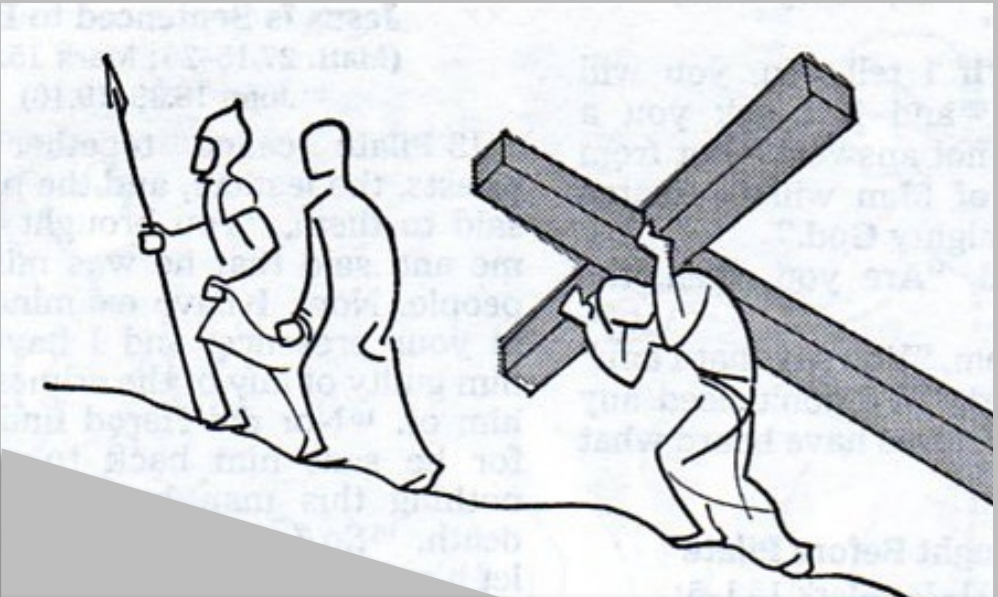


# A Meditation for Holy Week

Peter Sills



*Don't  
Weep for Me*

# *Don't Weep for Me*

## *Palm Sunday*

### **JESUS ENTERS JERUSALEM**

Today we begin our annual remembrance of the last week of Jesus' life. The story is told in detail by all four gospel writers, a fact that emphasises its importance for understanding the Christian faith. What happened in this week over two thousand years ago revealed, we believe, the true character of God and the true nature of his purpose in sending his Son to live among us and to die for us. Holy Week is the most important week of the Christian year; each day is important; it is the one week of the year when we should make a special effort to come to church each day to remember and to pray. Alas, many Christians go from Palm Sunday to Easter Day without observing the days in between, especially Good Friday, the single most important day in the Christian year. Holy Week should be like a pilgrimage where we set ourselves to follow the whole journey, not simply out of duty, but out of love for the Lord, and for the spiritual benefit that a Holy Week Pilgrimage brings.

Each of the gospel writers tells the story of the week in his own way, and this year we are following the story as told by St Luke. He follows St Mark's original narrative but adds his own details, like the words of Jesus to the women of Jerusalem which I have used as the title for this week. As Jesus carries his cross to Calvary

he sees some women weeping; he says to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children.' The tragedy that is unfolding before them is not just a personal tragedy for Jesus – the tragedy of a good and righteous man wrongly condemned to death, but the tragedy of Israel which did not know God's moment when it came, and this indeed is the tragedy of the whole human race.

The story begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem which we commemorate today. It is clear that Luke believed that Jesus intended a demonstration, and by choosing to ride on a donkey he fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah that one day a king would come to Zion, riding on a donkey to show that his authority rested not on military force but on his ability to establish a reign of universal peace. Luke makes this explicit. The shout with which the people acclaim Jesus is a quotation from psalm 118; Mark gives it in its original form: 'Blessed is *the one* who comes in the name of the Lord...', but Luke changes it to, 'Blessed is *the king* who comes in the name of the Lord.' What Mark leaves the reader to decide, Luke makes plain: the long-awaited time has come; the reign of peace has begun; Israel should hail her true king.

But there was perhaps a further purpose in the way Jesus chose to come. His entry into Jerusalem, as indeed his whole ministry, was a challenge to the authorities (and as the week unfolds we shall think more about the nature of that challenge) but at the outset Jesus wants to make the point that his challenge is not like that of the Zealots, who wanted a national uprising against Rome. And so Luke adds a second part to the people's shout: they sing of peace, 'Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.' The Pharisees in the crowd object to this, but Jesus will have none of it. This moment is the one that the whole history of Israel has been leading up to, and if the people did not shout the very stones would cry

out. But they cannot see it; the tragedy is theirs: 'Don't weep for me, weep for yourselves and for your children.'

The desire for peace is eternal; it marks every age, and too often it is frustrated, as in Jesus' day, by the posturing of the powerful and the fear of the ordinary people. There are powerful forces resisting change (*cf* health care reform in the USA, banking reform in the UK), and when God's moment comes we don't recognise it.

The women are not the only ones to weep this week; Jesus also wept. As he comes near Jerusalem he weeps over it, lamenting its hard-heartedness: 'If you, even you, had recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But they are hidden from your eyes.' And so the days will come when Jerusalem will suffer a violent end, the very end that Jesus had come to prevent. By inserting this passage into St Mark's account, St Luke makes it plain that Jesus did not believe that his final appeal to Jerusalem would be successful. At the beginning of his gospel in the Song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, Luke spoke of God coming to redeem his people, and now when the moment has come they are not ready for it. Yet the fact remains that God has visited his people, and if they will not have him as their Saviour they will have him as their Judge. And that also is true for us.

And so the scene is set, and the dark drama of the week begins to unfold.

## *Monday in Holy Week*

### **JESUS CHALLENGES THE AUTHORITIES**

Jesus may not have led a mass movement, but he attracted much popular interest and could not be ignored. However, his popularity meant that the Jewish religious authorities had to be cautious in the way they dealt with him. The cleansing of the temple was a direct challenge and a response was required. His popularity meant that that they could not arrest him, so their only course was to try and trap him into making a statement that would either incriminate him with the Romans or discredit him in the eyes of his supporters – a tactic still common in politics today. So a delegation from the Sanhedrin (who were responsible for the temple police) was sent to question him. The issue is authority, as it generally is for those in charge: ‘By what authority are you acting like this? Who gave you authority to act in this way?’

The question was hardly a polite enquiry, and was designed to make the point that, in fact, Jesus had no authority. He replies with a standard rabbinical response, a counter-question designed to settle the issue: ‘The baptism of John: was it from God, or from men?’ The question goes to the heart of the matter, but avoids focussing on Jesus himself. The authorities accepted John as a prophet, and of course his authority did not come from them; Jesus is inviting them to admit that in John they recognised that God was at work. It would follow, of course, that God was also at work in Jesus as his works were greater than John’s. In refusing to answer they admit that they cannot recognise God’s action; that destroys their claim to authority and, therefore, their right to interrogate Jesus. He declines to state his authority, and this response is consistent with his parables and miracles; in effect he says, ‘If you

cannot see it, then nothing will be achieved by telling you.’ The truth has to come from the heart.

Jesus then drives the point home with the parable of the vineyard. The vineyard was a common metaphor in love poetry, and Isaiah had used it to symbolise Israel. His story of the vineyard tells of Israel’s failure to produce the fruits of righteousness despite God’s care and protection. So God abandons his vineyard and it becomes a wasteland. ‘He looked for justice but found bloodshed, for righteousness but heard cries of distress.’ (Isaiah 5.1 - 7) Luke, like Matthew, makes a small change at the end of the parable. Where Mark has the Son killed inside the vineyard and his body thrown over the wall, Luke has him first cast out of the vineyard and then killed. The parable is thus made to apply precisely to Jesus.

Bishop John Robinson suggested that originally the parable had just two sets of servants sent to reclaim the vineyard, and in fact such a version is found in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. (John Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?*, p. 55, 56.) The two sets of servants correspond to the two waves of prophets – in the eighth and sixth centuries BC – sent to call Israel back to God. The message of the parable is beyond doubt and the authorities know that it is aimed at them: they have not listened to the prophets; they have failed to bring forth from Israel the fruits of righteousness; they have not been able to recognise the Messiah in their midst; their authority is at an end.

Perhaps we ought to spare a thought for the leaders of Israel. Leadership is a fraught enterprise; on the one hand the leaders carry the expectations of the people, and on the other hand they are constrained by what is possible, and an element in that constraint is a popular dislike of radical change. The people want it both ways, and popular demands will often be for a short-term remedy and

may sit light to the requirements of law and morality. Leadership requires wisdom and moral strength, but these are not the qualities that always go hand-in-hand with powerful personalities and popular acclaim. And power once gained is hard to relinquish, as we see with so many autocratic leaders in the world, and the powerful tend to enlarge the matters and the resources they control.

As one of the early American Presidents, James Madison, observed, power is of an encroaching nature, or in Lord Acton's famous phrase, 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' (Lord Acton in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton: Louise Creighton (ed), *The Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton*) Corrupt religious leadership is doubly pernicious because it sets itself to serve a higher interest. Christian leadership has a threefold character, it is pastoral, priestly and prophetic, and within the prophetic rôle is the duty of equipping people to recognise the hand of God in the world. This, according to Mark, is what the leaders of Israel had consistently failed to do.

## *Tuesday in Holy Week*

### JESUS TEACHES IN THE TEMPLE

Yesterday we heard how the priests and the scribes tried to trap Jesus; today two more groups come forward to challenge him. Luke describes the first group as 'spies'; Mark identifies them as Pharisees and Herodians (two factions normally opposed making common cause against Jesus). The second group are Sadducees. Both groups were hostile to Jesus, the Sadducees to the point of hatred. They wished to arrest him, but feared to do so because Jesus was popular with the people. If his popularity could be weakened by trapping him in his own words, their task would be easier; so they come to question him with malice in their hearts.

The spies ask about the legitimacy of paying the Roman poll tax, a hated exaction that provoked riots when it was introduced. The question is obviously a trap. If Jesus replies, 'Yes, pay the poll tax,' he would lose much of his popular support; if he says, 'No, don't pay,' he can be denounced to the Romans for treason. Jesus' response is masterly, and, as Luke says, leaves them 'amazed by his answer.' In cold print his reply reads like a judicious, even-handed statement, but this is unlikely, given the way that Jesus has responded in the past. The second clause would have been emphasised over the first clause: 'Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, **and to God the things that are God's.**' Coinage was regarded as the property of the emperor in whose name it circulated. In effect Jesus says, their first duty, of returning Caesar's coinage to him, is insignificant compared to their second duty, of honouring God in their hearts.

Jesus' answer has provided the basis for all subsequent discussion of church and state. We are subjects of two kingdoms,



the earthly and heavenly, and to each appropriate obedience is due. The duty of earthly authorities is to provide 'a framework of order for the common life of [the nation]', (G B Caird, *Saint Luke*) and if they do then our duty is to pay the taxes necessary to uphold it. But the state is not to be given an absolute authority, that would be to turn it into a god. Likewise, if the church tries to absorb the functions of the state, it becomes a totalitarian force, an instrument of oppression. We see both dangers around us today. Under communism that state became a god, and the same danger is present also in our secular society which absolutises 'politically correct' opinions and rejects divine authority. In Iran and some other Muslim societies, we see that theocracy soon degenerates into just another form of totalitarian rule.

After the Pharisees came the Sadducees; they were the high priestly aristocracy, conservative in their views, rejecting new ideas like angels and spirits and the resurrection of the dead which the Pharisees accepted. (All these beliefs were of recent origin at the time, and Jesus clearly accepted them, agreeing with the Pharisees.) Their question, about the widow who married seven brothers, was a well-known joke that was going the rounds at the time, designed to show that the resurrection from the dead was a ludicrous idea. In response, Jesus points out that the very scriptures on which the Sadducees relied point to the life to come. It is only the living that can have a God, and so when God introduces himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, he indicates clearly that Abraham continues to live. The life to come, says Jesus, is not a heavenly version of life on earth.

The two parties fail to undermine Jesus, a failure driven home by the story of the scribe, a religious lawyer, who warmly agrees with Jesus. His words echo the words of the prophets that God is more concerned with the state of our hearts than with the formal

observance of religious obligations. Putting the love of God and the love of neighbour at the head of the list of commandments means that all the elaborate casuistry beloved of the establishment is swept aside. The lawyer agrees, and says that the whole Jewish sacrificial system is nothing compared to personal devotion to God and Man. Jesus commends him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'

Luke follows this with a warning about the hypocrisy of the leaders, and the story of the Widow's mite. The contrast is masterly, and illustrates all that Jesus has said and taught. The widow from her meagre resources gives sacrificially to God; her heart is in the right place; her worship is true. Those who seek the places of honour at feasts and the chief seats in the synagogues, who dress in long robes to draw attention to their position, may give more, but in the sight of God it is worth less. The widow has shown a generosity of heart that is sadly lacking in the powerful.

Like the widow, the poor often show greater generosity than the rich. They know that we sink or swim together, a fact that wealth, even modest wealth, allows us to overlook. Following Jesus is about giving our whole heart to him and not about contributing to a cause. Jesus said, 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' (Luke 12.34) Luke prompts us to ask ourselves where our treasure is laid up.

So, Jesus has escaped the traps set for him by the authorities and refuted their questions; he has accused the leaders of Israel of hypocrisy and exposed them as hard-hearted. Unlike them he will give himself wholly to God and for the people as the widow has given her mite.

## **JESUS WARNS OF PERSECUTIONS TO COME**

As Jesus stands in front of the Temple, he hears some of the people talking about it, admiring the way it is adorned with beautiful stones and precious gifts dedicated to God. He seizes the moment to speak about the future, how the threat against Jerusalem that he came to avert will result in the Temple's destruction: 'Not one stone will be left upon another,' he says, 'all will be thrown down.' There then follows a series of warnings about a coming time of tribulation. In St Mark's original version, this is a time of judgement which Jesus expected to happen soon after his death, but Luke, writing fifteen to twenty years later when the expected End had not come to pass, changes it to refer to the coming destruction of Jerusalem.

This chapter draws on a style of writing called 'apocalyptic', a literary style designed to reveal the hidden purposes of God. The Book of Daniel and the Revelation of John are written in this style. They appear to predict the future, but in fact refer to current events and are designed to show that the suffering of the faithful will not go unnoticed by God, and that out of their affliction will come their vindication. In the end, though they cannot see it now, God will defeat their enemies.

Luke retains virtually all of Mark's account but weaves into it his own material that changes its meaning and makes it a more literal prediction of the future. For example, in his version Jesus says that Jerusalem will be 'trampled on by the gentiles', and its people led away captive. He warns that even though false prophets warn of the End, saying, 'The time is at hand!', this will not be the End: 'Do not go after them,' he says. What is about to happen is not the final

judgement, but a time of persecution for the faithful; they will be delivered up to the synagogues and brought before kings and governors; some of them will be betrayed, and others put to death. This will be time for boldness and courage, a time, as Jesus says, to testify, but they are not to prepare their defence in advance, because it is also a time for faith. They must put their faith in Jesus for what to say: 'I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.' By their endurance they will gain their souls.

Luke's changes help us to get around the difficulty of taking literally the apocalyptic warnings in this chapter which herald the final judgement. The warnings clearly predict an imminent end-time, and that did not occur and has not occurred since. If the events described – wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines, the sun and the moon darkened, and stars falling from the sky – are the signs of the end, then there can scarcely have been a period in history when the signs were not fulfilled. Time and again, there have been wars and distress on earth and strange signs in the heavens, but the end has not come. These signs are clearly fulfilled today, but the end has not come.

But persecution has come upon the Church, and today we experience a marginalisation of the Christian faith, denying it a place in public life, and refusing to acknowledge the part that Christianity has played in shaping the values and institutions of western civilisation. Things have got worse over the last few years. Ten years ago we were simply ignored; now we are attacked. People like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens ridicule religious belief, insult the Church and denigrate its leaders; and this week the author Philip Pullman publishes a new book, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, which continues his assault on the church that he begun in *His Dark Materials*. He retells the

gospel story in a way designed to undermine belief. The Guardian hailed it with the headline, 'Pullman creates a darker Christ in new assault on the church.' The Guardian is typical of the press, critical, cynical and hostile; in the same way, public authorities and employers try to downgrade religious observance in schools and the workplace. Tragically, the scandals over child abuse in the Church have simply played into the hands of our enemies – and 'enemies' is not too strong a word – they have gravely weakened the church's moral authority, and directed attention away from its good work in championing the poor and working for social justice. In Europe we are not yet dragged before kings and rulers and put to death, but in other parts of the world Christians fear for their lives.

Whatever, the situation, whether we face physical persecution or the hostility of a secular society, there is the same need to give an account of the faith that is in us, as Jesus expected of those in his own day. We need to be more prepared to do this, both in the sense of deepening our understanding of the faith, and also in deepening our trust that Jesus will be true to his promise and give us his words and his wisdom when we need them.

In a sense, we are living in the end times. The End that the Bible refers to is the completion of God's purposes, which was expected to be a time of judgement, and in Jesus' day that would have been thought of as the end of the world. Modern science tells us how the world is likely to end, in a gradual cooling of the planet over millions of years. We don't face the end of the world, but we do face a time of judgement. In the situation of the world today, God faces us with the truth of our stewardship of his creation, of our care for his people. The End as a time of judgement is now and always: it is the challenge to faith and obedience that Jesus preached, and which his followers must preach in his name. So just

before the final act of his ministry Jesus warns them to be on their guard, and not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.

And that's true for us also. We too will experience opposition and the condemnation, and we must be on our guard, alert to read the signs of the times. We must expect to be held to account for our faith, opposed, derided, ridiculed and even persecuted, but at such times we can be sure that God will put the words we need in our mouths. We must pray for one another and also that God's purposes, the completion of his work, will be fulfilled. We must also learn from the conviction of the first Christians that behind the events we see and which disturb us, God is at work ensuring that the final outcome will be good and not evil. The End will be God's.

## *Maundy Thursday*

### **JESUS CELEBRATES THE LAST SUPPER**

Every year the Jews celebrate the Passover, the festival that recalls the Exodus, the mighty act of God that delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Through that mighty act God made a Covenant with Israel by which they became his people. The Covenant was sealed through the shed blood of the Passover lambs. Passover was a new beginning, and every Jew is enjoined to keep the feast. On the night before he died Jesus kept the feast with his disciples. Earlier that day Peter and John were led through the narrow streets of Jerusalem by a man carrying a jar of water. He would have been quickly recognised because water-jars were usually carried by women, another unknown friend, like the owner of the donkey, whose generosity has been recorded rather than his name. Jesus once said, 'Foxes have their holes and birds their roosts; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' (Luke 9.58) As a travelling preacher with no permanent home, he was dependent on the generosity of his friends for all that he needed.

This friend led Peter and John to a large upper room where they prepared the Passover supper. At the end of the meal Jesus led his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. It's a long walk, down through the Kidron valley and up the other side, and if you do it in the rain, as I did many years ago, you arrive soaked. There in Gethsemane Jesus is betrayed and arrested; then he is taken back across the city to the high priest's house, not far from the upper room. When morning breaks he is taken on another long walk to the Praetorium, where he is flogged and handed over to be crucified. And then a final, utterly exhausting walk to Calvary. In the space of a few hours Jesus walked back and forth across the city four times. For him these events followed one another without

interruption; there was no rest or refreshment save for that last meal with the disciples in the upper room.

Each evangelist tells the story of that meal in his own way, and Luke follows Mark in placing it between two stories of betrayal. This indicates how we are to interpret the event. The meal points to the way in which the betrayal of God by his people will be overcome; it is the sign in time of what God has accomplished eternally.

Judas has already been to the priests and arranged to hand Jesus over in a place away from the crowds. Many have speculated on why Judas did this; Luke is clear: Satan entered into him. Satan exploited a weakness of character, and Judas became an instrument of the very enemy that Jesus had devoted his life to defeating. Aware of this, or knowing what was likely to be in Judas' heart, during the meal Jesus says that one of those eating with him will betray him, and this provokes a discussion as to whom this could be. And at the end of the meal he tells them that Satan has been given leave to 'sift all of them like wheat.' Its a graphic image of testing, when the dross is removed what will be left? In the end none have the courage or conviction to stay with Jesus; they all desert him, even Peter who protests that he is ready to go with Jesus 'to prison and to death.'

So the hour comes and Jesus takes his place at the table; he speaks to them in words of foreboding: 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' He knows what will happen to him, but he knows also that through his suffering his relationship with his companions will be transformed, and the relationship between God and his people will be transformed. As he speaks, Jesus knows that through his sacrifice God will make a



New Covenant with his people, another new beginning, which his life has anticipated and which his blood will seal.

Aware of the imminence of his death, Jesus makes the meal a symbol of its significance. The bread is his body, soon to be broken on the cross, the wine is his blood, soon to be poured out in sacrifice. In later years Paul would insist upon this interpretation of the Eucharist: 'Every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes.' (1 Corinthians 11.26) The Eucharist 'proclaims' the death of the Lord. The Greek word used to describe what happens in the Eucharist is *anamnesis*, which means to make effective in the present an event from the past – present now as it was then, potent in all its power. We lack a word to convey this sense adequately. 'Remembrance' is too weak; 're-present', making present again, better conveys the meaning. However we understand it, when we gather around the Lord's table like the first disciples, we do not simply keep alive the memory of Jesus, nor simply recall why he died; we make real among us the power of his death, his atoning sacrifice. And because he has invited us to his table, a sign of reconciliation, we receive for ourselves the gift that his sacrifice made possible, his greatest gift, the forgiveness of sins.

We see the effect of God's gift of forgiveness after the resurrection when the disciples stood firm against the very authorities from whom they will shortly flee, a fulfillment of Jesus' promise at the end of the supper that they will eat and drink with him in his kingdom and will judge the twelve tribes of Israel. But at the time that's not how it was. As Luke makes plain, they failed to grasp what Jesus is about. They have been with him for three years; they have seen the miracles; they have listened to his words; they have shared his fellowship, but still they have not really understood. Even now they argue about who will be greatest in the kingdom,

thinking of it like a worldly kingdom where the greatest lord it over the least, rather than as a fellowship where to lead is to serve; and they take literally Jesus' words about being armed, despite his example of self-surrender. No wonder he says, 'Enough!'

At the end, Jesus is a lonely figure. The people have flocked to him, but, like the twelve, they have not really grasped what he was about, and now as his life draws to a close he will lose even those who have stood by him in his trials. 'His call has been to drink the cup of experience to the dregs, to walk a path of obedience never before explored by man, and from his first wrestling with Satan in the wilderness to the last grim agony that now awaits him ... he has to face his destiny alone.' (G B Caird, *St Luke*, pp. 239-40).

## JESUS IS BETRAYED

The walk from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane takes you first through the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, then down a steep hillside, across the brook Kidron, and into the garden which is on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. It is an olive orchard, and an imposing church, the Church of All Nations, has been built there. Inside the church the focal point is a large rock, the Rock of the Agony (now surrounded by a low railing), which is hallowed as the place where Jesus knelt and prayed. In the evening away from the crowds it is a very moving place, and kneeling in prayer around the rock brings home the full anguish that Jesus felt at the onset of his Passion.

As they arrive Jesus says to the disciples, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial', and then he moves away from them and prays alone, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup

from me; yet not my will but yours be done.’ Luke says his prayer is anguished, and his sweat is like great drops of blood; an angel gives him strength, but the anguish does not abate. This is a new picture of Jesus. In his life he was not one to be overwhelmed. He was the one in control, but now things are different. The full reality of what he must endure comes upon him, even to the extent that he prays that there might be another way: ‘... remove this cup from me....’ We see here graphically the cost of reconciliation. The One to whom obedience to God was meat and drink, asking to be spared, but even so, willing to obey. The contrast with the disciples is telling, as they succumb to their feelings and fall asleep. The divine strength in Jesus is contrasted with human weakness, as he rebukes them, ‘Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’

Its easy to be critical of the disciples; would we have been any different? Weakness of the flesh is part of the human condition, even St Paul experienced it: ‘The good which I want to do, I fail to do; but what I do is the wrong which is against my will.’ (Romans 7.19) This will be within the experience of us all. The flesh often seems to have a mind of its own. We know these days from depth psychology how we are driven by by deep, hidden desires and impulses, and part of human growth into mature adulthood is to become aware of these hidden forces. Naming them enables us to use them creatively; strengthening the flesh is part of our spiritual growth. Jesus experiences these forces as the spiritual powers of darkness, and twice urges the disciples to pray that they may not come into the time of trial. As we watch with him, perhaps that should be our prayer also: spare us the time of trial, work within us, align our will with your Will that the flesh and the spirit become one.

And so the story comes to its brutal conclusion. The threat that Jesus presented to the authorities is clear from the arrangements made for his arrest. This is not regular police work, the apprehension of a troublemaker by a couple of officers. Judas comes accompanied by a crowd, armed with swords and clubs. The arrest has all the marks of the overkill typical of state action against dissidents. We have seen this use of force time and again; it is routine in police states, and it happens in Britain too. This is the arrest of someone perceived as an enemy of the state. Jesus challenges his captors, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs as though I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour and the powers of darkness.' As we have seen, Jesus is too popular for him to be arrested openly, and so the authorities act in a lonely place in the dead of night. Jesus spoke about those who preferred darkness to light because they know that their deeds are evil, and now that evil surrounds him. He is betrayed by a kiss, the most intimate sign of friendship. Evil seeks to mask its true nature; so in Gethsemane betrayal wears the mask of love.

## *Good Friday*

### **JESUS IS CONDEMNED & CRUCIFIED**

‘It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon...’ The darkness of Good Friday is one with the darkness of the whole week. As the week has progressed the forces of darkness have gathered, and last night in Gethsemane they found their opportunity away from the crowds, away from the light of day, and seized Jesus. Since then he has appeared before the Jewish council, Pilate, Herod and Pilate again. Neither Pilate nor Herod have found him guilty, but the council have extracted what they take to be an admission of guilt.

The proceedings before the council were not regular judicial proceedings, designed to establish whether someone is guilty or not. In their minds Jesus was already guilty; their examination of him was to find evidence that would substantiate his guilt. They knew the evidence must come from Jesus himself, and they’d tried before to trap him in own words by sending people to ask him trick questions, and now they use the same technique again, but this time their approach is more direct, ‘If you are the Messiah, tell us.’ Like the other questions, this one is two-edged: it sounds like a request for information – ‘Perhaps we have got this wrong, and you are actually the Messiah; is this right?’. Jesus sees through them, but he can’t deny who he is, so he answers obliquely, first pointing out that they are not really interested in the truth: ‘If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer.’ Then, he edges closer to the admission they want: ‘From now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.’ They pounce on this, and all of them ask, ‘Are you, then, the Son of God?’ Jesus’ reply, ‘You say that I am,’ sounds to them like the admission they seek, and they rise as a body and bring him to

Pilate. At last they had him. It may be day, but darkness has triumphed.

Pilate clearly does not believe Jesus to be guilty of anything deserving death, he sees through the duplicity of the priests – they say Jesus has forbidden paying taxes to Caesar, although this is precisely what he did not do – but Pilate does not have enough strength of character to abide by his judgement. When he hears that Jesus is a Galilean he tries to shift responsibility by sending him to Herod, and from then on he has lost control of the case. When Herod sends Jesus back, Pilate's situation has worsened. The priests have been at work and have whipped up the crowd, and there is a real danger of things getting out of control. Preserving order was a high priority for the Romans, as it is for any occupying force, and so one man's death, albeit unjustified, seems a small price to pay for preserving order, and Pilate's own position, and so he hands Jesus over as they wanted. Jesus is condemned through the fear of the powerful: both the priests and Pilate fear for their power and authority were Jesus to remain alive, and, as so often in affairs of state, truth falls victim to power.

The way to Golgotha led across the city from the Praetorium through a warren of narrow, winding alleys. The victim is close enough to the bystanders for them to strike him, trip him up, spit upon him. When Jesus requires help they pick another victim, Simon of Cyrene, someone from another country, not from the city like themselves; another stranger whom they could kick around. The abuse continues after Jesus has been nailed to the cross. The people stand by watching, but the leaders scoff at him, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' And the soldiers join in too, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' This is about as low as you can get: jeering as your victim suffers.

But Luke shows that Jesus is not coarsened by the brutality of what is happening to him, and continues to minister to those around him. He speaks to the women of Jerusalem, reminding them that this is their tragedy, not his, 'Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. If they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' He asks forgiveness for those who nail him to the cross, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' To the thief hanging beside him he offers an assurance of heaven, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.' And as his life ebbs away he cries out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' A final prayer of faith and trust. The centurion on duty has seen it all, and as Jesus dies he says, 'Certainly this man was innocent.'

The way Jesus dies is the most eloquent statement about who he is, and it confounds the views of the priests and the other religious authorities. This is not the death of a blasphemer or a dangerous revolutionary. It is the death of one who has lived his life so close to God that even as he suffers brutally he can forgive his torturers. It is the death of the Son of God. His final cry says it all, 'I've drained the cup, I've walked the way of obedience, I've done all that I came to do, and now I've offered my life - Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' In contrast to the priests and their scoffing, the people stand by powerless. Perhaps now they see that in demanding that Jesus be crucified they have been duped by the priests. Now, perhaps, they agree with the centurion, Jesus was innocent, and his words come back to them, 'Don't weep for me; weep for you and for your children.' Luke says they returned to the homes beating their breasts. They are all involved.

Innocent suffering has a value. Martin Luther King said he believed that unmerited suffering was redemptive, and that is how

we understand Jesus' death. 'Through him,' wrote St Paul, 'God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace though the shedding of his blood on the cross.' (Colossians 1.20) His death brings forgiveness, but it also but it also brings judgement. As the light shows up the darkness, so love and goodness show up all that is wrong and evil; love and goodness both reconcile and judge, it cannot be otherwise. Forgiveness and judgement are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have the one without the other. Loving and judging, God seeks to bring about reconciliation not condemnation, as St John said, God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but to save the world. How we respond is our choice. One of the thieves crucified with Jesus turned to him and received forgiveness, the other turned away with contempt and brought judgement on himself. One died reconciled to God, the other died separated from him. The choice is ours.

As Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.' The curtain separated the sanctuary from the rest of the temple, protecting it from view, and, symbolically, protecting God from view. Only the priests were permitted to go beyond it. Jesus' death rends the curtain and removes the barrier. From now on all can see God, and through Jesus' death all may now approach him. The darkness has become light.

Thanks be to God.