

GOOD FRIDAY 10/4/09

## REFLECTIONS

John 18:1-12

It is a moment of betrayal. Jesus and most of his disciples have walked out of Jerusalem and across the valley to the opposite hill where there is a garden. It's not too far away and they are used to the walk for Jesus likes to go there to be quiet and pray. It is night-time but the moon lights the path.

Then suddenly the scene takes on more of the idea of a modern police drama as the soldiers and high priests arrive with torches. Lights are shining on Jesus and his companions so that Jesus asks for whom they are looking. When they say Jesus of Nazareth, he answers 'I am he'. The original Greek omits the third word and just says, 'I am' or 'ego eimi'. This is evidently enough to make the soldiers fall to the ground. What is going on?

Just those simple words 'I am'. But those two words had been used at momentous times in the past. When God asked Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, Moses asked for his name. A not unreasonable request. God replied simply 'I am who I am' and told Moses to tell anyone who asked that "I am has sent me to you". So "I am" became a term for God and that is why the soldiers fell to the ground – they were prostrating themselves in their normal way on hearing the divine name.

In John's gospel, Jesus is reported as having used those words a number of times to describe himself. You will remember them: I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the door; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the true vine; I am the way, the truth and the life.

Those words 'I am' equated Jesus with God and even so the authorities arrested Jesus. Why?

People could not face the rule of God on earth whatever their lip service to it may have been. Jesus, who preached the Beatitudes, was not one to accommodate himself to the ways of the sinful world. He showed up the failings of others, especially the failings of the religious leaders. He had to go. In the same way today, those who stand up publicly for justice, love, mercy and truth, all suffer condemnation from those whose failings are shown up.

Followers of Christ keep going whatever the consequences, just as Jesus himself kept on doing the will of God.

John 18:33-40

After his arrest, Jesus was taken to the high priest and, after questioning, Caiaphas sent him on to the Roman governor, Pilate. Clearly Caiaphas and Pilate were working together. Caiaphas held office for 18 years – a very long time in those days and 10 of those years were while Pilate was governor. Tellingly, as soon as Pilate was removed from office, Caiaphas was also deposed. Even non Christian sources of the time were not impressed with Pilate or the priests of the house of Annas.

Pilate's territory was that of Judea with Jerusalem it's main city. Records of the day suggest that Pilate was a tough administrator and he needed to be because during his term of office there were a number of outbursts of Jewish nationalism and the place was alive with guerrilla bandits. On this occasion, the leader of a group of people had entered Jerusalem and been hailed as a king. That was certainly enough to make Pilate and others nervous. So Pilate and some of the chief priests worked together to get Jesus out of the way before the feasting of Passover began.

But Jesus was a peaceful leader, why would the authorities want him out of the way? There was a complex mix of reasons.

Pilate asked Jesus if he was the King of the Jews to which Jesus replied that his kingdom was not from this world. He didn't say that it would never be of this world because he had already made the point that he was sent to bring the kingdom to the world. Then he said, I came into the world to testify to the truth. This answer meant nothing to Pilate. Pilate himself ruled strictly according to the law. In his understanding, kings were autocratic and ruled by the sword, not by speaking the truth.

Pilate offered the crowds outside a choice – free the good man or the bad. Instead of wanting truth, and the freeing of the person who stood for truth, the crowds asked for Barrabas, a brigand, to be freed. For some people, outlaws become hero figures.

In these times of secular democratic government, who takes the moral lead and speaks the truth, especially when the truth is uncomfortable? The ways of the world, the values of the world too often overcome the way of truth. When we read this story, think about Pilate and the way he acted. Think of the crowd and their choice of the colourful brigand. Then think of how we act in situations where there is pressure put on us to behave in ways we deep down know are not truthful, honest or loving of others.

John 19:8-16a

Pilate was in a tricky situation. He had the power to order the execution of Jesus or even of the chief priests. But the constraint on Pilate was what the people back in Rome would think of him.

Pilate at first found insufficient grounds for executing Jesus but that is where the priests stepped in. Pilate was nervous about what the Roman bosses would think of his behaviour and the priests knew this and played on it to their own advantage. After all, Pilate was their governor but they had his measure and all they had to do was hint at letting Rome know and Pilate buckled.

The priests of the Sanhedrin would have had a mix of religious, political and personal reasons just as any large church community would today. For some, Jesus was a threat to their carefully balanced relationship with the Roman authorities who allowed them considerable freedom to practice their religion.

The social position of the educated, well of chief priests was threatened when Jesus preached care of the poor. Jesus had acted and preached against the way the temple was run and for some truly pious people that would have been an attack on all they held dear, what was sacred in their eyes.

And so the priests pointed out to Pilate that Jesus had claimed to be the son of God. This put Jesus in opposition to Caesar because the Romans believed that Caesar was divine. Then the priests declare their loyalty to Caesar. They have no king but Caesar.

What a shocking thing for the chief priests to say. Throughout the history of Israel, the religious leaders and prophets had spoken of their God being the true king. The coming Messiah would be God's king on earth. And now, suddenly they were denying all of that to save their own skins. Everyone was protecting their own position and even their lives. Better to let one man, Jesus, be executed than have the anger of Rome descend on them.

One wonders how they rationalised this action. Did they feel remorse afterwards when they again sang the psalms claiming God as king? How did they teach their religious heritage after this? Did they put down the followers of Jesus who had been claiming Jesus as the Messiah?

It is easy isn't it to go quiet when our position is threatened. It starts with wanting to be one with our friends, not wanting to appear prudish or old fashioned. Sometimes it is a case of deferring to the wishes of more senior or more experienced people, despite niggly feelings that they are wrong. Then it is the way things are done until someone is brave enough to stand up and say "No. This other way is the way of truth".

John 19:25-30

How do we look at the last scene of Jesus' life? Artists have portrayed it in various ways down the centuries. Paul spoke of the crucifixion as a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles while to Christians it was the power of God. Even so, the early Christians did not depict the crucifixion in art. Rather they showed Jesus as the shepherd. The earliest existing crucifixion scenes date from the 5<sup>th</sup> century and for some hundreds of years, scenes of the crucifixion showed Jesus as priest. According to Hans Kung, it was only from the High Gothic and Early Renaissance that Jesus was depicted as a suffering figure. People started to think in terms of the man and what he had gone through.

Jesus had been abandoned. Most of the disciples had run away for safety, leaving only the women and the disciple whom Jesus loved. Were they wimps or was it a practical necessity? Bishop Tom Wright reminds us that even in recent times in Lebanon, during the civil war, the men dared not appear out of doors unarmed and alone while the women could move relatively freely to the shops for food. He suggests that the beloved disciple was very young and not seen as a threat. Whatever the reason, Jesus had been abandoned by many of his closest friends. The gospels of Matthew and Mark tell of Jesus feeling abandoned even by God and crying out "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?".

Despite this, in John's gospel we have a picture of Jesus in charge of the situation. He makes sure that his mother will be cared for by the disciple he loved. But more important than his care of his mother is the fulfilling of the scriptural prophecies and the significance of the place of Mary here at the crucifixion. It is only the second time in John's gospel in which she features. The first was at the wedding at Cana. On that occasion Jesus told his mother that his hour had not yet come. This time his hour has come and she is with him again to witness it.

Then Jesus said he was thirsty and was given cheap sour wine to drink. This was seen by the early Christians as a fulfilment of the verse in Psalm 69 which says "and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink". It was the ordinary wine of the soldiers on duty, nothing like the good wine which Jesus had given the wedding guests at Cana. We are reminded too of how Jesus had spoken of living water to the woman of Samaria. He could give that living water to others but now, on the cross, he was thirsty. Jesus had become like ordinary mortals and was suffering. From then on he could be accepted as the Son of God who had come to earth as a mortal. He was both divine and human and so we know that he fully enters into our lives as one who had experienced what it means to be human.

When all was accomplished, Jesus was able to say that he had done all he had been sent by God to do and he died. Jesus had loved to the very end. He had been true to God to the very end.

That is his glory and it is the glory that Jesus had asked God to extend to his followers. It is ours if we are true to God to the end, if we love God and others to the end. Can we?