

Good Friday: The Last Hour

Reflections by Rev. Bill Church

Reading 1: Mark 14. 26-50

"All of them deserted him and fled"

Among the many pains that Jesus endured in the last days of his life, the betrayal and desertion by his friends must have been an added woe.

He could expect the hostility of some Pharisees (who disputed his spiritual claims), the enmity of the Temple establishment (who feared his challenge to their embedded monopoly), the suspicion of the Roman authorities (who were paranoid about anybody who might provoke trouble on the streets) – all those were predictable and expected.

What was really hurtful was the failure of his friends. Influential secret disciples like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were nowhere to be seen; his disciple Judas actively betrayed him; Peter, the most forceful of the Twelve, boasted he would never desert him but denied him three times; and all the others with him in the Garden of Gethsemane fled, including the young man (who may or may not have been John Mark, after whom this Gospel is named) who was grabbed by his cloak and ran away naked.

In quoting on the cross Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", Jesus may even have felt that God himself had deserted him.

Jesus faced his trial, condemnation and humiliation alone.

The next day, Matthew and Mark tell us some of his women supporters watched from a distance; only in John's account was anybody friendly anywhere near the cross.

We ourselves will have let our friends down, or been let down by our friends, but how bitter must have been Jesus' abandonment at the hour of his greatest need.

*Lord, grant that we may be your faithful friends and followers.
Amen*

Reading 2: John 19.1-16

"We have no King but Caesar"

This claim by the Chief Priests and the rent-a-mob gathered in the dark outside Pilate's headquarters just about takes the biscuit for sheer effrontery.

They knew, and Pilate knew, that of all the peoples of the Roman Empire, the Jews of Jerusalem were among the least genuinely loyal subjects of the emperor. The long series of revolts by zealots and false messiahs before and after Jesus' trial was proof of that.

The crowd and their instigators were not brimming over with love for Tiberius in faraway Rome. They were trying to intimidate Pilate into condemning Jesus to a form of execution only he and his soldiers were allowed to deal out. And they succeeded.

The real charge the Chief Priests had against Jesus was his claim to be the son of God, but they knew that Pilate would not be much stirred up by curious theological arguments within the

local religion; just as the Chief Priests would be less scandalised by a claim to be king of the Jews. They wanted to get rid of Jesus by any means they could find. And they knew that a claim of kingship would scare Pilate who was already suspected by Rome of being an ineffective Governor.

The soldiers mocked Jesus, calling him "King of the Jews" and putting on him a robe of imperial purple and a crown - a crown of thorns. Maybe to show that he knew he had been manipulated, Pilate ordered the sign on his cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews", in three languages to underline the point. The Latin initials of that sign, "INRI", are often seen in Christian art, including in the east window of this church.

But we know Jesus was not "King of the Jews". His title should be much more universal, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow.

Lord, help us to revere your majesty more than any earthly title. Amen

Reading 3: Luke 23. 32-43

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"

It is difficult to hear those words without humming the Taizé chant to which they have been set. The words are so familiar, we can miss how remarkable they are.

Although for Christians, execution by crucifixion seems a hallmark of our faith and the cross is our logo, crucifixion was a widespread form of punishment by the Roman empire for those who seemed to threaten their security. The crucifixion on Good

Friday was far from unique and for those who had to carry it out, just part of their duties. Maybe that, in part, lay behind Jesus' remarkable prayer: "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing"; an amazing act of forgiveness as he is put through a public ritualised torture.

The crucifixion of Jesus was not for Pilate or the soldiers a special occasion. It was not in a prominent place to make a particular spectacle, as was the beheading of King Charles the First. It was not just for Jesus but a couple of robbers were to be crucified at the same time.

Of the two, one joined with the Chief Priests in jeering and mocking – an extreme example of the sad tendency for fellow sufferers sometimes to turn on each other.

The other robber rebuked the first, ostensibly because he realised that while he and his fellow criminal were suffering the expected punishment for their crimes, Jesus was innocent and thus his punishment was unfair. But maybe he also sensed something special about Jesus. Why else would he assume that Jesus would be coming into a kingdom and was in any position to help him? Hence the heartfelt plea: "Jesus, remember me". He knew that he needed forgiveness and placed his hope in Jesus, who responded with a promise - not of escape from his earthly fate, but of a place in paradise.

The penitent robber was hardly a role model during his lifetime but at his end, he teaches us a lesson.

Lord, grant us the grace to see our need for forgiveness. Amen

Reading 4: John 19. 28-30

"It is finished"

This reading starts with Jesus saying, "I am thirsty" and wine being held to his mouth. And then, "It is finished".

Does that sound like a cry of despair - it is all over, it failed?

If so, we misunderstand what the Evangelist meant. The word spoken by Jesus means something is completed or fulfilled. The same verb is used immediately before to mean the fulfilment of scripture. It says "Job done", not "Mission failed". This points to the moment of triumph being the last hour on Good Friday, with Easter Day being the confirmation and epiphany of that triumph.

Have you noticed that there are three different types of cross in this church?

The first is the type commonest in western Europe, a cross with Jesus hanging from it stripped, in agony and humiliation, emphasising his suffering for the sins of us and of the whole world.

The second is an empty cross, sometimes favoured in reformed circles, emphasising that Jesus was raised from the death inflicted on him. He is no more on the cross but alive and active everywhere.

The third (it is on the front of the High Altar) is a cross with Jesus with arms outstretched, not just fully clothed but dressed in the gorgeous robes of a Byzantine emperor. Christ is reigning from the cross.

All three are true. All three tell the story of Good Friday.

All three can guide our thoughts and prayers this day.

Lord, help us to see you this day both suffering for us and active everywhere and glorified above all. Amen

Reading 5. Romans 6. 3-11

"We have been buried with Christ"

Usually, as we leave this service in silence at the end of The Last Hour, we leave Jesus dead on the cross.

We leave most of his disciples scattered, in hiding, scared and unaware of what is happening; we leave Pilate checking that Jesus is really dead; we leave Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea summoning up courage to ask for permission to take Jesus from the cross and then taking down his body, hastily placing it in a rock-hewn tomb before the sabbath day began, sealing the entrance with a great stone, while some of the women look on from a distance; we leave a guard of soldiers on sentry duty outside the tomb expecting a long watch of boring inactivity.

We, too, are outside.

Paul invites us to think differently. He makes the dramatic suggestion that we should be inside the tomb, buried with Christ; dark, still, waiting to be raised with him, raised to a new spiritual life, through the darkness that comes before birth, through the dissolution that comes before the emergence of the butterfly from its chrysalis.

For nearly 2,000 years, Christians have marked the death and resurrection of Christ. It is a great effort of will and imagination to forget all our wonderful ceremonies and transport ourselves back to the first Good Friday and wait in the darkness of the tomb.

Lord, may we be buried with you crucified and be raised in your resurrection. Amen

