

Good Friday 2010 – Station 3: Jesus Before the Sanhedrin and Peter's Denial

When it comes to false accusations, the best lies are always those which have a semblance of truth within them. Jesus' reputation is turned against him. He is a miracle worker, people flock to him, so he must be dangerous. Other people claiming to be the messiah had arisen before, even in his lifetime; but Jesus is the one who made it to Jerusalem. All the others got finished off beforehand. He caused disruption in the Temple, disturbing people going about their business. Actually, that was just a foretaste of his destructive tendencies, they say. He plans to knock the Temple down. And he must be destructive AND mad, because he says he will rebuild it in three days. It's blasphemy anyway, so we've got him on all counts – mad, bad and dangerous to know.

On the whole we expect a fair trial. There are lawyers in this crowd whose lives are dedicated to making this a reality. But this is not what persecuted Christians can expect in Zimbabwe, or Iraq, in Nigeria or Egypt. This trial is a cynical set-up job as the High Priest gives away. The outcome of this trial is a foregone conclusion. This is a political tidying-up operation by colluding authorities.

Jesus absorbs it all. He is handed over to the smiters, the initiative seemingly taken out of his hands. The beginning of his ministry is signalled by the Baptist pointing to him and saying, 'Behold, the Lamb of God'. And it has come to this: the lamb is already trussed for sacrifice.

Caiaphas says that it is right that one die that the nation live. How ironic is that? The priest thinks the end justify the means. Yet the end of this is meant to be precisely that the nation lives, to become a 'chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.'

I wonder who wrote that? Oh, yes it was Peter. But, like us, he has a long way to travel yet. If Jesus is to rebuild his temple in three days that is going to be in us. Right now, though, the truth of Jesus is stolen out of his mouth and now the reality of relationship is denied by his friend. He is on the way to becoming a non-person to whom anything can be done.

O Saviour of the World who by your cross and precious blood have redeemed us... Save us and help us we humbly beseech you, O Lord.

Good Friday 2010 – Station 4: Jesus Before Pontius Pilate

Poll taxes are never popular in any era, and certainly not in Judaea. It was the bitterest evidence of Roman control. Pharisees had tried to catch Jesus out about whether the tax should be paid. He looked at the face embossed on the coinage and teased them: he told them to pay to Caesar what belonged to Caesar and to God what belonged to God.

Jesus was not saying that. The Messiah stands before Pilate. He is not just the stamp of God on the currency. He is himself the source of all riches and all authority given to him by the Father. He has come not to flout the law but to complete it. Caesar has been given authority for a time but from whence does it spring? Only from God. We have to make choices about the currency we are prepared to spend as citizens under God. How we vote, how we spend our money, whom we bank with, what time we make for public service in the community – all of this counts as part of our citizenship of heaven right now. The choices will not always be the same; but are always made in the presence of the God who is king of all.

This is why Pilate keeps trying to divert this into an entirely religious fight, to deflect significance. He despises these stiff-necked Jews who will not worship Caesar. They have been nothing but trouble since Rome annexed them thirty years before. He uses Jesus to taunt them, to make them call on Caesar through gritted teeth. This will make an elegant and witty report to Emperor Tiberius and might get him preferment to a better position. After all, Tiberius thrives on the humiliation of others.

But Jesus, for all that he is already bruised and beaten, does not appear humiliated. 'Are you a king then?' 'Yes, I am a King.' Now this becomes all the more difficult. This man has already disturbed his wife's sleep and what if his own slumbering conscience might be stirring? This is the servant of an empire with great roads, philosophy and poetry, but which makes throwing people to wild animals into entertainment. It is a further irony, then, that this Procurator presents us with THE Man, with the new Adam who will overcome Adam's sin by which he is so surrounded in this scene. Still, for Pilate it must be just an administrative decision. It is like standing on the steps down to the gas chambers at Auschwitz and hearing people say, 'I was just obeying orders.'

O Saviour of the World who by your cross and precious blood have redeemed us... Save us and help us we humbly beseech you O Lord

Good Friday 2010 – Station 5: Jesus Falls/ Simon of Cyrene takes the cross

Jesus has been staggering along under the cross along uneven streets, at the hottest time of the day, the cross-beam snagging against protrusions from shops and houses on either side. He is felled as much by the deafening noise of the crowd as by the weight of the wood. He falls and it must be clear to the soldiers that there will be no promise of a spectacle if he cannot take another step. Like all soldiers, they improvise.

In the gospels, Jesus' prediction of his coming Passion is accompanied by the invitation to take up our cross (daily) and follow him. We are used to concentrating on the nice picture of Jesus calling fishermen and gathering women and men around him at parties. But Simon is called out of a crowd, from spectator to actor in an instant. He and his sons have come into Jerusalem as tourists and are going to leave as pilgrims, just as many do who come to our cathedral and churches in Salisbury.

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult as we know; but often he calls us directly within the tumult as well when we might so easily fall under the deafening roar of church pronouncements, or the evil of child abuse by clergy or any other disciple, or find ourselves with those who expect to be met by deafening silence because they are poor or black or not PLU, people like us. If this makes us fall, then we are kneeling beside the fallen Jesus.

When we are on our knees in despair or aching alongside another in need, Jesus invites us to expect him to be kneeling with us. He is inviting us to be

part of his aching heart now. The prophet Jeremiah wore a yoke around his shoulders as a sign of the weight of Babylonian power which had to be endured until the promised deliverance. We know that deliverance is at hand. Jesus invites everyone who is weary and carrying heavy burdens to come to him because he will give us rest. He says, 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' Of course, we feel the weight of the cross, and we wonder how the burden can be light. Yet, like Simon of Cyrene, we realise that we are invited to carry the cross but not hang upon it. We are invited to be broken but never to be destroyed.

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Good Friday 2010 – Station 6: Trial Before Herod

Herod Antipas is not the king his father was. He is a *Carry On* king, held in contempt by Romans and Jews alike, a comic figure but for the petty power he wields. ‘Infamy, infamy, they’ve all got it in for me.’ He is like Mussolini after the Germans really took power in Italy. All the strutting is possible only because of a military occupation.

His father, Herod the Great, was feared as a monster and killed thousands without mercy as a matter of policy to hold onto power. This Herod is superstitious and decadent. He fears John the Baptist as a prophet; but then actually has him executed out of lust and a woman’s spite.

Herod is like the emperor with no clothes, but he knows it. Whatever the pomp he is allowed, he sees that he is not robed in majesty. And now he meets this Jesus whom he sees as a successor to John the Baptist and he is hardly robed at all. And yet there is an inner majesty about him.

It is said that people most want to destroy that which reveals their own poverty of nature. Herod now wants some sport, some way to assert his ramshackle rule over the silent Messiah. The priests – who normally are his critics - will let him do what he wants so long as he gives them the outcome they say their law demands in the end. It is a tormentor’s paradise. We can think of our own modern parallels.

And rulers learn to close ranks when any threat is perceived. Shared enemies can make us friends. We connive together by defining ourselves

over against the other. Jesus has refused to define himself over against anyone. He has rebuked Pharisees, of course, but has also eaten in their homes. He has crossed words with scribes; but has also taught one to know who his neighbour is in the parable of the Good Samaritan. He knows that this objectifying of the other only leads to violence in the end. I am not like you so I can make you into pornography, drive you out of my country and eventually be so separate from you that it is alright to kill you.

Jesus will not do this violence to anyone. He will not make anyone the scapegoat; so the logic is that he becomes the scapegoat himself. He takes all this violence upon himself just as Pilate and Herod smile at one another.

O Saviour of the World who by your cross and precious blood have redeemed us....Save us and help us we humbly beseech thee O Lord

Good Friday 2010 – Station 7: Jesus Meets the Women & Children of Jerusalem

The ways in which we show our grief as human beings are very varied but strangely unite us. When we watch film of funerals in Israel or Gaza, Jewish and Palestinian mothers weep in the same way. At Wootton Bassett, the grieving crowd is united in respect for the fallen and in solidarity with lovers, parents, children and siblings.

We witness here the unity in anticipated grief of an element in the crowd that is not baying for Jesus' blood. The ones who show solidarity with him, even if they do not understand what is going on, are themselves the vulnerable.

These are the ones who have reason to know what a dangerous place Jerusalem already is, who are already victims of the occupation. While some of their men folk plot rebellion and others gather at the trough, there is trouble brewing. This is the holiest of places where God's glory dwells; but it has been over-run so many times before. God's glory has gone into exile with them when they sat down and wept by the rivers of Babylon; but they stand here watching evil men wanting to snuff out that glory shining out of this wounded Christ.

Isaiah called Jerusalem 'mother'; but what will become of these mothers and their daughters when in the next generation Jerusalem will not just be occupied but obliterated, and a new city built over it deliberately as though it had never been? And what about the lot of the daughters of Wau or of

Western Equatoria in the Sudan now? They are 90% illiterate, have the worst maternity care in the world and have experienced rape and murder and huge internal displacement through generation after generation.

Jesus offers no false comfort to them, no easy answers. But he offers them himself. He speaks of himself as the mother hen, wanting to gather her chicks under her wings. He is in solidarity with all mothers, all those whose every energy is outpoured in steadfast love for the little ones, even if that means death for the mother. He loves all who endure and all who succumb.

St Anselm of Canterbury wrote:

“Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you; you are gentle with us as a mother with her children. Often you weep over our sins and our pride. Tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement. You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds, in sickness you nurse us, and with pure milk you feed us.”

Two centuries later, Dame Julian of Norwich took up the theme:

“Christ came in our poor flesh to share a mother’s care. Our mothers bear us for pain and death; our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy and endless life. Christ carried us within him in love and travail, until the full time of his passion. And when all was completed and he had carried us so for joy, still all this could not satisfy the power of his wonderful love.”

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Good Friday 2010 – Station 8: Jesus Meets His Mother

So many medieval representations of the Blessed Virgin pose her seated and holding the Christ Child. Although naturally she is the larger figure, she is quite deliberately shaped architecturally and not naturally. Why? Because her lap is Christ's first throne. Just as the wood of the manger looks forward to the wood of the cross, so her lap is the throne before the cross. She bears him, she holds him, feeds him and with Joseph loves him. He grows into his full stature as the power of the Holy Spirit grows in him AND because, even when they do not understand, they love him.

How must it have been for Mary, though, to have an internal clock ticking in her heart waiting for pain and loss. I cannot imagine what it is like for every mother with a boy or girl in Afghanistan where every unexpected phone call or ring of the door bell brings terror. Mary is with all of them. The whole of heaven and earth held its breath waiting for Mary's answer to the angel. She said yes to the world being turned upside down by her child. But old Simeon who is like the whole First Covenant waiting for the promise of the New, hints to her how this new Covenant will actually be cemented; and it is going to hurt her so badly it will be like a sword thrust into her heart.

Now she knows the truth of it. She is surrounded by her own people buying for the blood of her son. Once before, early in his ministry, she tried to pull him back from what she saw as danger and his response was to redefine the nature of family and to see his mother and sisters and brothers in those hanging on his words.

Those medieval statues and many Eastern icons show this seated Mary holding Jesus out to the world. It is as if she is beginning to realise, however costly this is to her, that she must give him away.

Today we are invited first to shed those images of Jesus we have which defy reality, which we secretly know are comforting fantasies or ways of relating to him which were appropriate at one time but no longer. As Simone Weil wrote, we sometimes have to let go of Jesus in order to find him. In any case, we have to face the fact that he is always breaking out of the categories we try to box him in.

And, like Mary, we have to learn how to give Jesus away to others. We have to be truly convinced in our hearts that his love grows as it is more widely shared. He does not need our protection; but he does want each of us to be a throne from which he leaps.

O Saviour of the World who by your cross and precious blood have redeemed us... Save us and help us we humbly beseech you O Lord

Good Friday 2010 – Station 9: Jesus Is Prepared For Crucifixion

Have you ever wondered why there is such an industry of books and films about Jesus which are so far-fetched but which tell us that the gospel is unbelievable? I think that it is so hard for those authors and dramatists – and for us quite often, too – to think that this might all be real. We recoil from the affront of it. If this story we are re-telling today were the stuff of modern Hollywood fantasy, Jesus would have been rescued by now in *The Bourne Intervention* or *The Quantum Crucifixion*. I sat next to a lady at a performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It ends with the crucifixion and as the curtain came down she leant across and remarked that you'd have thought they could have come up with a happy ending.

But friends, this is not the fairy tale that some would like or a bigger and better re-make: this is the real thing. Nor is this how we would have predicted that God would reveal his perfect sacrificial love to us. This is the real thing. No one could ever be fully alive but for this. Jesus goes to this death freely for our salvation. Sin is nailed. Death will be undone. But only because he gives everything in obedience to his Father for us, for the whole universe.

This is the fulfilment of the promise of the First Covenant so that old Simeon could depart in peace. Yet it is an uncomfortable fulfilment not of a knock-down messiah, a warrior David, but of the one who has “surely borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our

transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”

So he is silent now, just being done to. These soldiers signed up for glory and camaraderie in battle, not for this. The soldiers treat Jesus with unnecessary cruelty. After all, they signed up to be heroes, not to do this dirty work. Anyway, it is his own fault, he should not keep looking at them like that. The scripture is fulfilled but he is now that non-person for whom there is no compunction. “We held him of no account”; only his robe is worth gambling for.

O Saviour of the World who by your cross and precious blood have redeemed us....Save us and help us we humbly beseech you O Lord

Good Friday 2010 – Station 10: The Crucifixion

The first nail is driven into him. *“Father, forgive them”*. “Behold nothing deserving death can I find against him....” But they cried, “Give us Barabbas ... Crucify him, crucify him”! *“Father, forgive them”*. The second nail bites his flesh. Peter called down a curse upon himself and said, “I do not know the man”. The final nail is driven into his flesh. *“Father forgive them”*.

The only person who suddenly understands what is really happening is a thief. He knows that he deserves punishment for his evil deeds. At the same time, perhaps he is lamenting that never in his life has he had any chance to step out of the gutter, away from poverty and violence. In the midst of his agony, he experiences real hope and love for the first time. He realises that this man beside him is not only innocent of any crime, but even from the Cross has the power to change the thief’s life. The thief is left with the ultimate choice between dying the tough guy, spitting God in the face and surrendering his will and facing God in sorrow and love. The die is cast: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom”. Jesus says: *“Today you will be with me in Paradise”*.

In the midst of the settling of scores and the baying for blood, there is hope for all sinners. From the perspective of the cross, we can see that the problem is not that God withholds mercy from us, but that we refuse it. To accept mercy is to accept the need to change; yet our sins are comfortably cruel, like spiritual arthritis. Whatever the excuse, the thief is proof that forgiveness has no sell-by date. The slate is clean for eternal life.

The pain is not finished for Jesus, hanging on that tree. I cherish the song, *Strange Fruit*. This song gained currency in jazz clubs between the Wars and came to be associated especially with Billie Holliday. ‘The strange fruit hanging on the poplar tree’ were the victims of lynchings in the American Deep South, people killed in a frenzy of hate for no good reason. Well, think today of *this* strange fruit: Incarnate Love is violently stripped and bound that we might be clothed in freedom and peace.

He is obedient even to death; he offered himself entirely in trust to the Father, even when the Father seemed to have forsaken him – this strange fruit hanging on the tree. This is the God who goes to hell to bring us to heaven.

We ourselves are stripped of every certainty save that the Son of God is on the tree, thirsting, crying, dying. Day has turned to night. What do we say?

**“O God, I love thee, I love thee -
Not for hope of heaven for me
Nor fearing not to love and be
In the everlasting burning.
Thou, thou, my Jesus, after me
Didst reach thine arms out dying,
For my sake sufferedst nails and lance,
Mocked and marrèd countenance,
Sorrows passing number,
Sweat and care and cumber,
Yea and death, and this for me,**

**And thou couldst see me sinning:
Then I, why should not I love thee,
Jesu, so much in love with me?
Not for heaven's sake; not to be
Out of hell by loving thee;
Not for any gains I see;
But just the way that thou didst me
I do love and I will love thee;
What must I love thee, Lord, for then?
For being my king and God. Amen.**

O Deus Ego Amo Te

Gerard Manley Hopkins

O Saviour of the World who by your cross and precious blood have redeemed us... Save us and help us we beseech you O Lord