

# The Lamb of God

A journey through St John's story of the passion

Good Friday, 2 April 12 – 3pm



# How to listen

This booklet accompanies a series of six short addresses by the Rt Revd Dr Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford. Listen online at **oxford.anglican.org/livestream** or search 'Bishop Steven' wherever you get your podcasts.

Each episode includes hymns and a reading and will be available from Maundy Thursday. You may want to listen to them and keep the traditional three hours; or space them out across a whole day set aside for prayer; or use from Maundy Thursday to Holy Saturday; or just use the final two as you keep watch at the cross.

# The Cup

### Opening introduction

#### Hymn: There is a Green Hill Far Away

Performed by Tom and Mandy Green



#### Reading: The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus.

John 18.1-14. Read by Julia Hollander. (NRSV)

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, "Whom are you looking for?" 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, "Whom are you looking for?" 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 fulfill 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.

### **Commentary (John 18.1-14)**

Welcome to this series of reflections on the story of the passion of Jesus as told in Gospel of St. John. We will spend this time reading the story together and reflecting on its different episodes and meanings with space for silence and for prayer. This is a Holy Week like no other as the world lives through the pandemic.

We begin with the betrayal and arrest of Jesus. My favourite song from Jesus Christ Superstar is Gethsemane. Christ is singing and the song begins with these words.

"I only want to say if there is a way  
Take this cup away from me, for I don't want to taste it's poison  
Feel it burn me  
I have changed. I'm not as sure as when we started"

The song is based on the account of Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane as told by Matthew and Mark and Luke. All three tell the story of Jesus wrestling with God and with his calling. "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this cup from me, yet not what I will but what thou wilt". John's account is very different. It takes place in a garden. The garden looks back to Eden and forward to the day of resurrection. But it is the story of the arrest and betrayal of Jesus not the story of his agony. When we first read the Gospel of John we might think that John simply assumes we will know about the agony and inner wrestling which Jesus endures from the other gospels. For his own reasons, John focusses our attention elsewhere.

I think that is partly true. But there is a clear moment of wrestling, of agony and tears in the Gospel of John in a story which is told a few chapters earlier. This, for John, is the moment of decision on the way of the cross.

That moment comes in the story of the raising of Lazarus, in the very centre of the fourth gospel. Jesus stands before the tomb of his friend with Mary his sister and he weeps. The language used by John to describe Jesus' emotional turmoil is very strong. He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He began to weep. He is again deeply disturbed. This is the place in the gospel of John where we see the emotions of Jesus laid bare.

At first we might think that Jesus is simply expressing sorrow at the death of Lazarus his friend and sharing the grief of his sisters. There is indeed great comfort in that picture. We love Jesus for his compassion. But there is something else still deeper taking place.

The story of the raising of Lazarus in John's Gospel is the end of John's book of signs but also the beginning of the passion story. The raising of Lazarus is the event which sets in motion the arrest and trial and crucifixion. It is the raising of Lazarus which causes Caiaphas to say, in the following chapter, it is better that one man die for the sake of the people. As Jesus stands before the tomb of Lazarus, he is reaching the point of no return. To raise his friend he must set his face to the cross. The raising of Lazarus anticipates his own resurrection, which of course anticipates his death. The raising of Lazarus sets Jesus in conflict with the authorities of his day. For that reason John sets the agony in a different garden, before the tomb of his friend. John also makes clear that what draws Jesus towards the cross is more than a sense of duty and obedience to the Father, the accent in Mark and Matthew and Luke.

What draws Jesus to the cross? It is love. Love for the world in John 3.16. Love for his friend Lazarus in John 11.36: "See how he loved him". Love for all of his friends in 15.13: "No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for his friends". John draws back the curtain more fully and enables us to see more clearly what lies behind Jesus actions. All that we will hear unfold this Good Friday has love at its heart. Judas and the soldiers come expecting trouble and a fight. Jesus offers himself in the garden as he will offer himself on the cross. "I am he" and again "I told you that I am he". Through love he has overcome his own fear and resistance and agony and through love he steps away from the fear and resistance and violence of others:

"Put your sword back in its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me". This Good Friday we come conscious of our own frailty and need, moved with compassion by the suffering of the world and the example of others. We come to the one who weeps at the tomb of his friend, who courageously walks the way of the cross, who offers his life out of love for the world. "No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for his friends".



*A minute of silence follows the commentary for personal reflection.*

# The Courtyard

### **Reading: Peter Denies Jesus.**

John 18.15-27. Read by Julia Hollander. (NRSV)

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 around 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.

### **Commentary**

The story of Jesus' passion takes place in the darkness and the cold of the night. John tells us in his prologue to the gospel that light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. This is what we witness here. He tells us as well that the light has come into the world and people



loved darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. We see both darkness and light around us in this pandemic. The darkness of human isolation and suffering. The light of love as people reach out to one another, as they fulfil their calling as doctors and nurses, as we are bound together to face a common danger.

Out of love, Jesus embraces the cup of suffering which will lead to through suffering joy. In the courtyard now there are two narratives played out. The first thread follows Jesus who is never out of focus. The violence is to grow steadily through the passion narrative. Jesus is bound and struck on the face and bound again here. We know that there is much more to come.

The search begins for the evidence to send Jesus to his death. In each episode of his trial, it is clear that this evidence is unclear. The motives of the high priest and the Council and of Pilate remain in the shadows, in the darkness. There are multiple attempts to convict Jesus. None of them is successful. Here they question Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus is clear that all of what he has done is already in the light: "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".

Jesus' openness and transparency itself shines a light on the clouded motives of the high priests. They have no answer to his signs and to his wisdom other than suppression. We watch the first narrative play out but the second is much more personal. We come with Peter into the courtyard of the High Priest. We see his denial unfold, as Jesus said it would. We have recognised already the dangers of extravagant and emotional protests of loyalty: "I will lay down my life for you".

And now we sense the pain as Peter, the rock, denies Jesus three times. To the woman who guarded the gate. "I am not". To the slaves and the police who have made a fire. "I am not". To the relative of the man he has injured: "I am not". And at that moment the cock crowed. Why does the cock crow? The cock crows in the courtyard because the dawn is near. This is not any dawn. This is the dawn of the day of salvation not just for humankind but for all the world. This is the day on which Jesus the Son of God will offer his life in love for the world and to make peace. The cock crows to signal a new beginning, a new age. The two narratives are intertwined. We should not read them as a tale of Jesus strength and Peter's weakness, a contrast. We should read them as a story of salvation. The strength and grace of Jesus Christ leads to the cross and to the salvation of his friend.



The story of the denial in the other three gospels is left hanging. We know that Peter is restored but we are not told how. In the fourth gospel, the story of the denial is told so that John can tell us the story of Peter's restoration. There is another early morning. There is another charcoal fire. There is another and deeper dawn. There is a conversation between Peter who has denied him and Jesus who is risen and draws near. And in that conversation there is healing and restoration and salvation and light. In that conversation Peter finds fresh courage and hope and forgiveness to offer his life again to his Lord and to walk in the way of the cross.

As we come ourselves to the cross on Good Friday and kneel in the silence and wonder, so we come as we are. We come with our doubts and our betrayals and our denials. We come conscious that we may be tested and found wanting in the present crisis. We bring the darkness in our hearts and our love of darkness. We do our best to bring these things into the light: to open our lives afresh to the deep grace of God. We come remembering this Jesus who invites us into the light, offers his life that we might be forgiven, loves us beyond our understanding and longs to restore us in his service, however far we have fallen.



*A minute of silence follows the commentary for personal reflection.*

# The Custom

### **Reading: Jesus before Pilate.**

John 18.28-40. Read by Julia Hollander. (NRSV)

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 fulfill 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.

## Commentary

The Evangelists invite us to place ourselves in the story through the characters who come and go. We identify with Judas who does not understand Jesus and who betrays him. We identify with Peter who denies him and is restored. John now invites us to reflect on the critical parts played by two new characters in the story, from opposite ends of the social spectrum: first on Pilate and then on Barabbas.

Pilate is an enigma in John's narrative. He conducts a reasoned debate with Jesus around the theme of kingship and power. He seems convinced, at least in part, that Jesus is the King of the Jews. He is full of questions of meaning and truth. He is convinced that Jesus has done nothing wrong. There is no case against him. But all of this is not enough for Pilate to dismiss the charge. He is trapped by the high priests and then by the crowd into creating a dilemma and choice: whom should he release according to the custom for the Passover? Both the priests and the people choose Barabbas.



By contrast Barabbas has a minor role in the story. He does not choose his part though we must presume he has chosen his life as a bandit. He has committed crimes worthy of death under Roman law. But his life is saved.

As we walk the way of the cross this afternoon, can we take some time to reflect on the ways in which we are powerful and the ways in which we are powerless before this story of the cross.

Pilate in the story has power and influence to shape events. His character has been formed over many years. When this great crisis of his life comes, for which he will be remembered for all of history, he falls short. Instead of making his own decisions he abdicates responsibility and power to others – afraid for his reputation, seeking a quiet life, taking the easiest road. In his actions, the purposes of God are still fulfilled but that does not mean that they are justified.

The figure of Pilate reminds us all that the exercise of leadership and power is challenging and difficult and especially so in moments of crisis. This is true of any walk of life: politics or government; business or industry; leadership in the academic community; leadership in the life of the church. Ideals are compromised. Our pride or our fear get in the way of good decisions. Our characters are shaped by power exercised over others. We are not held sufficiently to account and abuses of various kinds follow. For some, that exercise of influence will be a present reality. For some it will be a past memory but the experience will shape us still.

Good Friday is a day to hold those experiences and what they have done to us, all our acts and omissions, before the cross: to seek understanding, to lay aside the trappings of office or role, to be ourselves. Pilate seems in John's account to want to lay aside his power and engage in a simple conversation with the Son of God. He is not able to find the way. But we have that opportunity here and now to invite Christ to speak into our lives, to address in us about the way power and influence shape us, to recall us to ourselves and to the people God calls us to be.

And as we do that we will find that there is no place to stand in the narrative than with Barabbas, the bandit. For no-one in any office is able to exercise responsibility or power without becoming aware of their own limitations, lack of wisdom, flaws of character and sin. For those called to positions of influence, this is the good and safe place to be. We are better leaders when we know our own vulnerability and stand within it.

Like Barabbas (and like Pilate) we are undeserving of grace. In some deep sense we cannot fathom, Christ dies in our place, so that we might be cleansed and forgiven and made whole, so that the twists and turns and contradictions in our character can be set right, so that we can return to a place of humility and peace and joy, so that we might know that we are loved.

It was a custom to release someone on the Passover. The imperfect leader unknowingly offers a model for redemption and undeserved grace. He saves another but he cannot save himself. We take some time now to come as we are this Good Friday to God and seek that love without limits and forgiveness without measure.



*A minute of silence follows the commentary for personal reflection.*

**Hymn: Amazing Love. What Sacrifice.**

Performed by Tom and Mandy Green

# The Crown

### Reading

John 19.1-16. Read by Julia Hollander. (NRSV)

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.

## Commentary

The theme of kingship runs through John's story of the passion. There is a rich seam of irony. The soldiers do not know what they are doing. They weave a crown of thorns and put it on his head and they dressed him in a purple robe: purple is the colour worn only by emperors and kings. The crowds charge against Jesus turns around his claim to be a king: "Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor". Pilate presents Jesus to the crowds with the words: "Here is your king!" – part mocking and part doubting. The crowd demand that he is crucified with the profound and disturbing cry for the people of God in any age: "We have no king but Caesar!".

And then there is the charge which Pilate will cause to be inscribed above the head of Jesus on the cross: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. He inscribes it in Hebrew and Latin and Greek. In part again Pilate's tone is mocking and ironic: a brutal crushing of resistance. But when the chief priests say to Pilate: Do not write the King of the Jews but "this man said I am the King of the Jews" Pilate offers his famous response: "What I have written, I have written". There is something more than irony here. At the very least, Pilate has compared the kingship offered by Jesus with his own leadership, the leadership of Caesar and the leadership of the priests and has found a glimpse of something better in the servant king. There is a moment here to reflect in the mounting crescendo of violence on the vital importance of Palm Sunday in our celebration of Holy Week.

Practice varies but in recent years, most parish churches have replaced a full celebration of Palm Sunday with a brief procession and have then made room in their service for a long dramatized reading of the passion. Undoubtedly many people find this a helpful beginning to Holy Week. I have to say I am more hesitant. Palm Sunday should be a day of full employment for donkeys and is a wonderful way to introduce children and families to the celebration of Holy Week. But there is a vital point to the Palm Sunday story which we can miss if we rush straight into the passion narrative. All four gospels encourage us to linger here. The question they offer to us on Palm Sunday which is a vital question for Holy Week and Good Friday is this: who is this Jesus who is about to be crucified. This is really the most central question of course. Who is this? The answer Jesus offers without words on Palm Sunday is very clear. We cannot understand the cross unless we understand this point.



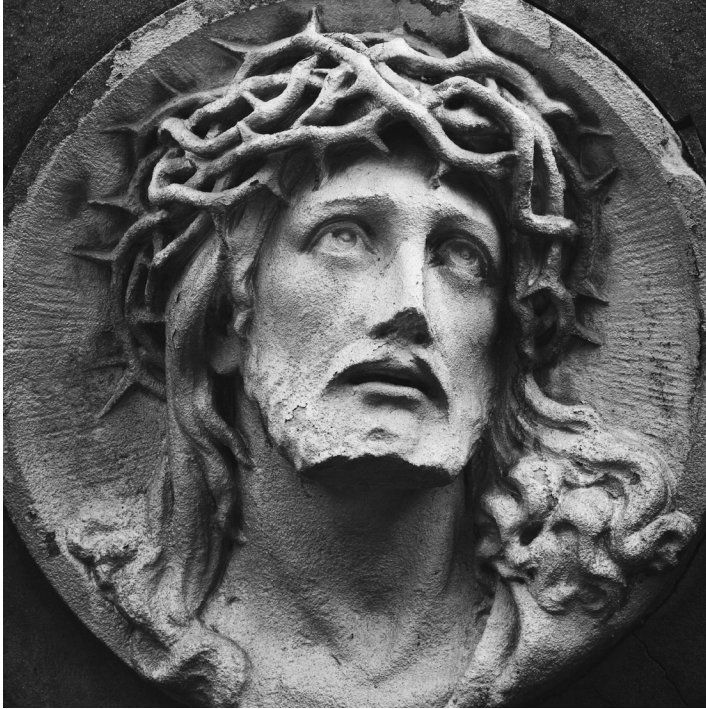
One thousand years before Christ the tribes of Israel were drawn together through the gift of an anointed king. First Saul, then David, then Solomon. After Solomon the great kingdom was divided but for four hundred years there was a king in Jerusalem. There were good kings and bad kings, but there was a king. Every year, in the great festival, the king would enter the city and the temple and renew his commitment to God and to his people, riding on the king's beast, a sign of humility, a donkey.

Six hundred years before Christ, Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple raised and the last king taken into exile. Seventy years after that the exiles began to return. They rebuilt the city and its walls. They rebuilt the temple. The community gathered and prayed. But still there was no king. The nation longed for the king's return. They called the king the anointed one: in Hebrew, the Messiah. In Greek, the Christ.

As Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he is making without words a profound statement of who he claims to be: the king who is returning to his people and to his city and to his temple. He is making a public claim to the throne – a claim which cannot and is not ignored by the chief priests or by the Romans.

But then in all that follows Jesus takes this claim to kingship and to power and to be God's Son and God's Messiah and turns it inside out. This is the king who does not assume his throne through violence and force of arms. This is the king motivated by love who brings in a kingdom not of this world. This is a king of integrity who brings in a kingdom marked by justice and peace. This king is not for one nation alone in a single lifetime but for every nation in all the time to come. This king does not inaugurate a dynasty. He forms a community through his death on the cross. He does not come to be served but to serve.

And this is why the crown of thorns for Christians is such a powerful symbol: of power combined with sacrifice which saves and redeems. This is why Jesus is called by the ancient name of old: Saviour, caught in the Hebrew word Hosanna and in the name he is given at his birth. Because he will save his people not from their physical enemies but from the deeper and greater enemies of sin and evil and death and lead them to freedom and abundant life and peace. Who is it who goes to the cross on the first Good Friday? Jesus of Nazareth the King.



*A minute of silence follows the commentary for personal reflection.*

# The Cross

### **Reading: The Crucifixion of Jesus.**

John 19:17-37. Read by Julia Hollander. (NRSV)

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 fulfill 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 fulfill 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."

### **Commentary**

*"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".*

And so we come to the centre of the story. We have journeyed from the garden to the courtyard to the pavement of Pilate and now we travel with Jesus to the cross.

John tells even the story of the crucifixion as a scene in which the principal actor is Jesus. Jesus carries the cross by himself here. There is no reference to Simon of Cyrene, familiar from the other gospels. As we have seen, John places a great emphasis on the charge set about Jesus' head as he is crucified. There is no dialogue or interaction between the soldiers and Jesus nor between the Lord and those crucified with him. The scene is stripped back.

Even from the cross Jesus takes the initiative in the interaction between the disciple whom he loves and his mother. "Woman here is your son. Here is your mother". Jesus himself in effect calls for wine and a sponge is held to his mouth. Most powerful of all are Jesus final words spoken from the cross: "It is finished". The sense and meaning of the words are: "It is accomplished". "It has been done" .

Then, in the active, Jesus bowed his head and gave up his spirit. No-one takes his life. He gives it. In spite of the plots of Judas and the high priest, in spite of the brutality of the Romans and the false justice of Pilate, it is vital to realise at this hour of Good Friday that death is not something which simply happens to Jesus because of the actions of others.

Jesus enters into a battle with death. He offers his life and in the fourth gospel is as active in this final part of the journey as at every stage. Jesus has come to the place of the skull to accomplish something. By the time he bows his head and gives up his spirit, it is accomplished. What has he done? What has been completed?

All the gospels bear witness that the disciples found it hard to understand that Jesus came to offer his life. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus speaks to them three times about his death and its necessity and meaning but they do not begin to understand until after the resurrection. John omits those encounters. But in a similar way John threads his references to the meaning of this death through the narrative in powerful images rich in meaning. The clues are there but we need to assemble them to understand. That assembly and understanding is the work of a lifetime.

In the opening chapter of the gospel, there is a man sent from God whose name was John. John sees Jesus coming towards him and declares: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". In the Old Testament sacrificial system, the lamb takes away sin through death. In Isaiah 53, traditionally read today, the servant of the Lord is led like a sheep to the slaughter, a slaughter which is for our healing and salvation.

In John 3.14 the reference is to an obscure Old Testament story. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life". The bronze serpent was lifted up in the camp so that whoever simply looked would be healed of plague. A powerful symbol in this Holy Week. So Jesus through his death and lifting up brings the deepest healing for all the world.

In John 10 the imagery shifts but the meaning is the same. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep". "For this reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again". There is a death here which brings healing and salvation and forgiveness generation after generation after generation. Which accomplishes a great victory.

In John 11, after Lazarus is raised, Caiaphas prophesies that Jesus was about to die for the nation: for salvation and deliverance and healing. In John 12 we read: "And I when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself". He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.



Here is no passive accident, no unfortunate ending to a brilliant life. This is the purposeful end to the mission for which he came, to accomplish the salvation of the world. Christians in every generation have pondered and sometimes argued about the meanings of this death and the best way to express the mystery in words. It is more important to believe and receive this truth than to understand it fully.

Each time we celebrate the Eucharist according to the Book of Common Prayer the priest say these words: "He made there by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world". Cranmer's words remain for me the best summary of what is happening here.

Every time I say those words or hear them, I pause to think about that phrase "for the sins of the whole world". I cannot imagine the weight and extent and gravity of the sin of the whole world. I understand something of the sin of one life or the small number of lives which have crossed my own path. The sin of the whole world for a single day is beyond our

comprehension. But the sin of the whole world in all eternity. This is beyond imagining.

But so great is the power of what is accomplished here. "He made there by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world". At the cross is healing and forgiveness and renewal and grace and new life and fresh beginnings. It is accomplished.

We wait and ponder and celebrate and remember and absorb in a way which is a little deeper year by year the mystery of our salvation.

*A minute of silence follows the commentary for personal reflection.*

**Hymn: As I surveyed the Wondrous Cross.**

Performed by Tom and Mandy Green



# The Cave

### **Reading: The Burial of Jesus.**

John 19:38-42. Read by Julia Hollander. (NRSV)

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. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. 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. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

### **Commentary**

The final part of our story and the final part of our devotion this Good Friday must look forward. We have identified with the disciples but we are not the disciples. We know the great final act and the ending. The death accomplishes a great mystery. It did not seem so at the time. The proof and the power of the cross is made clear in the events of Easter Day. And so at the end of Good Friday, Jesus has given up his life. The soldiers ensure that he is dead. His legs are not broken but his side is pierced with a spear.

It is then, when there is no-one else, when almost all have departed, that John introduces two more unlikely heroes in his story, two secret disciples. Joseph of Arimathea is a secret disciple, because of his fear of the Jews. He is a person of influence – he knows Pilate. He is probably in the second half of life – he has made provision for his burial. He is wealthy – he owns a new grave close to the city walls. With him comes Nicodemus who came first to Jesus by night: also an old man, also a secret disciple, also a person of wealth, also afraid.

These two scholars and we presume friends are able to act even in the midst of the grief and disappointment which has overtaken the other disciples.

They perform an act of love for Jesus their Lord, in whom they had such hope.

They bring a great quantity of spices. This anointing mirrors the one by Mary the sister of Lazarus in John 12. They take him to a garden, which will become the most significant garden in the whole of history. They wash the body together, saying prayers for the dead and grieving. They wrap the body in spices and in linen cloths according the burial custom of the Jews. They place the body on the shelf in the cool cave. One of them as a final act, in the silence, places a linen cloth over the face they know so well and love so dearly. We can imagine they bow in the quietness, weeping, and retreat into the cool of the evening, not lingering as the Sabbath is about to begin. Carefully they roll the stone across the mouth of the cave and depart. We know, because we know the end of the story, that all of this gentle work is about to be undone. All of the sad and violent work of Good Friday will be unravelled. All of the hatred of that day will be overcome. On the Sabbath, the great day of recreation, all lies still and undisturbed. This Easter tide, our whole country, our whole world is in this Holy Saturday.

But in the second night, as the world sleeps, the great reversal will begin. The stone will be rolled away. The linen bandages and spices will be unravelled and folded and set apart. The shroud, by tradition bearing the imprint of his face, will be set to one side. The marks of the spear and the nails will remain but the flesh of Jesus will be healed. The ravages of crucifixion will be gone. Death has not been reversed but conquered, journeyed through to the other side. Life is restored. Decay is arrested. Warmth returns. There will be movement and laughter and tears of joy and nothing will ever be the same.

The plots of the priests are turned back against them. One man has indeed died for the sake of the people and God has raised him from the dead. The injustice of Pilate and the cruelty of the soldiers has been transfigured for a greater good. The mockery and fickleness of the crowds sounds hollow in the face of this victory. God's love made flesh has given his life and life through him has been returned to him and to all of humankind. We leave our these hours of devotion with much to ponder. We have kept vigil this Good Friday in our different ways at the foot of the cross. We have come to see the Son of God and wonder at the gift of his life.



We have reflected on the cup which the Father gives him to drink; on the courtyard where his friend denied him, on the custom of the unjust judge offering a guilty man his freedom in place of Jesus. We have pondered the crown of thorns placed on the head of the king as he assumes his kingdom; on the cross where Jesus of his own accord and gave up his life and accomplished the salvation of the world; on the cave where he laid, in anticipation of the third day and of the new song we will sing on Easter morning.

We leave these reflections with much to think about: with a deeper understanding of God's love, of our complete forgiveness, of his sacrifice and of the hope of resurrection.

There is a place in the company of God's people for those who deny him, for those who stand far off and watch, for those who run at first sign of trouble, for secret disciples who come good in the end, for those who simply love him and want to be near him.

But we end these reflections, I hope, even this year, with hearts tingling with anticipation: not cast down by the solemn events we have rehearsed but deepened by them; with our minds on tiptoe, straining forward to catch the first sound of Alleluia, with faith in resurrection stirring once again as we will prepare to celebrate the great gift of life in all its fullness. The story is told but is not yet complete. And so because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.....

*A minute of silence follows the commentary for personal reflection.*

# **End Collect, Intercessions & The Lord's Prayer led by Paul Cowan.**

## **Collect**

Almighty Father,  
look with mercy on this your family  
for which our Lord Jesus Christ was content to be betrayed  
and given up into the hands of sinners  
and to suffer death upon the cross;  
who is alive and glorified with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## **Intercessions.**

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever. Amen

## **A closing message from Bishop Steven**



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