



Revd Ro's Reflection on Good Friday

Mark 15. John 18-19

There are thousands of portrayals of the Passion of Jesus, films, plays, documentaries and so on. Some are graphic, though none can come anywhere near the true horror of it. The gospel writers do not deal with the process, they had no need; everyone who lived in the Roman world knew the brutality of crucifixion.

Art in all its forms has been used to try to portray the Passion, some are realistic and some like Dali's St. John of the cross, less so. It has no visible nails and Christ looks down from the cross on the world he loves.

I remember a Passion play which was performed in Tamworth many years ago now. My father took part in it as Simon of Cyrene. He told me that it was one of the most moving things he had ever done, he also said that carrying the cross made him feel as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders and of course that is exactly what Jesus has. He is carrying the sins of all humanity. Perhaps the one image that I found really moving was not an art form at all. I once saw a facsimile of the Turin shroud, a cloth correct in all details and listened to a lecture on it. The authenticity or not of the cloth was not the point. It showed in clear detail, rather like a negative, the image of a crucified man. It was what I saw on that cloth that brought home the real horror of crucifixion to me.

We have dealt with Jesus' arrest and betrayal yesterday, even then it is Jesus who is active, and it is Jesus who is still giving commands.

⁶ When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they stepped back and fell to the ground. ⁷ Again he asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' ⁸ Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.'

This is a pivotal point. I remember reading a book just before training; it must be over twenty years ago. It was called 'The Stature of Waiting' by W H Vanstone. He makes the point that Jesus takes the initiative throughout the gospels. Jesus teaches, he heals, he prays, Jesus rebukes, Jesus forgives and finally presides at the Last Supper and leads the disciples to Gethsemane. There we see deep fear and emotion as never before. From this point however, when Jesus is led away bound, things are done to him. There is a huge stature in Jesus as the angry passions beat around him. It is his very stillness and calm which gives him the stature, the nobility which is so striking, so awe inspiring.

We have looked at Peter's denial and the huge contrast between the crumbling of his resolve and Jesus' bravery stand in stark relation to one another. The disciples have run away his 'familiar friend whom he trusted' has denied him now Jesus stands alone. It is Jesus who is the only one who can drink this cup, the only one who can redeem humanity. Judas has set the wheels turning which will lead inexorably to Golgotha.

Jesus is taken for trial before the Jewish leaders. We have seen how they fear him, how they intend to kill him, the 'trial 'is a farce. ⁵⁵'Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death.' The word 'Satan' means accuser. Satan is at work here in the evil and accusations that surround Jesus.

The trouble for the authorities was that the so-called witnesses gave conflicting evidence.

⁵⁶'For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree.' ⁵⁷'Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, ⁵⁸'We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands." ' ⁵⁹But even on this point their testimony did not agree.'

A few weeks ago we looked at Jesus' action in the Temple. In John's gospel the overturning of the tables of the money changers comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In the synoptic gospels it is one of his first actions in Passover week. So it would have been fresh in everyone's minds. Think back to what Jesus says as he drives them out.

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?

But you have made it a den of robbers.' Mark 11

Words like these are not easily forgotten. But when challenged as to his authority for behaving like this in the Temple his answer is shocking.

¹⁸'The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' ¹⁹Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' ²⁰The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?'

These are words from John's gospel but no doubt this is what the 'witnesses' were harking back to. That is the main bit of evidence; Jesus, as far as the authorities are concerned is threatening the Temple. Jesus is saying he has authority over the Temple and its worship not the High Priest, a direct challenge to Caiaphas and co. Worse than that Jesus is saying the Temple will be destroyed, by God they suppose. Jesus is prophesying disaster here. They have got to prove him a false prophet and imposter; if they could get him on a charge of blasphemy all the better.

The Jewish rulers, who have witnessed the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, see it as a clear indication that Jesus is saying he is the Messiah. They have heard the cries which have hailed him as 'Son of David'

⁶⁰'Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?' ⁶¹But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' ⁶²Jesus said, 'I am; and "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power", and "coming with the clouds of heaven."' Mark 14.

Jesus could not be clearer in his answer. The words 'I am' of course is a name for God. This is the 'blasphemy' they have been waiting for. Now they can take him to Pilate. The Jews have all decided he should die but they are occupied and only the Romans can sentence a man to death.

³¹Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' ³²(This was to fulfil what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)' John 18.

Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea, really a backwater of the Roman Empire. His job was to keep peace at any cost. The Empire needed this area because of its position; so many trading routes crossed it. Anyway once occupied the Romans were in control, any insurrection was brutally put down and crucifixion was reserved for rebels. Pilate has the reputation of being a brute and a bully who kept order at any cost. It is interesting then that a man like this should be so affected and impressed by Jesus. He too senses that this man is different; there seems an aura which surrounds Jesus. Pilate must have judged hundreds of men but Jesus is strikingly different. His calm answers are amazing to him.

³³ 'Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' ³⁴Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?'

³⁵Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?'

It is Jesus' answer that startles Pilate. Any 'king' means a treat to Roman authority but this man is different.

³⁶Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' ³⁷Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' ³⁸Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

Pilate goes to the Jews and tells them that he 'finds no fault' in Jesus. That should have been that. The word of the governor means power and yet it is not so. He tries to find a way by offering to release Barabbas to no avail. Even after flogging Jesus and the mocking in the barracks by the soldiers Pilate tries once again.

⁴ 'Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' ⁵So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' ⁶When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.'

Mob rule and desire for blood has taken over now. One wonders just how many of those who shout 'Crucify him' now shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' just a few days ago

¹⁰Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?' ¹¹Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.' ¹²From then on Pilate tried to release him.'

Jesus' words here have such significance; Jesus is walking the way he must walk. His work and last great battle on the cross must be faced before the victory is complete.

The Jewish leaders play their trump card now, 'The Jews cried out, 'If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.'

That is the end of it, one mention of Rome and Pilate siding with an insurrectionist spells trouble. Quite apart from this the crowd is working itself up and in a city packed to bursting at Passover there must be no spark to ignite a powder keg. Jesus must be sacrificed.

Jesus is the innocent victim; he is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.' The story of the crucifixion needs no commentary; suffice to say that God is with Jesus on the cross. Even at the moment he feels totally alone God is close.

It would be good now to read the account in any of the gospels or to attend the Stations of the Cross in church.

Pilate wrote the notice which read, 'The King of the Jews' and had it nailed on the cross. We hail Jesus as the king of the cosmos, who died in love to set us free.

'Suff'ring to give us life, conquering through sacrifice; and as they crucify prays, 'Father forgive.'

Graham Kendrick.

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