

A Good Friday Meditation

The following is a set of readings suitable for Good Friday, together with some reflections, and some penitential prayers.

You are welcome to use them if you find them helpful.

John 18.1-14

After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. 2 Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. 3 So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. 4 Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' 5 They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. 6 When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they stepped back and fell to the ground. 7 Again he asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' 8 Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.' 9 This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken, 'I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.' 10 Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. 11 Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?'

12 So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. 13 First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. 14 Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

Reflection

Today we recount the tale of our betrayal, complicity, duplicity, and collusion in the death of Jesus. It's all there, the worst parts of our collective psychic anatomy:

We see the betrayal of a leader by a trusted disciple, and we never even know what drove him to it – the money? Impatience with the pace of Jesus' ministry, or misunderstanding of its nature? Simple disaffection?

Do we, in Judas, recognise our own secret thoughts and doubts about those to whom we have pledged our allegiance or our friendship, even if we have not acted on them?

Prayer

**Lord Jesus, forgive us our times of impatience,
and misunderstanding;**

**Forgive us when we are convinced
that our way is right and their way is wrong;**

**Forgive us when we hedge our bets
and loyalty can be bought and sold;**

**Forgive us when we are misguided
in our attempts to get things done.**

**Lord Jesus, forgive us when we are Judas,
in the cross, take our sin away,**

and in your resurrection, bring us healing and new life.

John 18.15-18, 25-27

15 Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, 16but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. 17The woman said to Peter, 'You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?' He said, 'I am not.' 18Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing round it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

Reflection

It is human sin that brought Jesus to the cross, but it was and is the choice of God to submit to that sin and become its victim. From the moment that Judas betrayed Jesus, the tragedy of human sin unfolds and gathers strength, and through it, God nevertheless achieves his saving purposes.

There, on the cross, with Jesus' arms outstretched, God was embracing us, entering into our evil, our sin. And there in the tomb, our sin was buried.

For we have no hope, except for a God who is willing to meet us where we are, fallen as we are. God met our fallen-ness and brokenness at each and every point of the unfolding passion. He met each one of our sins: our betrayals, our denials, our willingness to sacrifice justice for expediency, our cowardice, our cruelty; and took them onto himself. On the cross, Jesus met head-on the very worst that humanity could do, and by the resurrection proved that the love of God is stronger. On the cross, we meet God, and above all else that we see, we see that God is willing to go to any extreme to have us, just as we are, so that he might transform us into who we were made to be.

Prayer

**Lord Jesus, forgive us when we are simply ourselves,
made in your image, yet damaged
by our own sins and the sins of others,
in the cross, take away from us all that is evil,
and in your resurrection, bring us the new life
that only you can give.**

25 Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, 'You are not also one of his disciples, are you?' He denied it and said, 'I am not.' 26 One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, 'Did I not see you in the garden with him?' 27 Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

Reflection

We see the cowardice of Jesus' very best friends, who all deserted him at the last, and supremely we see the threefold denial of Jesus by Peter, who only hours before had sworn that he would follow his Lord to the death.

Do we recognize our own potential to be surprised into denial by sudden questions from strangers? Perhaps we could withstand the very worst persecution for the sake of our faith, but fail, like Peter, at the thought of being ridiculed, judged as 'one of them'? Are we ever guilty of minimising our loyalty to our God, for the sake of saving face? Are we ever guilty of not standing up and saying, in a loud voice "Yes I am one of them?"

Prayer

**Lord Jesus, forgive us our times of cowardice and apathy;
Forgive us when we fail to speak and act
in a way that shows we are yours.
Forgive us when we think it does not matter
or that our faith is our business alone;
Forgive us when try too hard to fit in,
to play it safe, and avoid the risk
of being true to who we are.
Lord Jesus, forgive us when we are Peter,
in the cross, take our sin away,
and in your resurrection, bring us healing and new life.**

John 18.19-24,

19 Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. 20 Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. 21 Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.' 22 When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?' 23 Jesus answered, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?' 24 Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Reflection

Scholars of biblical history like to ask each other why Jesus died. Was it because the Romans saw him as a potential trouble maker, likely to rouse a rebellion amongst the oppressed Jewish people, especially at the time of the Passover when Jerusalem was flooded with visitors and pilgrims and emotions were already running high? Or was it through a plot by the religious authorities who considered that Jesus had made blasphemous claims to be the Messiah?

Or was it an act of desperation by those same authorities who genuinely feared that Jesus' actions leading up to his death would indeed inspire some kind of rebellion against Roman rule? A small-scale and unsuccessful rebellion would have been disastrous – the Romans were not known for being merciful and considerate to the nations they occupied, and the last thing the Jewish leaders needed was someone who would stir up trouble and bring down the wrath of the Romans on everyone. Can it be that silencing Jesus suddenly looked like the only way of preventing bloodshed on a massive scale?

Here see the anxious conniving of the leaders of God's people, the way priests Annas and Caiaphas play right into the hands of the Romans. We see the potential for law to come before justice, and uncomfortable truths swept under the carpet of expediency. 'It is better for one man to die for the people'.

Do we recognise the reasonableness of our own leaders, or perhaps even of ourselves, in neglecting the plight of the minority?

of Jesus' death is the fulfilment of words spoken through the prophets centuries before. This is a plan that has been in the making since the dawn of civilisation, a plan as long as the history of sin itself, leading to this moment.

Do we see our own part in this story of redemption, of love? Do we see our own part in God's purposes for ourselves and for the world?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, forgive us when we think we do not matter, forgive us when we do not play our part in your good purposes for creation.

Give us grace to recognise your call on us to offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, in the service of the building of your kingdom and the salvation of the whole earth.

Lord Jesus, bless us when we are your body on earth, in the cross, take our reluctance away, and in your resurrection, bring us purpose and new life.

John 19.38-42

38 After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. 39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. 41 Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. 42 And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

On this day, Good Friday, we are revealed, exposed, reproached. But if that were all there was to the story, then Calvary might be remembered like a good novel for its realistic depiction of human evil, and those who recognized their own sin in the passion story would despair.

Prayer

**Lord Jesus, forgive us when what we have done seems to have ruined everything.
forgive us when we do not deserve it.
Forgive us when we cannot earn it.
Forgive us when we cannot make it right.
Lord Jesus, forgive us when we are at our worst,
in the cross, take our sin away,
and in your resurrection, bring us healing and new life.**

John 19.31-37

31 Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. 32Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. 33But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. 35(He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.)36These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.' 37And again another passage of scripture says, 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced.'

Reflection

Throughout the passion, John's gospel shows us a Jesus who is fulfilling a long awaited moment in God's plan for the salvation of the world he loves. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son...' is all the way back in chapter 3, and here, even the manner

Prayer

**Lord Jesus, forgive the times
when our sense of responsibility becomes confused,
and our priorities are twisted.
forgive us our willingness to tolerate what is evil,
forgive us when we have been close-minded to the truth.
Lord Jesus, forgive us when we are the High Priest,
in your cross, take away our sin,
and in your resurrection, give us healing and new life.**

John 18.28-38a

28 Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover.²⁹ So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' 30They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' 31Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' 32(This was to fulfil what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' 34Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 35Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' 36Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' 37Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' 38Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

Reflection

We see a weak and nervous Pilate, checking the latest public opinion polls, intent on ensuring his own survival, no matter what the cost, and unable to exercise any real authority. Jesus even tells Pilate that he only has power over him insofar as it has been granted to him from above, yet even that he is unsure of how to use it. Do we recognize in ourselves an element of self-preservation preventing us really from loving neighbour as ourselves? Do we recognize in the structures that govern our society a misunderstanding of what power and responsibility are about?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, forgive us when we have sought to protect ourselves, to scape goat others, forgive us when we have misused the power we have, and failed to grasp the power you gives us for good; forgive us when we turn a blind eye to the unjust structures in our society, and in the nations of the world; Lord Jesus, forgive us when we are Pilate, in the cross, take our sin away, and in your resurrection, bring us healing and new life.

John 18.38b-19.16

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, 'I find no case against him. 39But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' 40They shouted in reply, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a bandit.

19Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. 2And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. 3They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. 4Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' 5So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to

Reflection

And so Jesus dies. Cause of death? Sin. Not his, but ours.

At every stage, the passion is possible because of the human capacity to sin. Is it not, in fact, in the nature of human sin that if ever someone perfect were to come into the world we would surely kill him? God could count on human sin to crucify his Son. Of course that's what we'd do.

Yet in the midst of all this, it is true – and we must hang on to this truth – it is true that we are – each of us, and all of us – made in the image of God. He created us to be good people, to be people at one with each other and at one with him, and it is to this that he continues to call us. Our capacity for sin is merely the sign of this divine image becoming distorted, not destroyed.

It is popular to suggest nowadays that humankind is making moral progress, that we are basically OK in ourselves, and getting better all the time. Sometimes we can kid ourselves that we are – collectively and individually – doing OK. And perhaps we could go on thinking that, were it not for today. It might be possible to get by on our own, to delude ourselves in thinking our capacity to hate and deny and delude are not that great, if were it not for this day, this Friday we call 'Good'. If we are to believe in our own self-sufficient goodness, we shall have to dispose of this story, of this day in the church's year.

Our capacity for denial and deceit about the truth of the worst in us is incredibly great, but this story that knows the truth of us so well and depicts it so graphically, challenges even our powers of evasion.

We really are in a mess. If Golgatha or Calvary were only one place, one moment in time, we have at last grown beyond it. But no, there is Auschwitz, Rwanda, Belfast, Kosovo, Syria, Sudan, and the list of Calvarys keeps getting longer. We really are fallen. We really have corrupted the image of God in which we were created. We really do need someone, somehow, to save us. Sin means that we needed – we need – a redeemer, to restore in us the image of God, so that we can overcome the power that sin has over us, and become the people we were created to be.

John 19.25b-27

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' 27Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

Reflection

The old funeral sentences include the line, 'in the midst of life we are in death'. Here on the cross, Jesus does the opposite: 'In the midst of death we are in life' – on the cross, surrounded and seemingly overwhelmed by suffering, Jesus finds a moment of pure love and care for others, creating a new family out of the wreckage of Good Friday.

Do we recognise ourselves in Mary and John? In Jesus? In moments when a spark of hope has glowed in the darkness of despair?

Prayer

**Lord Jesus, grant us grace to live the life you give us,
to fan the sparks of hope into flames**

in our own lives and in the lives of others.

**Give us comfort in loneliness, strength in suffering,
and faith in your enduring love.**

**Lord Jesus, bless us when we are Mary and John,
in the cross, take our pain away,**

and in your resurrection, bring us healing and new life.

John 19.28-30

28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' 29A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. 30When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

them, 'Here is the man!' 6When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.' 7The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.'

8 Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. 9He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. 10Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?'

11Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.' 12From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, 'If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.'

13 When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. 14Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' 15They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.' 16Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

Reflection

We see the mob, democracy in action, just a few days ago shouting "Hosanna!" now screaming for blood and crucifixion.

Do we recognise ourselves, swayed into glibly accepting received opinions about who deserves condemnation, and not daring to think differently?

Prayer

**Lord Jesus, forgive us when we do not think for ourselves,
forgive us when we are swayed by public opinion,
and simply repeat what we have heard;
forgive us when we get carried away
and do things that we abhor.
Lord Jesus, forgive us when we are the Passover crowds,
in the cross, take our sin away,
and in your resurrection, bring us healing and new life.**

John 19.16b-25a

So they took Jesus; 17and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. 18There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. 19Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' 20Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. 21Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."' 22Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.' 23When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. 24So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.' This was to fulfil what the scripture says,

'They divided my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.'

25And that is what the soldiers did.

Reflection

We see soldiers, who after all are only doing their job, desperate to establish their superiority by mocking the easy target, and numbing themselves from the reality of what it is they are doing by taking refuge in games and casting lots for a dying man's clothes.

Do we understand the real cost of our everyday choices and habits for those around us, for the world, and for our own souls? Are we complicit, however remotely, in systems that deny the dignity of fellow human beings?

And finally we see the crucifixion itself, surely the most cruel and degrading form of execution that ingenious humanity has ever devised to inflict on itself. It is not just about physical anguish, but also about mental and emotional torture: even the wild animals crawl away to die – but even this privacy was denied to our Lord. Do we see and understand this as simply the supreme emblem of the sort of cruelty and desire for power and dominance that can be found in all human societies – societies of which we are a part.

Prayer

**Lord Jesus, forgive us for the times when
our compassion burns out,
when the task takes over
and our awareness of others is lost.
forgive us when we fail to see
the full humanity of every person,
made in your image.**

**Lord Jesus, forgive us when we are
the soldiers at the foot of the cross,
in the cross, take our sin away,
and in your resurrection, bring us healing and new life.**