

## GOOD FRIDAY DEVOTIONS 30 MARCH 2018

Jesus was crucified. That is as certain as practically any historical event of its period can be. It is recorded in all four gospels. It is referred to by non-Christian writers. These written sources weren't set down at the time of the crucifixion. There weren't any press reports in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. The sources go back perhaps to the 60s ad, and on into the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, a period in which there was good reason to pay attention to the life and death of Jesus. His followers had become a group of note in the Mediterranean world, and possibly beyond.

Jesus was not the only person to be crucified. It was a punishment reserved for the lower classes: slaves and foreigners, not Roman citizens. It was a gruesome public deterrent. Jesus was not the only person to be put to death on religious grounds – and religion couldn't be separated from politics in those days. It still can't be, though people often think it can.

Why was Jesus crucified? Several answers can be attempted, from different perspectives. Christian thinking would go on to understand Jesus' death as the way God had chosen to bring about the salvation of mankind. S. Paul, for example, wrestles with finding such meaning for the crucifixion, and his writings are a rich source of ways we can unpack the simple statement 'Christ died for our sins'. But we can also approach the question why Jesus was crucified by looking at events in the gospels which may have brought about his arrest and execution.

I'm going to look at four such events. The first is the raising of Lazarus. This is described in S. John's gospel; most of the long chapter 11 is devoted to it. Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha. They are friends and followers of Jesus though not among the twelve apostles. They live in Bethany, a village just two miles from Jerusalem, well to the west of the River Jordan. Jesus is some distance away, to the east of the Jordan, when he hears Lazarus is ill. He delays two days before setting out, and by the time he arrives at Bethany Lazarus has been dead for four days. Jesus speaks with Martha and then with Mary. In this context of a natural death, Jesus speaks about himself being the resurrection and the life. It's rather like when he fed the 5,000 he spoke about himself as the bread of life. Anyway, Jesus has the tomb opened and shouts, "Lazarus, come out!" He does, and Jesus commands that he be unbound from the graveclothes.

It is a staggering miracle. There are links with Jesus' own death and resurrection. There are also differences: Lazarus' death does not save the world; Jesus' resurrection was not the resuscitation of

a corpse. But apart from the theological or symbolic links, the Lazarus miracle was an historical cause of Jesus' own death. S. John the gospel writer tells us

Many of the Jews, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him; but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

A meeting of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing council, is called. It is feared that if a new religious movement develops, the occupying Roman power might clamp down in a destructive way. The high priest Caiaphas declares, "...it is expedient that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." Unconsciously prophetic words. S. John concludes

So from that day on they took counsel how to put him to death.

Jesus' act of giving life encourages others to seek his own death.

The second event that provokes a confrontation is Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding on a colt or an ass, which the church enacts on Palm Sunday. Unlike the raising of Lazarus, this is recorded in all four gospels. It is an act claiming kingly status. The gospels quote the prophet Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!...Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass... .

Eventually Jesus' claim to kingship would be understood in a non-political sense. Jesus says to Pilate, "My kingship is not of this world." But his public act would not have been interpreted in this way by the crowd or by the authorities in Jerusalem, political and religious. His disciples also seem to persist in the view that in some way Jesus is going to bring the Jewish establishment into the movement he began three years before in Galilee. A few days later they seem to anticipate a struggle: at the last supper they show Jesus swords they have brought.

The prophecy from Zechariah is not the only Old Testament passage giving a meaning to Jesus' entry. In the opening chapter of the first book of the Kings we read of King David, near the end of his life, being told that one of his sons, Adonijah, has declared himself king of Israel. David's choice, however, was another of his sons, Solomon. David instructs his counsellors,

Cause Solomon my son to ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon; and let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet there anoint him king over Israel.

This happens, and the crowd who witness it shout, "Long live King Solomon!" This is very similar to the crowd's "Hosanna to the Son of David" at Jesus' entry. In different senses Solomon and Jesus are both sons of David. There is no mistaking the boldness of what Jesus is doing. Reaction is inevitable. If members of the establishment do not acknowledge Jesus as their ruler, then forceful rejection will follow: almost certainly execution.

The instruction that Solomon should be anointed links us to the third event which may contribute to the hardening of attitudes towards Jesus: his anointing by a woman. In the Old Testament those chosen to be kings were anointed. It happens at coronations in our own country. All four gospels describe such an event, though the details vary. Two of them have it before what we call Palm Sunday; the other two have it afterwards. Expensive perfume or ointment is used; there are complaints that the money spent on it could have been given to the poor; Jesus says that he is being anointed for his burial. At the same time, anointing could imply Jesus is being recognised as king. John's gospel sets it in the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, with Mary performing the anointing. John relates that many of the Jews come to see Jesus and also to see Lazarus raised from the dead. It is recorded that

...the chief priests planned to put Lazarus also to death, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

Opposition is mounting.

The fourth and final event which pits the powers that be against Jesus is his cleansing of the temple precincts. It seems this happened within a day or two of his triumphal entrance. Animals were on sale for the temple sacrifices. A special currency had to be used to purchase them, not coins with Caesar's head on one side, so there were money changers. Maybe there was other commercial activity connected with the temple or for the convenience of worshippers and pilgrims. Jesus overturns tables and begins to drive out the dealers. What is Jesus protesting against? Maybe commercial exploitation – he describes the place as a 'den of robbers'. Maybe he's protesting against the system of animal sacrifice, though this could be a later Christian interpretation, with an understanding that Jesus' death has done away with the need for other sacrifices. Maybe he's protesting against the exclusivity of temple regulations: Gentiles and women were only allowed so far in. In Mark's gospel, Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.' There's no indication that Jesus' disruption had a permanent effect on the temple's activities, but it did have the effect of hardening official opposition to Jesus. Quoting S. Mark again,

The chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching.

Threatening the temple's existence was one of the charges brought against Jesus at his trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council:

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.”

So the gospels relate a number of events near the end of Jesus’ ministry which give opponents ample cause to seek his execution: the raising of Lazarus which increased his following, the assertions of kingship in his triumphal entry and anointing, and the attack on the temple, a central institution of the Jewish way of life. Jesus’ teaching at this point in his ministry is of a piece: it points to an imminent crisis both for him and for the nation. A good example of this is his parable of the tenants in the vineyard. The vineyard stands for Israel, the tenants for its rulers. The owner stands for God. Eventually the tenants kill the owner’s son when he is sent to collect a due share of the produce. The parable ends with the owner destroying the tenants and giving the vineyard to others. It’s all there: the killing of Jesus, and the widening of God’s people to include Gentiles.

Let’s turn from looking at events to thinking about Jesus himself. How does he regard his impending crucifixion? That is an extremely difficult question, with much speculation involved. Sometimes we focus so much on Jesus’ divinity that any human doubts and aversion to suffering he had seem of little consequence. He is the one in control, who knows how things are going to turn out. He stills the storms, he walks on water, he casts out demons, he heals those with apparently incurable diseases. Could he not use his power to lessen his own suffering? Some watching him on the cross take his failure to come down from the cross as proof that he cannot be the Son of God. But that, I think, fails to see an implication of the gospels: Jesus’ miracles are foretastes of the victory over evil he was to achieve through his death on the cross, and his subsequent resurrection. Without the reality-changing conflict on the cross, the earlier small scale triumphs over evil would not have been possible. The counter to those who mock his sonship is provided by the centurion, who sees how Jesus dies, and exclaims, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” Jesus’ divinity is demonstrated by his dying rather than saving himself. What is common to all humans – death – shows the divinity of this one man.

Now we can speak in these terms because we live after the events. Is Jesus thinking in this way as the time of his passion draws near? We cannot know. We can, however, look at some of the many descriptions in the gospels of Jesus’ human reactions. Generally these show his awareness of the spiritual conflict in which he is engaged. He can feel joy. When seventy disciples whom he’s sent out return, and report that ‘even the demons are subject to us in your name’, S. Luke tells us that he rejoices in the Holy Spirit. He can feel love. When a rich young man asks how he can inherit eternal life, we are told that Jesus ‘loved him’ – and the word used for ‘love’ there (Greek has

several) is the one that is used elsewhere in the New Testament for love within the Christian community. Poor, ordinary people, are especially dear to Jesus. He can feel anger: at hardness of heart, at unwillingness to repent, and at the misuse of power. He tells his followers that the greatest among them is the one who serves. He can feel sorrow: he weeps over Jerusalem's unwillingness to heed the prophets of the past and himself in the present.

Jesus increasingly feels the weight of confrontation to come. He is eager to press forward; even, as we might say, 'to get it over with.' A large part of S. Luke's gospel is devoted to the teaching and events of his final journey to Jerusalem. Jesus says at one point,

I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptised with (meaning his death); and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!

Another translation puts it 'what stress I am under until it is completed.' A similar feeling is suggested in S. John's gospel in different settings. In the temple during his last week Jesus says

Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.

After washing his disciples' feet at the last supper, S. John records,

Jesus was troubled in spirit, and testified, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.'

The other gospels record Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. So it is fair to say that the cross casts its shadow backwards over Jesus' ministry as recorded in the gospels, and the shadow becomes more clearly defined as time goes on. It is hinted at by the opposition Jesus faces in some of his early miracles – curing someone in the synagogue on the Sabbath Day, for example, enrages some Pharisees. Midway through his ministry, at the transfiguration, Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah about 'his departure which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.' And his last days were filled with a natural, human dread.

What keeps Jesus going as he faces the cruellest of deaths? Surely the convictions he has held throughout his ministry. Fundamental is the consciousness that he is doing the will of his Father. The voice from heaven at his baptism declared, "This is my Son whom I love...". This declaration was repeated at the transfiguration. "I do not do my own will, but the will of him who sent me," Jesus tells his hearers. Perhaps he is clinging to his consciousness of sonship even as he takes up the heavy crossbeam. The most desperate of his cries from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is still a cry of faith. To ask 'Why?' is to search for a reason which one believes exists but does not know at the present. It is wrong to make a division between God the Father and Jesus his Son at the crucifixion. Sometime the picture is given of God being angry at human sin

(that's fair enough) and punishing his Son rather than the rest of us (that's unjust). A hymn recently written, which we don't sing here, talks of the wrath of God being satisfied. Rather, the crucifixion is an expression of the one love shared by Father and Son for sinful humanity. There is a painting of the crucifixion which portrays the Father's arms supporting Jesus' outstretched arms; the space between them is the shape of a dove, the Holy Spirit. The Trinity acts as one. The crucifixion doesn't change God in the sense of appeasing or placating him – it changes sin, doing away with its power, and it changes people.

Derived from Jesus' doing his Father's will is the love he shows for his followers, for all who acknowledge their need (like the young man I mentioned earlier), for the crowds who are like sheep without a shepherd, and even for his enemies. This continues in his suffering. He prays that those who nail him to the cross will be forgiven. He makes provision for his mother and the disciple he loves, and because they are representative figures it is provision for the whole family of his followers. He promises a place in paradise to a criminal next to him. He shows to the end the love he has shown throughout his life.

Part of Jesus' love for people is his opposition to the misuse of power, as I said earlier. He teaches about the kingdom of God, with values very different from the ones commonly practised in human society. Those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake are the blessed. Humility is to be practised rather than high status sought. He has stern warnings for any who cause a 'little one' to stumble. However, Jesus' arrest, torture and crucifixion are the exceptions to his habit of opposing injustice. He accepts what is forced upon him. As we observed before, he does not use divine power to mitigate his suffering. He reaches those who suffer unjustly because it has happened to him; he is one with them.

A final conviction that guides Jesus in his ministry and in his passion is the necessity that scripture should be fulfilled. In the scriptures the will of the Father is revealed. He tells the twelve,

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished.

After his resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, he tells the two disciples he has joined,

...everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.

Fulfilment of the scriptures goes deeper than the matching of texts to specific events. The Old Testament is a rich source of symbols. As an example we can take one of the passages set for reading at the Easter Vigil, the 55<sup>th</sup> chapter of prophecy of Isaiah. It begins

Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters... .

Water is a symbol of the life God offers. We may recall the water flowing from the rock to quench the thirst of the Israelites being led through the wilderness by Moses. I suspect Jesus has the scriptural image of water in mind when he proclaims, probably to a crowd in the temple, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink." Earlier he has told a Samaritan woman at a well that whoever drinks of the water that he gives will never thirst. Now, on the cross, Jesus who has promised to relieve the spiritual thirst of those who come to him, says, in fulfilment of one of the psalms, "I thirst." Once again, Jesus meets people's need because he experiences the need himself. His physical sufferings make spiritual provision possible.

This is shown, in symbolic terms, by the blood and water flowing from his side after death. It is the blood of sacrifice which brings forgiveness. It is the water of life: a life that is lost in order to bring life to others. His death is the fulfilment, the completion, of what he has proclaimed in word and deed during his life. He allows evil to have its way with him so that all who come to him might be delivered from evil. We have thought about the events which bring about his arrest and execution. We have tried to think of his feelings as he faces the prospect of a suffering from which all of us would naturally shrink. And we have seen that the convictions that sustain him in his passion are those he has held throughout his ministry. He can commend his spirit into his Father's hands because, truly, it is finished: all is accomplished.

THE PASSION PREFIGURED

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

CROSSING OF THE RED SEA

Normative passage for

VALLEY OF DRY BONES

HO, EVERYONE WHO THIRSTS

Link with Jesus 'I thirst'.

Word of God accomplishes his purpose.

God's ways higher than earthly ways – foolishness of the cross.

My God... and It is finished the two limits of our thinking about Jesus. Doing the will of his Father; loving his followers and those who acknowledge their need; opposing misuse of power; fulfilling scripture. Wept over Jerusalem.

WHY WAS JESUS CRUCIFIED?

HOW DID HE APPROACH IT?

HOW DID HIS FOLLOWERS FIND SIGNIFICANCE IN HIS DEATH?