

The Passion according to St Luke

A Meditation for Good Friday

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

25th March, 2016

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St Bartholomew's Church
The Passion according to St Luke
A Meditation for Good Friday – 25th March 2016

Hymn 549 When I survey the wondrous cross

Opening Prayer

Almighty Father
 look with mercy on this your family
 for which our Lord Jesus Christ
 was content to be betrayed
 and given up into the hands of wicked men
 and to suffer death upon the cross
 who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
 one God now and for ever
 Amen

Then we say together **Holy God**
 holy and strong
 holy and immortal
 have mercy on us

Before each meditation is said the following

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People ***because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world***

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|---|--|--------|
| 1 | Are you the King of the Jews? | 23 v3 |
| 2 | I find no basis for an accusation against this man | 23 v4 |
| 3 | Neither has Herod for he has sent him back to us | 23 v15 |
| 4 | Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us! | 23 v18 |
| 5 | Crucify, crucify him! | 23 v21 |
| 6 | Why what evil has he done? | 23 v22 |
| 7 | Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me . . . | 23 v28 |

- 8 Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. 23 v34
- 9 He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God,
his chosen one. 23 v35
- 10 Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us! 23 v39
- 11 Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom. 23 v42
- 12 Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise. 23 v43
- 13 Father into your hands I commend my spirit. 23 v46
- 14 Certainly this man was innocent. 23 v47

Closing prayer

Most merciful God
 who by the death and resurrection of your son Jesus Christ
 delivered and saved mankind:
 grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
 we may triumph in the power of his victory
 through Jesus Christ our Lord
 Amen

Hymn 499 There is a green hill far away

Blessing

Most merciful God
 who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
 delivered and saved mankind:
 grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
 we may triumph in the power of his victory
 through Jesu Christ our Lord.
 Amen



*1 Are you the King of the Jews?
Luke 23 v3*

Are you the King of the Jews?

Pilate's question is a good one. It goes to the heart of the charge against Jesus. If Jesus is in fact the King of the Jews, then he is a potential threat to the Pax Romanorum, the peace of the Empire that he, Pontius Pilate, as the Governor of Judea has been appointed to keep.

Before Pilate, the Jewish authorities accuse Jesus of potential insurrection against Roman rule. The heart of their accusation is that Jesus should be regarded as a trouble-maker, leading the people astray; a self-appointed, self-proclaimed leader of the people, sowing discontent and encouraging the non-payment of Roman taxes. These men may have seen Jesus as a threat to their power base, a threat to the good order of their society, a threat to the safety of their people but they never took seriously the possibility that Jesus was truly their King, God's Messiah, the anointed one sent by God to restore the Kingdom of Israel.

Pilate mistrusted the Jewish authorities. There was a history of tension between them, a distrust of their motives, a lack of understanding for and sympathy of the stiff-necked people he had been sent to govern. When the authorities brought Jesus to him on a trumped-up charge, Pilate was politician enough to see through the subterfuge, to doubt the truth of their accusation. Intuitively, Pilate knew that the man before him could scarcely be considered the King of the Jews.

Actually, both Pilate and the Jewish authorities were wrong. They both failed to see that Jesus was the Messiah, the long–expected King of the Jews. They both failed to see God’s hand at work in the man, Jesus, who after his inevitable death and resurrection would come to be regarded by his followers as their Lord and their God.

Are you the King of the Jews?



2 *I find no basis for an accusation against this man*
Luke 23 v4

I find no basis for an accusation against this man

Pilate was a judge. A judge's role is to discern guilt, culpability. Pilate judged that Jesus was innocent of the charges laid against him.

For an accusation to be true, it has to be well founded. There has to be sufficient evidence to confirm the accused's guilt. Jesus is being accused of stirring up the people against Rome.

It is true that Jesus challenged the people who heard him, who came to see him, by what he said and by what he did. But the revolution that Jesus was initiating was on a personal level. His was a call to renew individual faith in God, to re-establish the covenant relationship with God, for a person to be a part of a holy people dedicated to a life informed by the love of God and the love of neighbour as oneself.

It is true that Jesus spoke about the problem of paying taxes to Rome. But he taught that the people should render to Caesar that which was Caesar's and to God what was due to God. He taught what was appropriate, not civil disobedience. Tax is a fact of life. By the standards of public life which Jesus encouraged, all, not least taxation, would be fair and balanced.

It is true that in one sense Jesus is the King of the Jews. The final Sunday of the Christian Year is dedicated to Christ the King. But Jesus did not make

such a claim of himself. Others attributed it to him as they recognised in him the promised Messiah, God's anointed one, who it was prophesied would restore the Kingdom of God to Israel. In fact, what Jesus taught did not make him the King of the Jews in the eyes of Pontius Pilate who could, therefore, affirm:

I find no basis for an accusation against this man



3 *Neither has Herod for he has sent him back to us*
Luke 23 v15

Neither has Herod for he has sent him back to us

Pilate is not alone in finding Jesus innocent. But alone among the gospels, Luke includes Jesus' trial before Herod. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod who is in Jerusalem for Passover on the pretext that Jesus is from Nazareth and Nazareth is part of Herod's jurisdiction.

Herod Antipas, son of King Herod the Great, had inherited Galilee and Peraean from his father. He was deposed by the Romans in AD39. His fame lies principally in being condemned by John the Baptist for marrying Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, in being seduced by the dancing of Salome, her daughter, and consequently for having John the Baptist beheaded to keep an ill-judged promise.

Herod has wanted to see Jesus for a long time. He did not want to hear him speak rather just to see him perform a miracle. Standing before him, Jesus remained silent. Herod questioned him for a long time and the Jewish authorities clamoured for a guilty verdict but Herod drew a blank from his interrogation of Jesus. Losing patience with the man, Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate dressed in 'gorgeous apparel', an ironic comment on Jesus' alleged status.

Herod did not respect Jesus but clearly he found the charges against him a joke as is indicated by the way Herod had him dressed to return him to

Pilate. A Galilean, Herod could have condemned or pardoned Jesus had he chosen to do so but instead he chose to wash his hands of him, to pass Jesus back to the Roman Governor. It was a neat piece of political manoeuvring that Pilate and Herod both appreciated for, from that moment on, they became friends.

Again, Jesus stands before Pilate awaiting judgement. Pilate is not alone in being reluctant to sentence Jesus.

Neither has Herod for he has sent him back to us.



4 *Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!*
Luke 23 v18

Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!

Pilate has declared that Jesus has done nothing to deserve death. By sending Jesus back to Pilate, Herod is of the same mind. Now the crowd expresses their opinion.

Away with this fellow. The crowd want Jesus removed, removed from their presence. They don't want him just flogged then released. They want him removed from circulation, possibly permanently. 'Away with' is suitably vague, ambiguous. Only the Good News Bible paraphrases the verb as 'kill him'. 'Fellow' is unique to the New Revised Standard Version which we have as our pew Bible. The majority of the rest use the word 'man'. The extra meaning suggested by 'fellow' is contempt for surely the crowd have no respect for Jesus.

Who do the crowd respect? Barabbas. Barabbas is a robber, guilty of insurrection and murder. Such crimes were not uncommon in turbulent times and if the victims of the crime supported Rome, such crimes might be overlooked by those who hated Roman rule.

It is ironic that the crowd shouts for Barabbas since his name means 'son of the father', one of the names by which Jesus is known. It is ironic that the crowd shouts for Barabbas since he is actually guilty of the crime of which Jesus is falsely accused: insurrection against Rome.

We live in a democracy and value the people's voice in informing choice but here, the voice of the people does not express a carefully thought out, balanced verdict but simply naked prejudice, possibly sown among them by rabble rousers. We know how dangerous mob rule can be and how little justice can be expected from a crowd enflamed by hatred and mistrust of the outsider.

Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!



5 *Crucify, crucify him!*
Luke 23 v21

Crucify, crucify him!

For a second time, the crowd shouts out what they want done with Jesus, their insistent clamour drowning the reasonable voice of Pilate.

Their verdict, 'Away with him', has become a death sentence – crucifixion. They demand Jesus be executed by a particularly brutal, long-lasting, Roman method. Jesus is to hang from a cross of wood until exhaustion prevents him from being able to breathe so eventually he will suffocate.

The ability to inflict pain on others is one of the less attractive characteristics of human beings. Whipped up into a frenzy of shouting, the crowd carelessly sentence one of their own to death. Since it is not them who are about to suffer a particularly unpleasant and humiliating death, they can easily shout for someone else's blood. There is something particularly intoxicating about being part of a crowd: to be part of a mob is to lose one's sense of individual responsibility.

And who is responsible? At this point, our story has been used as an excuse for a spate of anti-Semitism. A clever piece of political spin to encourage the discomfort of the stranger in our gates. It does however fall far short of the truth. Clearly, the Jewish authorities were responsible for setting events in motion. According to their understanding, they were acting in what they saw was their best interest for Caiaphas, the High Priest, says in John 11 v50: 'It

is better for one man to die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’ Clearly, the crowd was made up of Jews and they may have been manipulated by Jewish rabble-rousers. But the fact is that what is important here is not that the people who sought his death were Jews but that they were PEOPLE. It is all of us who are guilty by association because it is MANKIND who have rejected and condemned our God to death. It is easy to blame the Jews for the death of Jesus but the truth is WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE for his death. Jesus will go to his death as an act of love for everyone who has rejected him.



6 *Why what evil has he done?*

Luke 23 v22

Why what evil has he done?

The crowd is shouting for blood. Pontius Pilate asks why? The rational confronts the irrational; logic opposes frenzy; an appointed judge challenges a potential lynch mob.

To ask the question why points to a world of cause and effect where there is a reason for doing what we do. If we commit a crime, then there is an appropriate punishment for such a crime. If we work hard, we will receive our due reward in due time. To ask why shows us that Pilate is a normal, reasonable person with a normal understanding of life.

Why should anyone be crucified? Because, in Pilate's world, they have done something seriously wrong. Pilate asks what evil has Jesus done. Evil is a strong word to describe something so bad it would be hard to think of something worse. Evil is harmful and dangerous, undermining and destroying our well being. Is Jesus evil?

But there is evil present here that day. What the crowd seeks is evil because it is unjust. What Pilate does is evil because he unjustly sentences Jesus to death.

To ask why Good Friday is called 'Good' is to ask why did Jesus have to die that day. The short answer is that 'Evil' had to be confronted and overcome

by love, by the death of an innocent man, by Jesus' conscious sacrifice of himself for 'the Good'. Something is good if the intention and the consequences are good. Both are true of what Jesus did on Good Friday to fulfil his Father's will for him and for us.



7 *Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me. .*
Luke 23 v28

Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me . . .

Jesus is on his way from Gabbatha to Golgotha along the Via Dolorosa. He has been sentenced to death. He has been beaten by the soldiers and has had a crown of thorns placed on his head. Bloody, bruised and bleeding, Jesus is carrying his cross to the place of execution.

On his way, he passes groups of women who are in tears, weeping for him, knowing he is about to be killed. Their reaction contrasts sharply with the crowd who have just brayed for his blood. The women are full of compassion for the wandering, miracle-working Rabbi whom they respect and who is being so badly abused.

And Jesus has compassion for them too. He tells them not to weep. But there is a sting in his comfort; a prophesy about the bad times to come: the siege of Jerusalem, the fall of the city, the destruction of the Temple. Hard words for hard times. There will be weeping at the death of the old order. The Temple will be destroyed. But in its place, each individual will be a living temple in which the Spirit of God will dwell.

Inexorably, Jesus is making his way out of Jerusalem to the place of crucifixion. Stumbling, he will pass his mother, he will have his face wiped by Veronica's handkerchief and Simon of Cyrene will be press-ganged into carrying the cross for him when, exhausted, Jesus can no longer.

Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me . . .



8 *Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.*
Luke 23 v34

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.

So to the place of execution. Soldiers have put Jesus on the cross. He forgives them.

What is Jesus forgiving them for? The list of wrong-doing is long. Essentially, they are obeying orders in carrying out an execution of a condemned, Jewish criminal. But do they enjoy what they do? They have abused Jesus and shamed him in public and private, treated him with contempt and with cruelty. They have tied him up, whipped him, spat at him and slapped him. They have taunted him and shouted at him. They have dressed him up and they have stripped him of his clothes. They have exhausted him, making him carry his own crosspiece to Calvary. They have nailed him naked to a cross. Exposed to the crowd and to the elements, Jesus is being left to die slowly, hanging in the air which will become increasingly hard for him to breathe in.

What is Jesus forgiving them for? At the heart of Christianity is a recognition that all have sinned and come short of what God intends. It is a recognition of failure and the need for forgiveness. The justice of God is tempered by the mercy of God. Without compassion and forgiveness, there could be no salvation.

Who is Jesus forgiving? Ostensibly, the soldiers. They are the ones who have done what has been done. They have been unkind. But just as we saw that the Jewish crowd shouting for Jesus' death does not make Jews alone guilty but by implication all humanity; so too, forgiving the soldiers in particular, implies God's readiness to forgive all mankind.

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.



9 He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one.

Luke 23 v35

He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one.

And so the taunts begin. Part of the entertainment value of a public execution is people can watch. Part of the torture of a slow death in public is the chance to make fun of the victim.

Part of the pain of this form of execution is psychological. Of course, the physical pain is great but the prisoner can be hurt by humiliating, degrading him. To place a crown on his head, to dress him up in purple like a king, to remove his clothes and to uncover him in public, to shout at him with contempt: all is meant to challenge his sense of dignity, of self-worth.

Again, it is those in authority, the leaders of the people, who take the lead. Their taunt is precise. If Jesus has the ability to save other people, why doesn't he save himself? Rumours about Jesus' power must have been circulating widely even here in Jerusalem: Jairus's daughter; the widow of Nain's son; Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus. Do they believe it? Above them, Jesus hangs, helpless. It is a cheap point to suggest he can't be the Messiah because he can't come down from the cross. Oddly enough, Jesus could have had he chosen; instead, Jesus chooses to do his Father's will and

he will only come down from the cross having first fulfilled God's will for him when he is taken down by others – dead.

He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one.



10 Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!

Luke 23 v39

Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!

And so the taunts go on. This third time from someone next to him, from the criminal hanging on the cross alongside him.

What had the two men done to deserve their sentence? They were probably common criminals, robbers who may have waylaid travellers, beat them up, stolen what they had, leaving them by the roadside possibly to die. Their execution alongside Jesus was a deliberate act to devalue him by association.

What was his dig at Jesus? The unnamed brigand picks up the idea that Jesus is really a fraud. His question is simple enough, 'Are you not the Messiah?' But the phrasing suggests his tone: contempt for a liar whose words are shown to be lies in public. Clearly, he implies Jesus can't be the Messiah, God's chosen and anointed one, because if he were, he wouldn't be in this mess. So he repeats the challenge to save himself and so demonstrate he is who he says he is. Actually, Jesus will prove his kingship but not in the way he is being invited or being tempted to do: his power will be shown in the power of love to conquer evil, the power of sacrifice to overcome the grave. Interestingly, the man adds, almost as an after-thought, 'and us'. He does not believe Jesus is the Messiah and he does not believe that Jesus can save himself but his last desperate throw is to ask Jesus to save him and his mate. He doesn't believe it possible but his prayer will be answered in part!

The German's have a word to describe what the man feels in taunting Jesus: schadenfreude – literally ‘harm–delight’ which translates neatly into ‘deriving pleasure from someone else’s pain’. This man is sharing Jesus’ pain but he relieves his pain a little by taking it out on the person next to him. Instead of being united by their shared suffering, he makes himself feel a little better by joining in the mockery he hears.

Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!



*11 Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.
Luke 23 v42*

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom

One criminal mocks Jesus; the other defends him.

Jesus remains silent. His defence: to say nothing. Now his defence comes from an unlikely direction – from the other thief who tells his companion off.

“Where is your respect for God especially now we’ve all been sentenced to death? At least our sentence is just: we’re getting what we deserve. But this man, this man has done nothing wrong.”

Truth silences the unnamed robber. Turning to Jesus, the other then asks, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ When the other man asks to be saved, there is a desperate sarcasm in his voice. He doesn’t believe he will be saved or that Jesus has the power to do so. Here, there is hope, a quiet sincerity in the request not to be forgotten. The words are powerful not only because they’re familiar but also because the plea for help is made in the belief that Jesus is who he is said to be and he could help if he were minded. And so we hear this plea to be remembered.

According to tradition, the man is called Demas. One legend relates that, as a boy, Demas, already embarked on a life of crime, saves the baby Jesus from bandits when Mary and Joseph are on their way to Egypt. Now, Jesus has the chance to repay his kindness.

Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.



***12 Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.
Luke 23 v43***

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.
Insulted, Jesus is silent; implored, he responds.

Demas has asked Jesus to remember him. His hope is not to be forgotten in death. How often does the psalmist express this same fond hope, not to be abandoned to the grave? Jesus hears the hope in Demas's voice, the respect in his tone, the plea of a human being not to be left out, alone, in the dark.

What Jesus promises is a present that Demas could not have imagined even in his dreams. It is to be with him, his companion in paradise. To us, paradise sounds like heaven; the word is in fact Persian and refers to a walled garden where plants grow in abundance and there is clear, flowing water. It is a place of cool shade and privacy, of light and warmth and comfort, nothing short of the haunt of princes and the privileged. How far removed, then, from the dry, dusty hilltop exposed to the wind and the heat and the gaze of the careless.

The picture is beautiful but it is a picture nonetheless: a picture of our salvation to come; a picture of our hope that one day, like Demas, we too will be companions of Jesus in what is called, in the Revelation of St John, the New Jerusalem. Even in the face of death, when both men are in the process of dying, Jesus holds out to Demas what is held out to all Christians, the hope of the life to come.

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.



13 *Father into your hands I commend my spirit.*
Luke 23 v46

Father into your hands I commend my spirit.

On the point of death, Jesus prays.

Father into your hands I commit my spirit is the prayer we would say as faithful Jews before going to sleep. It is possible for us to die in the night – never to wake again. With the thought of our own mortality before us, to pray this prayer is to recognise not only our need for God but his willingness to be there for us.

Sleep is a picture of death; death is an image of sleep. In sleep, unconscious, dead to the world, we are unaware of what is going on around us. In death, we have withdrawn from the world but we do not cease to be. Jesus' death is not the end but our new beginning. On Easter morning, the discovery of the stone rolled away, the folded grave clothes and the absence of Jesus' body in the tomb will be the touchstone of our faith in the resurrection from the dead and the life of the world to come.

But here and now, Jesus is just about to die; he has been faithful to his Father's will for him. Jesus has explored fully what it is to be Man, to be embodied. The Incarnation of God the Son, the Word made flesh, comes to an end with the Crucifixion.

Father, Abba, is the word Jesus uses to address God. The sacred name of God would not have been uttered by a Jew in case by speaking the Tetragrammaton aloud, he were to blaspheme. Father is the name of God we can freely use knowing that the relationship between Father and Son is ours by adoption. Like Jesus, we can address God as Father because through the grace of the incarnation and the mercy of the cross, we are his sons and daughters.

Father into your hands I commit my spirit



14 Certainly this man was innocent
Luke 23 v47

Certainly this man was innocent

Jesus is dead. His epitaph is pronounced by the Roman centurion in charge of his execution.

Pilate had found Jesus innocent. Herod was like-minded, having returned Jesus to Pilate without passing sentence. Now the officer in charge of his execution gives his verdict on the dead man: not guilty, innocent.

The Authorised Version of the Bible translates the word 'innocent' as 'righteous'. The original Greek word is δικαίος (dikaios), in Hebrew 'tsaddig'. In the Bible 'righteous' is used to describe a right relationship, a right relationship between God and Man, a right relationship between people. To be righteous is to do the will of God, to live your life according to godly principles, right action informed by right motive. 'Righteous' is not a word we would normally use to describe someone and to our modern ear it has an uncomfortable ring but to be 'righteous' necessarily is to be innocent.

How does the Centurion know? We know he is in charge of the execution party which probably means he oversaw Jesus being taken to Golgotha. He may have been present when Jesus was being beaten up by the soldiers. He may have been present at the hearing before Pilate. He may have known the centurion whose boy had been healed by Jesus. Certainly he thought Jesus innocent.

Was it inspiration? Was he directly inspired by the Holy Spirit to pronounce Jesus' innocence? Was it intuition? Did he feel the whole process was a charade? Was it observation? Was he impressed by how Jesus bore himself on the face of the humiliating and excruciating pain? Whatever the centurion's reason, his declaration of Jesus' innocence is powerful.

And as for us, what do we think? What do we think of the man Jesus, said to be the Son of God, who has died this day that we may live?

