

The Last Hour

Good Friday 2023, St Stephen and St Paul, Gloucester.

The First Address

John 19:13-16

Stretching way back in the tradition is the practice of reading St John's account of the Passion on Good Friday. In some churches the whole of chapters 18 and 19 of the Gospel according to St John is read at the service today. We are not going to do that, but what I have done is to lift out four passages, all from chapter 19, to mark our keeping of the Last Hour together here. And after the first three of those passages I'm going to give a brief reflection, an address, to focus our prayers and our thoughts as we wait here at the foot of the cross, marking in worship, marking in remembrance, the minutes ticking away until the point where Jesus dies. Interestingly although the gospel accounts vary a little bit in the precise timings of what happened on that first Good Friday, in the city, and on the Green Hill far away, there is pretty much consensus on the fact that Jesus died at what Scripture refers to as the ninth hour, 3 o'clock in the afternoon. And so it has been the tradition for a very long time for Christians to gather in the afternoon on Good Friday, rather than in the morning or the evening, which are the normal kind of times that we gather together in the usual run of things, because we want to watch and wait with our Saviour, in our heart and mind, as he approaches the moment of his death, the moment where the entire world changes for ever, the moment where God dies, and paradoxically, wonderfully, and mysteriously, we live.

So as we mark the minutes leading up to 3 o'clock, we will hear four passages from St John's account of the Passion of the Lord. Three of which will be followed by reflections and silence, but

the fourth of which, at the very end of the service, will be followed by nothing but a brief prayer, and then our dispersal. That's the story of the burial of Christ. Because once the tomb is sealed all we can do is sit with the silence until the morning of resurrection. That waiting, in itself, is quite an important element of these last three days of Holy Week. We can be quite frenetic, as human beings, can't we. Always wanting to move on as quickly as possible to the next thing, and that has been hastened I think by the advent of 24-hour news, social media accessible every second of the day on our mobile phones, and so on. But the church enforces a silence on us this afternoon, once the tomb has been shut. We just have to wait for the dawn. We just have to sit, like the disciples, waiting for God to do God's thing. And I commend that practice to you. Even though of course we know the end of the story. There is something quite important about the waiting.

But that is to get ahead of ourselves. That is to do with the final of today's four readings. Let's come back to the one we have just heard.

And an ancient discipline of Christians has been to 'imagine ourselves' into the biblical story. As we hear the reading, wondering what we can observe, what we can see, we can hear, or what we can smell. And perhaps wondering also where we find ourselves in the story. Which characters do we immediately empathise with, associate with, and perhaps particularly interestingly, which characters are we repulsed by? And why? There are elements of this kind of way of reading the Bible in the Ignation exercises. It's also part of the practice of *lectio divina*, the meditative reading of Scripture in the monastic tradition.

And of course in the short passage that we have just heard, there are lots of people, and if we are honest we might find ourselves in any one of their places. There is Pilate, that shadowy character. Is he trying to defend Jesus? Is he being quite strong? Or is he actually rather weak, giving in to the crowd, keen to shore up the occupying ruling power by giving in to what the local religious leaders want to do? What are his motives? What guides his morality? And on Good Friday we ask those same questions of ourselves. We need to be careful when we hear St John refer to “the Jews” in his gospel. Because he is really talking about, at various points, the religious leaders, or those who followed them on that particular day in Jerusalem. So on this Good Friday we might ask ourselves, who do *we* follow? In life. Who do we allow to influence our decision-making? Our behaviour? When are those times when we have been persuaded into doing something that we actually knew, deep down in our hearts, was less than the right thing to do? Who exercises power over us? Who do we *allow* to exercise power over us? Who do we want to impress? And is there any of that that might be unhealthy? Is there any of that that leads us close to the point of simply falling in, of allowing our own cries of ‘hosanna’ to become ‘crucify’?

At this point in the story our King, Jesus, is a prisoner, and interestingly in John’s gospel he is completely silent. He appears to be *powerless*. And for whatever reason, Pilate is persuaded by that crowd with their cries of ‘crucify’. We have all seen in recent years the way in which that sort of crowd can be whipped up. Perhaps most clearly and shockingly in what happened outside the US Capitol building on 6 January 2021, where there was a literal crowd, shouting ‘string them up’. But there are lesser versions of that, character assassinations, rumours, uncharitable gossip, probably fairly tawdry and certainly less

scandalous, but no less an outworking of the same abdication of responsibility to our crucified redeemer.

On this Good Friday we examine our motivations, the people we allow to influence us, and the shadowy recesses of our own hearts that lead us sometimes to deny, to sell out, to live less than the life of a disciple. And we hold those up to the silent figure waiting to be sentenced, his head scratched with the thorny crown, stripped of his dignity, stripped even of his clothes, and yet bearing an authority which still calls out to us, to follow him.

The Second Address

John 19:16b-22

So we have followed Christ out from Pilate's headquarters, and joining in with that noisy throng who just a few moments ago were shouting for Jesus's blood, we find ourselves at Golgotha, or, in Latin, Calvary. The Place of the Skull. Interestingly these days there is no real consensus on exactly where this place might be. There are three reasonably strong contenders, all of which you can visit if you go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When I visited 20 years ago I went to 2 of them, and there's now a third popular possibility you can go and see. But regardless of its precise geographical location, Scripture tells us that it was outside the city, but as John makes clear, in a place where there were a lot of people. Jerusalem of course, in the time of Christ, as today, is a busy bustling place with lots of gates and roads leading in and out, and particularly on this festival weekend there would have been people everywhere. So as we imagine ourselves into the story we might imagine pilgrims and travellers moving up and down the tracks, the roads, towards the city, or indeed away from it. A certain amount of bustle, and perhaps curiosity from those travellers as to what the Romans are up to. Chatter and noise. Several languages probably, for Pilate writes his sign in three languages, and refuses to alter the wording. And again his motivation is cloudy at best. Is he just being stubborn? Twisting the knife a bit to irritate the religious leaders? Is there anything more noble in it? We don't know. Where are you in this story? Which language do you speak? Which language can you read? Can you make out what it says on that sign nailed to the top of the middle gibbet, over there on that little rise to the side of the road?

That sign of course has passed into our Christian tradition. Wander into many churches and you'll see stained-glass or

paintings or carvings of the crucifixion, with a little rectangle at the top of the Cross and the letters INRI, the first letters of the phrase *Jesus Nazarenus, rex Judæorum*, the Latin rendering of Pilate's phrase, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.'

When we gaze upon the crucified Christ we gaze upon the King. I don't know how much they are going to change about the Coronation service this time around. Depending on who you talk to, there have been minor or perhaps more significant edits, but the interesting thing about the Coronation of an English monarch is that there is a very clear understanding that the sort of kingship that is being recognised is a kingship that understands itself to be modelled upon Christ the Servant King. So you will see and hear language of servanthood and service quite clearly when we get to that point in May. In the last Coronation, in 1953 for example, the Queen was repeatedly referred to as "your servant, Queen Elizabeth", and as "the Minister of God".

Christians believe that when we look upon this man, this particular man, Jesus, dying on a gallows outside a medium-sized occupied Mediterranean city in something like 33 A.D., we are looking at our King. When we look to the cross today, this afternoon, in the city of Gloucester, on a [gray/rainy/sunny] early April day 2000 odd years later, we are looking at the throne of our King. Because this act in history reaches forward and backward and does what theologians call the atonement. This moment in history redeems everything. It is the moment at which we are made 'at one', when God's capacity to just keep loving bangs up against our weakness and limitation and inadequacy, bangs up against our failure, our indolence, and the moments where we are just plain bad, bangs up, too, against that little spark in us that longs to be better, that longs to shine and be innocent and young in the way that we were in the garden of Eden, that longs and yearns and hopes for love. And there is

connection. So that what happened at Christmas, when love stooped down to us, is completed. Love has found us, and lifts us, knows us, and brings us home. [It is what the great East window of this church is saying when it shows us the holy infant at the bottom, and the resurrected Christ at the top, and in between them the holy Sacrament, the broken body and the spilt blood of Good Friday. God's loving purpose is completed.] There is atonement. We are made one.

Mother Julian of Norwich, the great English mystic of the 14th century, gazing at the crucified Christ in prayer, had a vision of Jesus saying, "it gives me greater happiness and joy and, indeed, eternal delight ever to have suffered for you. If I could possibly have suffered more, I would have done so." In other words, we are looking at the statement of love eternal. There is, as Scripture says, no greater love than this. It is accomplished.

'What I have written I have written'. We cannot know what Pilate thought he meant when he insisted he wouldn't change his wording. But we, gathering in the crowd around the foot of the Cross, perhaps alongside some of those characters who don't get named in this gospel, Simon of Cyrene, the women of Jerusalem - or those like the soldiers who do find a place in John's version of the story - we gather, and gaze, and try to wrap our heads around this extraordinary truth that we are looking at the full measure of God's love. That we are looking at Mother Julian's vision of the greatest love imaginable. That we are looking at our Servant King, and that he is even now working out our salvation.

The Third Address

John 19:25b-37

"It is completed. It has come to a full end. The mystery of God's love towards us is accomplished. The price is paid, and we are redeemed. O God and Father, you have valued us so much as to pay the highest of all possible prices for our sinful souls - and shall we not love and choose you above all things as the one necessary and one only good?" Words of John Henry Newman, Anglican and later Roman Catholic priest.

We come at last to the moment of Christ's death. And if we are continuing to place ourselves among the crowd, to place ourselves into the scene, we find that we come with Mary, and with John. Mary who has, by definition, been with Jesus for his whole life, finds herself standing at the foot of her Son's cross. The prophecy that you might remember from Candlemas, when Simeon said to this mother, cradling her 40-day old child in her arms, "a sword will pierce your own soul too" - that prophecy is fulfilled today. The sword is driven home. Any of us who have borne the weight of bereavement know that sword. The sword of grief. The sword of emptiness and the hollowing of our heart. And each of us comes to the Cross each successive Good Friday scarred by the wounds of our own losses and bereavements. Some of them ancient and familiar, some of them raw and new.

We come to the foot of the Cross and Christ speaks. John gives us words of Christ very sparingly in his Passion Narrative. But he records three out of the seven things that scripture tells us Jesus speaks from the Cross. The Seven Last Words, as they are known. And one of them is the making of a new family. Hanging on the Cross, moments from his own death, when others might have railed and ranted and cursed the world for its

unfairness, Christ makes a new family out of Mary and John. Compassionate at the very moment of his apparent destruction, Jesus is building the Church. Whatever great or little part the Blessed Virgin Mary might make in our life of faith, there is something profound happening here. What does God do at the point of seeming disaster and destruction? What does God do in the depths of grief and fear and hopelessness? God makes family. God builds relationship. And Mary and John model that at the foot of the Cross.

Part of the deep truth of the crucifixion, part of the deep truth of this whole three-day period leading up to Easter Day and the rising of the sun is that it is in the depths of the darkness that our identity as Christian people is wrought. We fear the darkness. We fear annihilation. We fear death, very often we fear other people's deaths more than we fear our own, for we fear being left alone. But in the words of another Passiontide hymn which I didn't choose today, "inscribed upon the Cross we see in shining letters: God is love."

Whatever else we might want to say about the Cross, and the Christian church has wanted to say all sorts of things over its history, what we are looking at when we look at the Cross is a love letter. The promise of relationship. A relationship that binds Mary and John together for the rest of their lives, a relationship that constitutes you and me, us, the Church, a relationship based on covenant, the promise, made at that first Easter that says, there is nowhere that you will go where I, God, will not go with you. And indeed where I have not gone ahead of you already. 'The darkness is not darkness for you, for the night is as bright as the day', in the words of the psalmist.

And that promise is made here, at the Cross. Something that looks like complete disaster and failure, but is the opposite,

because it is wrought in love, not in power. The late Queen Elizabeth said, "grief is the price we pay for love." And how Mary must have known that. These are John Henry Newman's words again: "he has been hidden in your womb, he has lain in your bosom, he has been carried in your arms - and now that he is dead, he is placed upon your lap."

But we, standing in this gaggle at the Cross as 3 o'clock draws near may not be able to hear all of that at the time, might not know that in that moment of apparent desolation, we have been made into a family. Indeed we will scatter, as did the disciples, as the stone is rolled across the entrance of the tomb and sealed.

But in the darkness hope is building. And, yes, grief is the price we pay for love, but this is love so amazing, so divine, this is love that, at the moment that it appears to be extinguished is forming a new relationship where you and I and our loved ones who have gone before us, and generations yet unborn can stand upright alongside our Servant King and know ourselves to be at one with him, and cherished, and come home; and 'love is come again like wheat that springeth green'.