

Good Friday

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Introduction

We have been journeying through Lent and Holy Week and now arrive at Good Friday. Every Holy Week is a difficult journey. We come from Palm Sunday with its hope of triumph and celebration though the inexorable progress towards the cross. Jesus and his friends, his companions, traveled together towards the Passover, faint 'Hosannas' ringing in their ears as they sat at the table together in the upper room. The journey to the cross is a journey of many things – disappointment, confusion, misunderstanding, fear, love. It is also a journey of relationship. Conflicts are often portrayed by extremes, or by using catastrophic language. 'I hate you.' 'I wish you were dead'. 'They are the worst people in the world.' But conflicts are also beset by, consist of more ordinary, less extreme feelings. Bewilderment. Disappointment. Misunderstanding. These won't kill or maim, but nevertheless mark the path of the conflict journey. We ignore them at our peril.

As we prepare to read John's telling of Jesus's last journey, the reading set for Good Friday, let us think about relationships in the light of these more 'ordinary' emotions that we may ourselves be very familiar with– disappointment, confusion, misunderstanding. Jesus and Judas. Simon Peter. Thomas. Philip. The other Judas (not Iscariot). The disciples. And as we think about those relationships, lets also think about our own relationships this Holy Week. In the light of these emotions – disappointment, confusion, misunderstanding. Because these are the emotions that have been around all year during this pandemic and may have beset many of our relationships. These are the emotions that this year we may bring heightened into Holy Week, this particular Holy Week, the second Holy Week of the pandemic. As we read John's account of Good Friday, let us acknowledge with the disciples the depth of confusion, misunderstanding and disappointment we may feel already. Emotions ripe for fresh conflict to erupt.

Text

John 18.1 – 19.37

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. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. 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. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they stepped back and fell to the

ground. Again he asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.' This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken, 'I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.' 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. Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?'

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

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, but 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. The woman said to Peter, 'You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?' He said, 'I am not.' Now 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.

Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. 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. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.' 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?' Jesus answered, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?' Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

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.' 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?' Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

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. So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' Pilate 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.' (This was to fulfil what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate 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?' Jesus 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.' Pilate 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.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, 'I find no case

against him. But 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?' They shouted in reply, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. Pilate 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.' So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' When 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.' The 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.'

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate 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?' Jesus 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.' From 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.'

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. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' They 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.' Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' Many 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. Then 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."' Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.' When 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. So 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.' And that is what the soldiers did.

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

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A 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. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

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. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.' And again another passage of scripture says, 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced.'

Comment

There are many lenses we can use to reflect on this reading. I'm going to focus on the relationships we find and the journey these relationships take. Conflict is always contextual, and where the relations are played out also matters. Whose was the land we are fighting over and who wants it next? The context on Good Friday for Jesus and those he was in relationship with over those last hours was played out over a physical journey as well as a relational one. We are taken from a garden of violence to a hill of crucifixion. A long difficult journey of only hours. It is a journey in which the emotions of confusion, misunderstanding and disappointment are heightened further. A journey in which we find relationships turn sour and emotions become extreme. Judas betrays Jesus. Simon Peter uses violence and then betrayal. Pilate asks one of the most crucial questions ever, 'What is truth?' before, against his own judgement, letting the crowd have their way. Jesus is mocked, tortured and executed.

There is a poem by the 13^C Persian poet, Rumi: He wrote, 'Out there beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.'

As we journey through the relationships that were played out on Good Friday, I'd like us to imagine this field, the field of meeting beyond wrong or right doing. What do you imagine this field to be like? Just take a moment to think about your field – where is it and who are you going to meet there?

The field you are thinking about now might be a place of childhood memories; of playing in a meadow; the field might be a field of gold; or it might be a muddy field, shell pocked, fought over, in Passchendaele or a field of scorched earth in Vietnam; or desert in South Sudan; Iraq, Syria, Israel/Palestine...

Our field could be this desolate wounded place. It could be. It sometimes, it often is. On Good Friday it certainly was. And as we see from the meetings, the relationships that were already in place or new over that Good day, the journey to the field of the cross involved others who were not the ones we had hoped to be there. With one exception, that painfully tender meeting between Jesus, his mother Mary and John. "Woman, here is your son." And, 'Here is your mother.' The other meetings, relationships, old or new, involved misunderstanding, confusion, disappointment. And gave way to the extremes of mockery, hate, violence, murder.

Looking at Jesus's journey through Good Friday and his relationships from the garden to the hill enables us to enter with him ultimately into that field beyond wrong and rightdoing. To meet 'the other'. This journey requires the one emotion we haven't seen much of so far in this journey. Love. Even love for our enemies in our field. Our field is a fundamental part of our journey. And maybe it is this field where Jesus was heading that day. The field beyond good or bad; friend or foe; perpetrator or victim. The love he showed from the cross despite, because of everything.

Response

What is your field like? And who are you going to meet there? And where does our journey with Jesus take us today in the 21st century? In our own lives? In this time of covid conflict? And who will we be open enough to meet in our field? In today's world where white gated communities trump cardboard shacks. Where Europe is again being torn apart. Where the colour of your skin, or your gender, or your ethnicity or your sexuality can deny you justice. Where your fields have been appropriated, or taken away like those of the Canadian indigenous peoples and countless others around the world.

Prayer

A poem by Louis MacNeice

'What is truth? says Pilate,
Waits for no answer;
Double the stakes says the clock
To the ageing dancer;
Double the guard, says Authority,
Treble the bars;
Holes in the sky, says the child
Scanning the stars.'

Let us pray for holes in the sky.

Amen.