

The Passion according to St Matthew

A Meditation for Good Friday

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

14th April, 2017

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St Bartholomew's Church
The Passion according to St Matthew
A Meditation for Good Friday – 14th April 2017

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***

- | | | |
|---|--|--------|
| 1 | I have sinned by betraying innocent blood. | 27 v4 |
| 2 | What is that to us ? See to it yourself. | 27 v4 |
| 3 | Are you the King of the Jews ? | 27 v11 |
| 4 | You say so. | 27 v11 |
| 5 | Whom do you want me to release to you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah? | 27 v17 |
| 6 | Have nothing to do with this innocent man for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him. | 27 v19 |

PTO

- 7 Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah ?
27 v22
- 8 Let him be crucified ! 27 v22
- 9 I am innocent of this man's blood see to it yourselves. 27 v24
- 10 Hail King of the Jews ! 27 v29
- 11 You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days,
save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.
27 v40
- 12 Eli, Eli lema sabachthani. 27 v46
- 13 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.
27 v50
- 14 Truly this man was God's Son ! 27 v54

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 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.'
Matthew 27 v4

'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.'

Judas Iscariot is not a happy man. In his sweaty hand, he may hold a purse with thirty pieces of silver in it but money, as we all know, does not necessarily bring with it happiness. In fact, Judas is anything but.

He knows that he has betrayed the man who loved him. He knows that Jesus has been arrested. He knows what is therefore likely to happen to Jesus. And Judas knows for certain that he is responsible for betraying his friend, his teacher, his constant companion these last three years. He has betrayed the man who loved him whom he loved for money and now he feels guilty.

The guilt Judas feels is coloured by his growing sense of unease, of desperation as he struggles with his conscience, with his sense of what is truly right. Money is the root of his problem, greed, so perhaps he believes that the problem can be put right if he gives the money back – if simply by giving the money back, he will free Jesus and free himself of this unbearable sense of having betrayed what is truly important to him.

In Judaism, blood is sacred. Blood is the essence of life. Meat is kosher, fit to be eaten, only after it has first been washed clean of its blood. Poor Judas now feels that he has Jesus' blood on his hands and he no longer feels clean

in the sight of God. Close to despair, he tries to put things right by trying to give back the money.

Ultimately, his despair will lead Judas to a second death – his own suicide.

‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’



2 *'What is that to us ? See to it yourself.'*
Matthew 27 v4

'What is that to us ? See to it yourself.'

The Jewish authorities have got what they want. Jesus has been arrested without fuss, without trouble. The troublemaker is safely in their hands and they are free to get on with silencing him.

As far as they are concerned, things are cut and dry. They know what they want to do. They know what they need to do. They know what they are going to do.

But, just as they are poised to act, this unwelcome interruption by one of his ex-disciples. They have paid the man the price they agreed: thirty pieces of silver – a fair price for the life of a man in a country where men's lives are cheap – so why is this fellow bothering them now ?

It's a bit late for him to start feeling squeamish ! It's a bit late to have scruples ! A bargain is a bargain and once a bargain has been sealed, tough !

If the man's conscience is bothering him, too bad ! His deeds are on his own head – it's nothing to do with them. Being a man means being responsible for what we do, being held accountable before the Lord G-d. A Son of the Law should know the Law and act accordingly. The Lord G-d is a just G-d and He shall judge each man according to his heart, whether or not he has

followed the path of righteousness according to the strict tenets of the Law.
A man's standing before G-d is his own affair. It is not their concern!

So they dismiss Judas without further thought for him.

'What is that to us? See to it yourself.'



3 *'Are you the King of the Jews ?'*
Matthew 27 v11

'Are you the King of the Jews ?'

Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea, Roman Governor and Judge of an occupied territory. Pilate has no love for the people he governs, no sympathy for an ungovernable race whose religion is a world away from this Empire built on very different principles.

Jesus stands accused of plotting insurrection, of fermenting trouble against Roman rule. He is accused of being a self-proclaimed Messiah who is threatening to liberate his people from the Roman occupation.

So Pilate asks him a direct question – are you ? Are you who they claimed you are ? Are you in fact the King of the Jews ?

When Pilate asks the question, is there a smile in his voice ? Is he amused by this wretched man who stands before him: tired, dirty, stinking ? Someone less like a king could scarcely be imagined. But Pilate asks the question because he needs to know.

When Pilate asks the question, is there contempt in his voice ? Surely Jesus embodies all he dislikes about the people he governs: foreign, uncouth, unsophisticated ? But Pilate asks the question because he needs to know.

When Pilate asks the question, is he at all sympathetic, perceiving the man before him is innocent, a victim sent to him to execute ? Has Pilate's suspicion been aroused by what he has seen and by what he has heard and by what he now sees ?

But Pilate needs to know so he asks the question, 'Are you the King of the Jews ?'



4 'You say so.'
Matthew 27 v11

'You say so.'

Jesus answers Pilate's question. But what sort of answer is that ?

Jesus has made a simple statement which states the obvious. In his question, Pilate has used the title 'King of the Jews' of Jesus. By doing so, he has neither said Jesus is or he isn't but he is seeking Jesus' own view of the question.

Pilate's question is a legal trap.

If Jesus answers yes, then in the circumstances of a trial in which he is being accused of potential insurrection against Rome, to state he is 'King of the Jews' is to admit his guilt.

If Jesus answers no, then he would be denying the truth that he is their king. But the nature of his kingship is so very different from the conventional understanding of the word, a simple yes does not do justice to what that yes means. And neither Jesus nor Pilate are now in a position to explore the theological niceties of what it means for Jesus to be in fact 'King of the Jews'. So Jesus' answer demonstrates a surprising subtlety and ambiguity. Just three words which neither confirm nor deny the statement but simply put the

ball back into Pilate's court by stating the truth, that the phrase 'King of the Jews' is how Pilate himself has described him.

'You say so.'



GJR 29 12 10/3 2 17

5 *'Whom do you want me to release to you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah? Matthew 27 v17'*

'Whom do you want me to release to you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah ?'

Pilate's second question is addressed to the Jewish authorities and to the crowd. He finds himself in a difficult position. He does not consider Jesus guilty of what he is accused. He does not judge him to merit the death penalty. But he does not have the moral courage to dismiss the accusation out-of-hand.

But Pilate has the gift of a 'get-out-of-jail-free' card in his pocket - the free pardon he could grant a criminal at Passover.

So his question to his audience is a clever piece of politics. He is inviting the people who have accused Jesus of a crime to absolve him, thereby shifting the responsibility for the pardon onto their shoulders.

Pilate clearly isn't stupid: he couldn't have done his job if he were. He must have known that the Jewish authorities were bent on Jesus' death otherwise why bother to turn up so early that morning when they could have simply punished Jesus themselves ? So the question is really for the crowd. Pilate is hoping that Jesus' popularity and the relative unpopularity of the Jewish leaders will produce the pardon he is offering and, thereby, solving his problem.

'Whom do you want me to release to you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah ?'



GJR 29 12 10/4 2 17

*6 'Have nothing to do with this innocent man for today
I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.'
Matthew 27 v19*

'Have nothing to do with this innocent man for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.'

Unique to Matthew's gospel is the mention of Pilate's wife. It is she who adds weight to Pilate's conviction that Jesus is innocent. Her message to him is unequivocal – don't get involved.

Dreams are fascinating. A good sleep pattern is part of a healthy life. Dreaming at night can help us process the events of the day. In the realms of psychoanalysis, our dreams can be windows onto what is troubling us. In the contemporary world of the Bible, dreams were thought to be one of the ways through which God might speak to us: to Jacob on his way to his uncle Laban; to Pharaoh warning him of the famine to come; to Joseph that Mary was pregnant with God's Son.

Here Pilate's wife has been granted insight into the case before her husband. The details of the dream are not recorded. But what is the real sense of a woman ill-at-ease: the phrase used, 'suffered a great deal', suggests something fairly unpleasant akin to a nightmare. But whatever the exact nature of her dream, the effect on Pilate's wife is clear. She advises him in no uncertain terms: not to go there; not to do it; not to have anything to do with sentencing Jesus – it will only lead to grief !

I wonder what Pilate thought of his wife's words ? Did he dismiss them as silly or did they confirm what he already knew in his heart – the growing conviction that Jesus should be set free ?

'Have nothing to do with this innocent man for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.'



GJR 29 12 10/5 2 17

*7 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah ?'
Matthew 27 v19*

'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah ?'

Pilate's third question indicates just how desperate the situation has become.

Jesus stands before him awaiting judgement. Pilate has asked him whether he is 'King of the Jews' and in Pilate's opinion, the charge against Jesus cannot be justified. Pilate perceives that the underlying motive for the accusation is one of jealousy on the part of the Jewish authorities so he has offered the crowd the possibility of having Jesus released through the holiday amnesty he's offered in the past. Pilate's wife has warned him not to sentence Jesus. With the crowd rejecting the offer, preferring to have Jesus Barabbas released, Pilate's third and final question is extraordinary !

Pilate is sitting on the judgement seat. Pilate is the judge. But here he is asking the crowd what they want to happen to Jesus. Is his question astonishingly ill-judged or extraordinarily devious populism ?

It could be seen as ill-judged because, by his question, Pilate is allowing a prejudiced crowd to decide what will happen to Jesus. If Pilate had wanted to save an innocent man, then asking this crowd is not the way to achieve it.

It could be seen as extraordinarily devious populism. By allowing the crowd to decide, it could be argued that it is them not him who are responsible for the potential injustice to an innocent man.

Whatever your verdict, Pilate is in the process of following his wife's advice and disengaging himself from due legal process.

'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?'



8 *Let him be crucified !*
Matthew 27 v22

Let him be crucified !

The crowd's shouted response is inevitable. 'Crucify him'.

The crowd is being manipulated by the Jewish authorities. Matthew's word is 'persuaded' which suggests that their voice is what the Jewish authorities want to hear. The crowd shouts for the death of Jesus. 'Crucify him'.

It is easy to for a crowd, made up of individuals, to lose their identity as individuals by taking on that of a group. A group, acting as one, can behave outrageously, with impunity, under the cloak of anonymity. Freed from individual responsibility, a mob can cause chaos and destruction and even death. So with impunity they can shout, 'Crucify him'.

Pilate tries to reason with them: 'Why what evil has he done ?' It's a good question. Evil is a powerful word. There is neither logic nor justice for what they want to happen to Jesus. But this is not the time for logic and now justice is no longer possible when here, in front of the judgement seat, in spite of the evidence, the crowd can still shout, 'Crucify him'.

It is the voice of the anonymous crowd which is shouting for the death of Jesus. Such a crowd is made up of ordinary people like you and me. We, here, the people of God, are shouting for the death of God. How ironic !

Let him be crucified !



GJR 30 12 10 / 7 2 17

*9 I am innocent of this man's blood see to it yourselves.
Matthew 27 v24*

I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.

Matthew alone records that Pilate washes his hands of the matter. He distances himself from the verdict. Though his soldiers will efficiently conduct the execution, it is not his will but that of the crowd which determines it.

To wash your hands is to clean them, to purify them. The act of washing his hands in these circumstances is clearly symbolic and the symbolism would not have been wasted on the Jewish authorities whose own ritual baths, mikvahs, were an essential part of a religion preoccupied with purity.

Do you remember the scene in Shakespeare's play, 'Macbeth', after the murder of Duncan? The hands of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are covered in his blood. Lady Macbeth tells her husband, 'a little water clears us of this deed'. She is, of course, mistaken. She will be haunted by the memory of the sight of her hands stained with the blood of her innocent victim.

Who exactly is responsible for the blood of Jesus is a perennial question. It would be easy to blame the weak-willed Pilate who allowed this miscarriage of justice to happen. It would be possible to blame the crowd manipulated by the Jewish authorities and, in the past on Good Friday, such a blood libel has been responsible for countless acts of anti-Semitism. But in a real sense,

we are all responsible for the death of an innocent man because Jesus died so that each one of us might live.

So Pilate might well say, 'I am innocent of this man's blood' but is anyone ?

I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.



GJR 30 12 10/9 2 17

**10 Hail King of the Jews !
Matthew 27 v29**

'Hail, King of the Jews !'

So the mockery begins. We have had the mockery of a trial and now Jesus is being mocked by the soldiers who are charged with his execution.

We know what soldiers are capable of doing to the prisoners they guard. We have the unpleasant example of American soldiers in Iraq and our own men stationed in Basra were accused of abusing their prisoners.

One of the ways prisoners are abused is by stripping them of their clothes. To be forced to be naked in public is humiliating. That humiliation is far worse for the God-fearing Jew for whom nakedness itself is wrong.

Physical violence is part of the abuse. To strike Jesus; to spit in his face: to whip him till the blood flows. Physical pain is part of the process of weakening the prisoner so that he will die all the more quickly. A case of being cruel to be kind ?

A third form of abuse is verbal. To mock someone is mentally to abuse them. The guards are trying to break Jesus' spirit by taunting him with his alleged title, 'King of the Jews'. Clearly, Jesus looks anything but a king at this point: wretched, bloody, as far removed from the appearance of royalty as might be imagined. But the soldiers' sarcastic abuse is ironically true. He

is not only 'King of the Jews' but he is also Christ the King and as such Lord of All.

'Hail, King of the Jews !'



GJR 30 12 10/9 2 17

*11 You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.
Matthew 27 v40*

‘You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’

And so the mockery goes on. Now it’s the turn of the passers-by.

Jesus has been led out by his guards from the Praetorium along the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha, the hill of Calvary, outside the city walls. He has been stripped of his clothes, nailed to his cross and hoisted up in the air. There together with two of his ‘loyal subjects’, two thieves placed one on each side of him, he is left thirsty in the dry, hot air ultimately to suffocate from exhaustion.

The heat, the thirst, the pain, all combined will begin to exhaust him. Harsh words from the on-lookers are part of that process. This particular taunt is inspired by the blasphemy of which he is accused. The Temple stands at the heart of the Jewish priestly tradition of worship. This present incarnation was the Third Temple built by Herod the Great to replace the Second more modest construction built by the Jews on their return to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon. King Solomon’s Temple, the First, had been destroyed when Jerusalem fell in 587 BC to Nebuchadnezzar’s besieging army. In fact, Jesus had foreseen the destruction of the Temple in 66 AD by the Roman army. But the temple Jesus had promised to rebuild three days after its

destruction was his own body which, like our body, is the temple in which the Holy Spirit of God resides.

The passers-by taunt Jesus with what they believe to be impossible. Three days later, Jesus will show us that with God all things are possible.

‘You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’



12 'Eloi, Eloi lema sabachthani ?'
Matthew 27 v46

'Eloi, Eloi lema sabachthani ?'

Of the Seven Last Words that Jesus uttered at his crucifixion, Matthew records just one: 'Eloi, Eloi lema sabachthani ?'

'My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me ?' is a translation of the original Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. To our ears, the words sound desperate, the cry of a man who feels abandoned by God.

Jesus is the Son of God. He knew who he was and what he was and what he had to do. His decision to die on the cross was a painful decision by which he demonstrates that his will fully conforms to the will of God the Father. His was a perfect obedience reflected by that of his mother, Mary, and of his step father, Joseph, both of whom said yes to God and agreed to play their part in God's plan and purpose for Mankind.

So when Jesus cries aloud, expressing his present anguish, is he doubting, as Jacques de Champchesnel suggested to me ? I think not. Nonetheless, what is happening is profoundly shocking. The Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the perfect, uninterrupted communion of love enjoyed by the One God whom we worship. There never was and never will be a time when each is not fully aware of the other. Except that is at this moment of Atonement, when Jesus, the Lamb of God, is weighed down by the sins of the People of

God. The burden of our wrong-doing at the moment of Atonement is sufficient for Jesus to feel cut off from God. Anyone who has lost the one they love will know a little of what Jesus was feeling which will cause him to cry out in his distress, 'My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me ?'

His cry is not a cry of doubt but one of pure desolation !

'Eloi, Eloi lema sabachthani.'



*13 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.
Matthew 27 v50*

‘Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.’

The last sound Jesus makes before he dies is an inarticulate cry. The Word of God who called the universe into being, the Word of God who spoke so eloquently of the love of God, the Word of God who commanded the wind and the waves to be still and recalled Lazarus from the sleep of death dies with a wordless exclamation on his lips.

There is no doubt Jesus has died. It has been comparatively quick, mercifully so. The exhaustion of the day before and of the previous night had taken their toll of him, let alone the tension of the trial, the abuse thereafter and the pain and exposure of the crucifixion itself. The usual cause of death is suffocation. Whatever the cause of death, his death is not in question since the soldiers pierced his side with a spear and the flow of water and blood proved he was already dead.

So the Word of God has been silenced. The world of the women who stood at the foot of the cross, of Mary, the mother of Christ, and of John, the beloved disciple, is bereft of the man they loved. The body will be taken down from the cross and the corpse will be placed in the previously unoccupied tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. But first Mary will cradle her son in her arms for one last time.

'Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.'



GJR 31 12 10 / 11 2 17

*14 Truly this man was God's Son !
Matthew 27 v54*

'Truly this man was God's Son !'

We end today's meditation on the Crucifixion according to Matthew with the words of a witness to the event, the centurion in charge of the execution.

He was a Roman soldier. He was an experienced officer in one of the most efficient armies in the world. In one sense, death was just a part of his everyday life. How many people must he have seen die ? He would have been used to death, to dying: it was his profession. So what led him to make such an extraordinary statement that must surely encourage believers down the centuries and annoy sceptics ?

Two Roman centurions come to faith in the New Testament. In Luke's gospel the unnamed centurion whose boy is cured at a distance by Jesus. in Acts, Cornelius, guided by an angel, sends for Peter and receives along with his whole household the gift of the Holy Spirit and the sacrament of baptism. And, perhaps, here is a third: a witness of the crucifixion.

What was it that the man saw which led him to make this statement ? Was it the stoicism with which Jesus endured the pain ? Was it the gentle way he bore the taunts of the passers-by ? Was it his kind words to the soldiers who nailed him to the cross or to the repentant thief who was dying alongside

him ? Was it the presence of the women and his words to his mother ? Did he sense something in the person of Jesus ? Many folk had. Did he feel the presence of the Spirit of God in that place ? Some folk have. Was he impressed by the phenomena that surrounded the death: the eclipse, the earthquake ? Some folk might.

Fact is, I don't know what persuaded him to say, 'Truly this man was God's Son !' But whatever it was I thank him for it.

'Truly this man was God's Son !'

