



Woodstock
St Mary Magdalene

Holy Week Addresses
given by
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March 26th - 28th 2018

Monday in Holy Week 2018:

Jesus Arrested Luke 22.47-53 (p 1058)

Some people are worried by the discrepancies in the four Gospel accounts. The Holy Week stories are full of differences. I'm not worried. I'd be more worried if we had four identical accounts, because that means one organized source, with all potential different recollections conveniently ironed out, and one polished piece of PR. That's not what we have. We have four distinct sources, some of which seem to be aware of each other, some of which are distinctly different, but all of them telling pretty much the same tragic, heart-stopping, breath-taking story. For me, this makes the story more, not less, convincing.¹

I find all four accounts fascinating, and moving, but this year I wanted to use Luke's refined, beautiful, detailed version – and each evening I will lead us to dwell on one particular feature of his tale.

Tonight, we are in the garden – Gethsemane if you like, though Luke does not name the garden. Perhaps there is pressure enough² – Luke has, after all, just described (uniquely) Jesus practically sweating blood in the anguish of the cup that he alone must bear.³ As you know, Judas' manner of betrayal was the famous kiss, so famous that pop songs, novels, films, and hundreds of artworks have been inspired by it. 'Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?' Jesus asks him.⁴ Judas doesn't answer, not here, nor in Matthew, Mark, or John. But look at the text more closely. In Luke, he doesn't kiss him either. Luke tells us that Judas approached Jesus to kiss him. Jesus then asks him. And then the violence breaks out – only in Luke does Jesus heal the high priest's servant.⁵ But there is no kiss. Why? Or rather – why not?

Some writers think that Luke has a more tender approach to Judas than the other Gospel writers. Luke seems to suggest that Judas (and John does this too) has been pretty much possessed by Satan, and driven to act like this.

¹ On conflicting accounts and their value see James D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (SPCK 1995), pp. 65-66

² Gethsemane means 'oil-press'

³ Luke 22.43-44

⁴ Luke 22.48

⁵ Luke 22.51

So, does Luke retell the story to demonstrate that Jesus' love for Judas is so great, even at the moment of betrayal, that he tries to prevent Judas from going the whole way?⁶ Perhaps the point is subtler – and more frightening.

In Luke's telling of the story of Jesus' handing-over (a better translation than 'betrayal')⁷ we are reminded of the broken nature of our world; a world where friends are brandishing swords and enemies are ready to kiss us. Nothing is as it seems. Judas is one of the twelve, after all: one of the chosen, like Peter, Andrew, James, John, all the rest. He was in the inner circle. He was key to everything that Jesus wanted to say and do. He saw it. He heard it. And yet. Love – and let's hope that, once, there was love – became hate. The kiss was once a sign of affection. Now, it is something else entirely. And Jesus, even now, is trying to put a stop to it, not for his sake, but for Judas' sake. Even now, at the cusp of betrayal, Jesus says to him, 'are you sure you want to do this'?

I might be reading too much into it, of course. But that Jesus goes on loving is beyond question. And that Judas cannot be doing with Jesus' love seems to be beyond question too.

This story gives us the chance to face a difficult truth. It gives us the chance to face up to the Judas in each one of us. You and I are chosen, disciples now, just as they were then. We are the key, today, to everything that Jesus would say and do. We see what he does in scripture. We hear what he does in scripture. It is brought to life in our worship, in the heart of the church, in the heart of our lives. And we love Him. We really do. We know who He is. We try to follow. The love is real.

But we are mixed-up, broken vessels, earthenware. Flawed, fissured, our motives mixed, our love compromised. It looks like love. To the outside world, that's just what it looks like. Arms open in embrace, lips puckered ready for the kiss. But things are not always what they seem. My words, my gestures, are worthless, if my heart is not in it. In Him.

There is, then, an extraordinary hope laid before us in this story. He will not have it. He will speak his word to us, even at the last moment. He will call us by name and say, are you sure? No more of this. The voice, the touch, full of love, full of healing, even in that hour when darkness reigns.⁸

⁶ Cf Barton, *People of the Passion* (Triangle/SPCK 1994), pp 15-17

⁷ For an extended treatment of this theme see W. H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting* (DLT 1982), pp. 17-33

⁸ Luke 22.53

Tuesday in Holy Week 2018:

Jesus Betrayed Luke 22.54-62 (p 1059)

How can it be that someone to whom you have been close, served, loved, honoured, worshipped can become someone you are willing to betray? How does that happen? We know that it does. We've betrayed people. And they've betrayed us. The psalmist's lament rings true over and over again: in my wife Megan's translation

For it was not actually an enemy who is being sharp with me – for then I could make sense of it; it is not someone who hates me who is up against me – for then I could hide myself away from him.

It is you – someone just like me, someone who is my friend, someone I know well.⁹

It's a terrible story this story of betrayal, the sad, tragic, disturbing story of this unfaithful apostle, Simon, son of John, the one He called Peter.

Peter? Not Judas? No – we saw what Judas did yesterday evening. Tonight, it's what Peter did that concerns me. And should concern us all.

For the kind of betrayal that Judas performs, Judas the grass, Judas the hander-over, by prayer, grace and hard work we might manage to avoid. But what Peter does – well, you and I do it all the time. We stay as close as we dare – and we're asked the question, 'Are you also one of his disciples?'. And what do we say?

I remember as a teenager standing at a bus stop outside Wolverhampton railway station. It was the week after Easter, and I had birthday book tokens to spend. I was considering ordination even then, and had bought some prayer books or something similar. The queue at the stop was large, and chiefly silent. And a vivacious lady, gently but joyfully, burst out saying - and these were her exact words - 'Well, lovely ladies and gentlemen, Jesus is risen for you and for me!' The queue did not know where to put itself, wrought with embarrassment. She continued to be annoyingly glad about the resurrection, and I hoped she'd go away. But she didn't. In fact, she got closer. She stood in front of me. Everyone was watching.

⁹ Verses 13 and 14 of Psalm 55, translated by Megan Daffern in *Songs of the Spirit* (SPCK 2017), p. 22

She looked at me, and smiled, a lovely smile, with eyes full of love, and full of questioning sadness. She knows, I thought. She knows I'm a disciple too! And she's wondering why I won't join her in her witness to the greatest news the world has ever known.

Are you also one of his disciples? Again, Adrian denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

Jesus looked at Peter, Luke tells us. In our translation we are told that 'The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter'.¹⁰ Archbishop Rowan Williams describes this as one of the most searing images of the Gospel.¹¹ I remember the look of the lady in the bus queue 30 years later. I wonder what Peter remembered. Right there and then, there was only bitter weeping. The *Ebarme dich*,¹² from Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, captures the double agony – the Lord who hoped to be proved wrong, perhaps, but was proved right after all; the disciple who was determined, despite himself, to stay the course, but failed.

Let's be clear. I'm not suggesting that any of us are Judas. But I am suggesting that we are Peter. And it would be easy to feel quite desperate about that. We mean so well. We are so up for it! We want to follow. We tell Him we will. But, in the charcoal's accusing flame, we deny.

But something else happens by the light of that fire, and it is hidden in the text. One word, used twice, which changes everything. It's not about us. It's about Him.

Throughout the passion narrative, Luke has so far called Jesus by his name. But not here. In the garden Luke tells us that *Jesus* went out to the Mount of Olives, that *Jesus* was approached to be kissed, that *Jesus* said no more of this. And soon, it will be *Jesus* who is mocked, and beaten, and crucified. But here, it not *Jesus* who turns and looks straight at Peter. Remember? 'The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter' It is *the Lord*. Then, we are told, Peter 'remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him'.¹³ Does it matter? It mattered enough for St Luke to write it.¹⁴ So it should matter to us. Here, in the betrayal, in the heart of darkness, there is a flicker of resurrection light.

¹⁰ Luke 22.61

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial* (Fount/Harper Collins 2000), pp.138-140

¹² Have (thou) mercy

¹³ Luke 22.61

¹⁴ For the Christological implications see Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans 1997), pp. 788 ff.

Wednesday in Holy Week 2018:

Jesus Condemned Luke 23.13-23 (p 1060)

I said on Monday that Luke's approach to Judas seems to be more tender than the other Gospel writers, and we saw a glimpse of that last night with Peter too. When I was telling a friend about my addresses this week he said 'ah, you're doing all the baddies'. Luke doesn't see them like that. Luke's account of Jesus' trial - insofar as we dare call it a trial, travesty of justice that it was – depicts no interrogation. Luke gives Pilate only one direct question to Jesus. 'Are you the King of the Jews?' To which Jesus answers 'yes, it is as you say'.¹⁵

But we know from various historical sources the kind of man that Pilate was. He was a brute. Luke has already described him as such: chapter 13 of Luke's Gospel begins 'now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.'¹⁶ This fits with everything else we know about Pilate: cruel, vindictive, despotic. Like those whom Pilate executed so viciously, Jesus is, of course, himself a Galilean on pilgrimage – is Luke alerting us back in chapter 13 to what is to come?

Perhaps. But it doesn't explain why Luke presses the soft-pedal in his account of Pilate here at the 'trial'. John's version of this scene gives us the famous questioning about 'what is truth?'; a question, if we are to believe Bacon, asked by a 'jesting Pilate' who would not wait for an answer.¹⁷ No jesting Pilate in Luke. In this chapter he is depicted almost as a statesman, not the brutal and oppressive hegemon that we know of. Luke alone tells us that he tries to get out of it by sending Jesus off to Herod, who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time. (You may recall the scene in the musical 'Jesus Christ Superstar' when Herod taunts Jesus with a challenge Luke fails to record:

So, you are the Christ? You're the great Jesus Christ!
Prove to me that you're no fool
Walk across my swimming pool.)¹⁸

¹⁵ Luke 23.3

¹⁶ Luke 13.1

¹⁷ Francis Bacon, 1st Viscount St Albans, 1561 –1626, *Of Truth: Essays Civil and Moral*, see <http://www.bartleby.com/3/1/1.html>

¹⁸ Tim Rice, King Herod's Song, lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, The Bicycle Music Company

Pilate's most famous action in this drama is, I suppose, the moment where he calls for a bowl of water and washes his hands of Jesus' innocent blood. We still wash our hands of those we want nothing to do with. But not according to Luke. Luke's Pilate doesn't wash his hands of Jesus. He just wants to let him go.¹⁹ But the shouts of the crowd prevailed. 'Then Crucify was all their breath, and for his death they thirst and cry.'²⁰ 'So Pilate decided to grant their demand'.²¹

It's a complicated picture. Jesus is a political problem, certainly, otherwise crucifixion wouldn't be his fate. People nailed to a cross were enemies, not of Judaism, but of Rome. And there is another narrative reading. The great Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf interprets this scene as a parable of the power of truth. He puts it brilliantly:

Trials are supposed to be about finding out what happened and meting out justice. In Jesus' trial, neither the accusers nor the judge cared for the truth. The accusers want condemnation . . . for both the accusers and the judge, the truth is irrelevant . . . the only truth they will recognize is 'the truth of power'.²²

We see all around us what the truth of power leads to. It leads to xenophobia, fear, foolishness, terror. Its consequences are apocalyptic.²³ Its destination is hell. The truth will set you free, says Jesus.²⁴ No wonder that those who are consumed by power don't like it. Perhaps when we speak of the 'trappings' of power, we are saying more than we realize.

I'm guessing that Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ* is not a book I'm going to find on many bedside tables round these parts; and, before you ask, no, I don't have a copy. But I do know that in that jolly read, Pilate is a hero, the possessor of a 'noble scorn' for, and I quote, 'the little Jew from Galilee'.²⁵ Makes one's blood run cold, doesn't it? Yes – because when truth is scorned, it is the hour of darkness indeed.

Tomorrow evening we will gather here to witness truth being delivered to the forces of darkness. On Friday, we will watch as truth gets nailed to a cross. But do not be afraid. Never forget – you know not *what* truth is; you know *who* Truth is. And on Sunday the power of truth proves itself once more to be all that is meant by life.

The truth will set us free.

¹⁹ Luke 23.20

²⁰ From the hymn *My song is love unknown*, Samuel Crossman, 1624-83

²¹ Luke 23.24

²² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Abingdon Press; Nashville 1996), p. 266

²³ See Archbishop Justin Welby's new book *Re-imagining Britain* (Bloomsbury 2018), p. 30

²⁴ John 8.32

²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, quoted in Volf, op. cit., pp. 270-271