the words are also ironic, saying one thing, meaning another but with the possibility of being understood both ways. Irony, because in fact Jesus is a king but like no king on earth, a king beyond their experience or their understanding.

*Hail king of the Jews.*



## *2 I find no case against him*

*John 19 v4*

*I find no case against him*

For the second time that morning Pilate declares to the crowd gathered to hear his judgement that Jesus is innocent.

*I find no case against him*

Pilate is a Roman citizen. He is not a Jew; he says as much himself. In fact, he is contemptuous of the people he governs. He has little sympathy for or understanding of Judaism. As a judge, he judges from the standpoint of Roman Law. No wonder then he should find Jesus innocent.

*I find no case against him*

What is the case against him? Before Pilate, the charge is insurrection: of challenging the authority of Rome. As such, it is serious accusation because of the Roman determination to maintain their control of the land. To execute a political troublemaker would not cause Pilate to lose any sleep. But there is no evidence that Jesus is guilty of the charge; in fact, the reverse if his teachings are accurately reported: 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's' are not the words of a political revolutionary.

*I find no case against him*

So Pilate finds Jesus innocent and he will say so for a third time. The judge has spoken but the people refuse to accept what he says. They clamour for a

guilty verdict. They shout out for the release of another prisoner. They shout for Jesus' execution.

*I find no case against him*

So Pilate has stated he finds no case against Jesus but he will sentence him to death because of pressure from the crowd. He will wash his hands of an innocent man because it is politically expedient to do so. The innocent is condemned; the guilty go free.

*I find no case against him*



**3**     *Here is the man*  
          *John 19v5*

*Here is the man.*

Jesus is again brought out before the crowd on the orders of Pilate in another effort to save him.

*Here is the man.*

Dressed in purple, crowned with thorns, Jesus must be a sorry sight. In showing Jesus in such a state to the people, Pilate is showing them that he had punished Jesus and is now inviting them to accept that his punishment is sufficient. Pilate is appealing both to their sense of justice and to their compassion.

*Here is the man*

Presenting Jesus to the people, Pilate is asking them to look at Jesus, to open their eyes and to see him for what he is. In Pilate's eyes, Jesus is a Jew like them. In Pilate's eyes, Jesus is a man who had been hauled up before him by the Jewish authorities on a spurious charge. In Pilate's eyes, Jesus had suffered enough. By inviting the crowd to look at Jesus, Pilate is inviting them to have pity on him, to spare him the further suffering which must end in his death.

*Here is the man*

If the crowd had looked up and had seen Jesus, they would have seen a man like anyone of themselves. As Christians, we know this man is different. Not

only is Jesus fully what it is to be a man, he also God's son. As the Son of God, he is fully what it is to be God; he is God incarnate, God made Man, the Word made flesh. Not only should we respect him as a person but we should worship him as God.

*Here is the man*

Without knowing what we know, Pilate has tried to open the people's eyes to whom and to what is standing before them. Have often do we fail to see what is before our eyes?

*Here is the man*





4 *We have a law and according to that law he ought to die*

*John 19v7*

*We have a law and according to that law he ought to die.*

We have a law say the crowd. It is good they do. The Law, known as the Torah, is what makes a Jew a Jew. The Law is good since it regulates their actions. There are 613 laws: the expression of the will of God for Man allowing Man to live a righteous life in the eyes of God.

*We have a law and according to that law he ought to die.*

We have a law say the crowd. True they do. A law is a rule of conduct and determines the rightness of any action. If an action is judged to be wrong, then there is a penalty for breaking the rule; in this instance, the penalty required of anyone breaking such a law is death.

*We have a law and according to that law he ought to die.*

The law in question is the law of blasphemy: the third commandment, not to take the name of our God in vain. Jesus stands accused of blasphemy in that he claims to be able to forgive people's sins which only God himself can do. He claims to speak in the name of God as the Son of God which is to lay claim to a position of authority to which the Jewish Authorities think he has no right. They see Jesus of Nazareth as a trouble-maker, an outsider from Galilee who dares to dispute their interpretation of the commandments and to break their understanding of the rules about keeping the Sabbath holy.

*We have a law and according to that law he ought to die.*

The appeal to law is good in principal. The rule of law produces an ordered society. The problem here is the law is being wrongly applied to silence the voice of God. The Jewish Authorities consider themselves to be the only legitimate mouthpiece of God. There can be no room for a difference of opinion so the law is the medium being used to silence Jesus. That the law is abused by the guardians of the Law is an irony not lost on the one who gave the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai in the first place.

*We have a law and according to that law he ought to die.*



5 *Where are you from? But Jesus made no answer*

*John 19:10*

*Where are you from? But Jesus made no answer*

Away from the crowd, Pilate is making one last effort to interrogate Jesus in order to see if he can come to a judgement that he can live with.

*Where are you from? But Jesus made no answer*

Where are you from? A simple question. A question that would be easy enough to answer. Nazareth is the obvious reply. But Jesus made no reply. Why?

*Where are you from? But Jesus made no answer*

Jesus is silent because the answer, if accepted as truth, is life-challenging and life-changing. It is not a question for Jesus himself to answer but for each one of us. If we answer the question correctly, then we will have the answer to another question, 'Who is Jesus?'

*Where are you from? But Jesus made no answer*

In the gospels, Jesus is constantly being recognised for who he is, the Messiah. Demon-possessed people have no problem blurting out the truth. In the healings and in his miracles and through his teaching, there are numerous signs and evidence. The people recognise in Jesus a man with authority. Peter speaks for all the disciples when he says to Jesus that you are the Messiah. But it is important that the individual recognises the truth

for himself. It is not sufficient to be told; you have to know the truth for yourself. It has to be real for you in your heart and mind. Only then will things begin to change.

*Where are you from? But Jesus made no answer*

Pilate has asked a good question. Jesus' silence is an answer in itself. The silence is inviting Pilate, on the basis of the evidence before him, to come a conclusion himself. If he had, would Pilate have condemned Jesus and dealt with the consequences? In theory, Pilate had a choice; in practice, he did what he had to do.

*Where are you from? But Jesus made no answer*



*6 You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you  
from above* *John 19 v11*

*You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from  
above*

Pilate is speaking to Jesus for the last time before he sentences him to death. His exasperation with the man is growing. In Jerusalem, Pilate is the representative of Rome. He has the power of life and death over the man who stands before him yet Jesus seems unperturbed by the realities of power. Finally Jesus speaks:

*You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from  
above*

'Power over me'. There is a real power the state can exercise over the individual: the right to tax; the right to impose duties and obligations; the right to curtail freedoms; the right to punish; and finally, the right to take away life itself. That is the nature of government. But all power is derivative. In Western democracies, the power comes from the support of the people. In a dictatorship, it comes through fear and force. Here, Jesus tells Pilate an uncomfortable truth: the power you have over me is not yours; it has only been lent to you for a time. How true that proves to be when Rome later removes him from his post.

*You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from above*

'Given to you from you above'. From where does all power ultimately come? From God. In a religious state like that in Afghanistan, formerly run by the Taliban, that claim would readily be acknowledged by such Moslems, though it is open to question whether their interpretation of Islam was indeed the way of life promulgated in the Qur'an. What Jesus is telling us in pointing to God as ultimately in charge, is to say that ultimately all will be well. No one that close to these events now unfolding could have seen how the results of these last 24 hours would, in the end, turn out so well. All will be well, Jesus implies, because God is in charge. It is not by chance we call the day of Jesus' crucifixion Good Friday.

*You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from above*



## 7 *Crucify him*

*John 19 v15*

### *Crucify him*

Jesus stands before Pilate on the Stone Pavement called Gabbatha awaiting his verdict. The crowd is clamouring for his death.

### *Crucify him*

There is no justice in Pilate's verdict; there is no mercy in the crowd. They shout for the death penalty; they want Jesus' blood. It is towards noon on the eve of Passover. The Passover lambs have been killed; time to kill another, this time the Lamb of God.

### *Crucify him*

Executions were public in those days. The crowd would know what they were asking to happen to Jesus. Crucifixion is a particularly slow, painful and brutal execution. It is not a good way to die but still they shout for his death.

### *Crucify him*

Why was the crowd shouting for Jesus' death? We know that less than a week previously, a crowd had enthusiastically welcomed his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Then the crowd had been full of excitement, enthusiasm and hope at the arrival of the Son of David entering the city on a donkey. Now there is hatred and anger in their voices. Why? Are they disappointed in Jesus' who has failed to satisfy their expectations of him? Is the crowd

swayed by well placed rabble-rousers who shout out loudly to set the mood of the crowd? Do they believe that Jesus has blasphemed and deserves death? Can they seriously want someone who is supposedly their king to be executed on the grounds of *their* loyalty to Rome? I don't think so.

*Crucify him*

Crucify him shouts the crowd. And so they do.





## *8 Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*

### *John 19 v19*

#### *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*

Fixed to the cross on the order of Pontius Pilate is an inscription in Latin:  
INRI, Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum.

#### *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*

Jesus has been taken to the place of execution outside the city walls called Golgotha; appropriately enough the word in Hebrew means the place of the skull. He is crucified in the company of two thieves but on his cross is placed a notice in order to identify him so there can be no doubt in people's mind who and what he is.

#### *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*

Jesus, the Greek form of Joshua, from the Galilean town of Nazareth, nothing remarkable there though with hindsight the name will be known throughout the world. King of the Jews is what he is being accused of. To be executed, Jesus needs to have committed a crime and the crime implied in the title is that he is the leader of a potential revolt against Rome.

#### *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*

The Jewish authorities would have preferred Pilate to have written, 'He said he was the King of the Jews' because clearly they don't want Jesus publically to be seen as their real king. The consequent shame, the opprobrium of

mistreating their Messiah would clearly be a terrible act of wrong-doing in the sight of God. But Pilate refuses by simply saying, 'I have written what I have written'. By remaining firm, Pilate is reasserting his independence.

*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*



GJR 8 9 08

9 *Let us not tear it but cast lots for it*

*John 19:24*

*Let us not tear it but cast lots for it*

While Jesus is slowly dying, hanging nailed to the cross, his guards divide up his clothes among themselves.

*Let us not tear it but cast lots for it*

One bonus for soldiers supervising an execution was that they got to keep the prisoner's possessions. We are not dealing in large sums here: a prisoner would not have had much left on him except the clothes he wore but even these he wouldn't need much longer. In the world of plenty in which we live, it is hard to understand why anyone would be interested in taking a prisoner's clothes from him, that they had any real value.

*Let us not tear it but cast lots for it*

What were his clothes? Sandals: you couldn't walk far in that climate in those conditions without something on your feet; a long outer robe, probably wool, to keep him warm at night with a hood to cover his head; a long cotton or linen shirt to below the knee; a shorter undershirt; a loin cloth; and a girdle to tie round his waste. They wouldn't have been particularly clean and probably not new. It's hard for us to imagine why soldiers should bother with them but they had some small worth and dividing up the clothes passed the time while they were waiting.

*Let us not tear it but cast lots for it*

Pictures of the crucifixion and crucifixes show Jesus naked on the cross except for a loincloth. To do so is a question of taste. But this depiction is inaccurate. Jesus would have been completely naked. To remove a prisoner's clothes in public is part of the process of degradation, of humiliation. No one likes being naked in public, especially in such a hostile atmosphere. Still worse for a Jew whose upbringing had taught him that to be seen naked was shameful.

*Let us not tear it but cast lots for it*

That the soldiers do so fulfils a prophecy. In life, in death, Jesus points to whom he was by fulfilling such prophecies.

*Let us not tear it but cast lots for it*



*10 Woman here is your son; here is your mother*

*John 19:27*

*Woman here is your son; here is your mother*

Jesus is dying while, at the foot of the cross, stand one of his disciples, John, and four women: his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene.

*Woman here is your son; here is your mother*

Jesus is not dying alone. Jesus is not dying surrounded just by hostile strangers. To keep him company as he dies, out of a sense of duty, fellowship and love, are four of the woman who supported his ministry and one of his disciples. They are the silent witnesses present at this final episode in his life. They suffer in silence as he suffers on the cross.

*Woman here is your son; here is your mother*

Looking down from the cross, Jesus sees Mary and John, two people whom he loved. He can see and feel their distress. Even in his own distress, Jesus has compassion for those he loves.

*Woman here is your son; here is your mother*

First he speaks to his mother. Mary has children: four sons and two daughters. It is open to question whether they are her children by Joseph or simply Joseph's children by a previous marriage. Joseph is dead and Mary is a widow. Jesus entrusts her care to his beloved disciple, John. John is the

youngest of his disciples. John is the brother of James and son of Zebedee; though not rich, his family are boat-owning fishermen who employ other people. To John whom he loves, he entrusts the care of the woman he loves, his mother.

*Woman here is your son; here is your mother*



GJR 11 9 08

*11 I am thirsty*

*John 19v28*

*I am thirsty*

Slowly, the exhaustion of death is stealing over Jesus' physical body. One sign of this is his thirst.

*I am thirsty*

To be thirsty is quite natural. The body needs liquid to prevent dehydration. We all need water to flush out our vital organs and to carry away the waste products our bodies generate. We will die more quickly from lack of water than from lack of food.

*I am thirsty*

It is the afternoon. It would be hot. Jesus has had little if any sleep. He has been traumatised by being arrested in the middle of the night, tried that same night before a Jewish court, then hauled off first thing in the morning to a second Roman trial. He has been beaten up and forced to carry his own crosspiece to the place of execution. When was Jesus last given something to drink? No wonder, then, he should be thirsty.

*I am thirsty*

Nearby stands a jar full of sour wine. A guard dips a sponge into the wine and on a branch of hyssop, he lifts it up to Jesus' parched lips to moisten them. The wine gives Jesus momentary relief from his suffering.

*I am thirsty*

It may be natural but there is an irony in Jesus being thirsty. He once told a woman at the well outside the Samaritan city of Sychar that he is the source of living water. Whoever drinks this flowing water would never thirst again; it would be like a well-spring bestowing eternal life. This is a spiritual truth. Here and now, however, it is a physical not a spiritual death that Jesus knows that he is facing.

*I am thirsty*

In his distress, Jesus calls out. Jesus the man needs some water to live. His thirst and his cry is one sign of his approaching death.

*I am thirsty*



## 12 *It is finished*

*John 19v30*

### *It is finished*

These are the last words that Jesus spoke before he died.

### *It is finished*

With his last breath, with his last gasp, Jesus is saying goodbye to the small group of his followers at the foot of the cross.

### *It is finished*

His final words mean it is ended, it is over and done with. Literally, the incarnation of Christ, of the Word made flesh, ceases with the death of his body. The spirit, which filled that body and which animated him, leaves with the break-down of his vital functions.

### *It is finished*

The words are ambiguous. They can mean that Jesus' life is over and his present suffering and torture have come to an end. This is an obvious fact. But the words have greater significance if seen in the context of our salvation. The cross is about atonement, about being at one with God. Jesus' death on the cross is about redemption, about paying the price of sin, of our wrong-doing. The crucifixion is the process whereby we are saved from the consequence of our sin by God paying the real price of that sin, our own death, by dying for us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus'

death on the cross is a voluntary act of love which results in our salvation. 'It is finished' means that Jesus has accomplished what he set out to do when he started his ministry three years earlier having been baptised by John in the Jordan. What he has achieved is the possibility that we may all have eternal life in communion with God our Saviour.

*It is finished*

It is finished indeed.



*13 When they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead*

*John 19 v33*

*When they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead*

The day is drawing to a close and the soldiers are making sure their prisoners are dead.

*When they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead*

Normally, Roman crucifixions can be long, drawn-out affairs; sometimes, it might take someone days to die slowly on a cross. But there is pressure to finish the job quickly. It is the Eve of the Passover and it would be wrong for a public execution still to be taking place over the holiday. To speed things up, the soldiers break the prisoners' legs.

*When they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead*

The usual cause of death from being crucified is to suffocate. As the prisoner succumbs to his growing exhaustion, he is too weak to push up with his legs to take the pressure off his chest and to allow him to breathe. By breaking a prisoner's legs he suffocates.

*When they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead*

Interestingly, Jesus is already dead when they reach him. We know as much when he says, 'It is finished'. There is no need to break his legs. By not breaking his bones, the treatment of Jesus, the Lamb of God, meets the requirements of the Law concerning the lamb sacrificed at Passover. But the

soldiers did want to make sure that Jesus was dead, not pretending to be dead, so they thrust a spear into his side and there was a flow of blood and water.

*When they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead*

Some people dismiss the Resurrection by suggesting that Jesus was not actually dead when he was taken down from the cross. This is unlikely. The soldiers knew their business; they knew what death looked like and even though they could see Jesus had stopped breathing while he was still hanging on the cross, they made sure with a spear.

*When they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead*



*14 Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate to let him take away the body*

*John 19 v38*

*Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate to let him take away the body*

Jesus has died and Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate to seek permission to bury the body.

*Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate to let him take away the body*

Why Joseph of Arimathea? Why was it he who went to the Roman Governor for permission? Joseph was rich. He had position as a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. He was a follower of Jesus, albeit in secret. In short, he had the resources and the standing and the motive to do this act of kindness.

*Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate to let him take away the body*

At the end of the execution, one thing remains: the decent disposal of the corpse. The body would need to be taken down from the cross, washed and wrapped in a shroud, then taken to a place of burial. The resting place was to be an unused tomb garden tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea. The fine linen for the shroud was also provided by him. Nicodemus, another member of the Council and secret follower of Jesus, provided the spices with which to anoint the body. It was important to do these last rites properly. It was important to keep the strict purity laws concerning a dead body. By so

doing, Jews are showing respect for the living and the dead. By doing so, we respect the dignity of Man.

*Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate to let him take away the body*

For me, the thought of Mary, the mother of Jesus, cradling her dead son in her arms is most poignant. It is to appreciate the awful fact that a mother who had nursed her new born, who had cuddled her child, should hold her dead boy, now a man, in her arms. The most famous pieta, the representation of Mary cradling her dead son, is arguably Michelangelo's statue in St Peter's, Rome. Mary is beautifully young; Jesus is incredibly handsome and muscular. The scene is idealised. But it beautifully captures the poignancy of the moment of the grief, of loving in the face of death.

*Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate to let him take away the body*

