

## Good Friday 6 April 2012

### Reflections on four participants in our readings

#### PETER

Well, he's done it again. Peter has to be the most impulsive character in the whole of the Scriptures. Remember how he took the plunge out on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus came walking on the water. Remember how at the Transfiguration he opened his mouth without thinking and wanted to make three tents for Moses, Elijah and Jesus, so they could stay together on the mountain.

And here he is again, acting with little thoughtfulness, a fisherman carrying a sword(!), chopping off the high priest's slave's ear.

At least he had the courage to follow Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, to see what was happening to Jesus. But then three times his courage deserted him, and as predicted by Jesus, three times he denied that he was a disciple of Jesus.

Yet this man went on to witness the resurrection of Jesus and to be one of the three most prominent leaders of the early church, along with Jesus' brother James and the apostle Paul.

What can we learn from Peter? Surely we can all take heart from the story of Peter. God doesn't demand perfection from us. God forgives Peter his denials and his weakness. And that forgiveness empowers Peter to become more thoughtful, more faithful, more courageous as a key leader of the early church.

God understands and accepts our failings and can and will still use us as his people, his disciples, his agents. Thanks be to God.

#### PONTIUS PILATE

We know precious little about Pontius Pilate. Until a few years ago it was even thought by some that he was a creature of fiction, for there was no hard evidence that he really existed. But then in 1961 an old stone inscription was dug up in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea, which refers to Pontius Pilate as the Roman prefect of the province of Judea.

It appears that Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea from 26 to 36 AD. Despite the Roman policy of relative tolerance for the religious views and the culture of their conquered peoples, Pilate managed frequently to offend Jewish sensibilities. He raided the wealth of the temple in Jerusalem. He constantly proclaimed the divinity of Caesar Augustus. He ruthlessly put down any whiff of rebelliousness against Rome.

Yet in the gospel accounts of the trial of Jesus, Pilate is reluctant to acquiesce to the pleadings for the death of Jesus. He's caught in the middle, between the feverish desire of Jewish leaders for Jesus to be executed and his sense that Jesus is no danger to Roman rule. Only under serious pressure from the crowd does he yield, and sentence Jesus to death.

What can we learn from Pilate? That you can't win when there are competing pressures upon you? That you can't please everybody. That you have to make hard choices sometimes. That it is not always right to go along with the crowd. Thanks be to God.

## **MARY**

How cruel is it, for a mother to watch her son die! Somehow it only adds to the grief to have the mother's dying son hand her over to one of his followers for safekeeping "Woman, here is your son" - as if anyone else could possibly take the place of your own flesh and blood.

Mary's composure in the face of great challenges is nigh unbelievable. As a young woman, probably only in her mid-teens, an angel tells her she'll become pregnant and bear God's son. When Jesus is born in a less than salubrious maternity ward, she meets shepherds and wise men and hears strange stories of angel choirs and guiding stars, and she has to flee with her young baby from the wrath of King Herod.

Then when Jesus commences his ministry, she and the rest of the family are inclined at first to agree with those who say Jesus has gone out of his mind. But she sticks with him. She treasures things in her heart. She remembers that God gave her a mission, and that God gave her son an even larger mission.

And she's there at the end, anguish and grief notwithstanding.

What can we learn from Mary? She's a model of terrific faith, faith that realises and accepts we cannot know everything. She's a model of parental love, staying with her son through thick and thin. She remains calm in the face of huge challenges and impositions. She knows God is a presence in her life, and will see her through. Thanks be to God.

## **JESUS**

Jesus dies, weakened by months of demanding self-giving ministry, battered by the treatment meted out by his captors, physically exhausted and perhaps even emotionally and spiritually exhausted. Jesus dies. But he knows that not only is his earthly life finished, but that his mission on earth is finished too, fulfilled, completed.

Jesus has seen it through. He always knew that what awaited him in Jerusalem was hostility, arrest and a cruel death, but still he came. In Gethsemane the night before, he prayed that the cup of suffering might be removed from him, but he stuck with God's mission, he saw it through.

In Jesus' death we see the extraordinary depth of God's love. Jesus accepts the hostility, the suffering, the dying, right to the end living out, the love of God for all – for his disciples eating the last supper with him, both men and women; for the thieves dying with him; for the Roman soldiers nailing him to the cross; for his mother watching the terrible events in grief.

What can we learn from Jesus? That God's love is for everyone. That God wants us to receive his love and forgiveness, his gifts of abundant and eternal life. That God wants us to live following the example of Jesus, reflecting God's love, willingly serving the needs of others. That human sinfulness, the powers of evil, while looking like they're winning, in fact are not. That death is not the end, for resurrection day is coming. That God is in ultimate control. Thanks be to God.