

28 The Cross

Ch 23

The court was concluded and they took him off to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. They might have had him stoned for blasphemy, but in such a case the Law required that individual witnesses should first come forward to lay their hands upon the condemned man's head.¹ Now it is one thing to go with the collective strength, anonymous within a shared responsibility, but it is quite another, especially in a case of doubtful legality, to come forward and be individually identified, laying your own hand as witness to the crime. The chief priests and leaders of the Sanhedrin probably didn't even ask if anyone was prepared to do this office.

When the British cabinet decided on war with Iraq, condemning thousands of Iraqis to death, each member of the cabinet did so within the safety of collective cabinet responsibility, individual names and views hidden behind the mask that is the voice of government in Britain. Now that questions are being asked, and there are calls for an enquiry into the decision, Jack Straw (Secretary of State for Justice) and other members of the present government have stopped any questions that might probe for individual voices within the government group. We of 21st century Britain should not find it difficult to understand the workings of the Sanhedrin.

Besides that, the leaders of the Sanhedrin wanted more than their local court to take action against Jesus. They wanted the utmost power in the land to condemn him to an exemplary, that is a painful and humiliating, death, disgraced and eliminated from the power equation. They took him to Pilate, where they presented a somewhat different charge. "King" is now the operative word.

We found this man inciting a revolt among our people, telling them not to pay taxes to Caesar and declaring himself to be the Messiah, an anointed king.

I doubt if Pilate was taken in by their enthusiasm for the prerogatives of Caesar, and there was no love lost between him and the Jerusalem leaders. He would have been on his guard and, whatever their scheme, not at all willing to help them in it. He examined Jesus himself. He asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and Jesus replied, "You're saying it." It was

¹ Leviticus 24: 10 - 16

similar to the reply he had given the Sanhedrin, but Pilate decided to take it in the harmless sense: “Im not talking about King of the Jews.”

He turned to the representatives of the Sanhedrin and told them, “I don’t find any cause against this man.” But they stood their ground: “He is stirring up the people, spreading his teaching all around Judea, bringing it from Galilee to here.” The governor spotted an opportunity for stalling. “Is the man a Galilean then?” he asked. That put him, if the governor chose to acknowledge it, under the jurisdiction of King Herod, who also happened to be in Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. So Pilate sent him to Herod. Let Herod get entangled in the machinations of the Priests and the Sanhedrin.

Herod was pleased. He had been curious about Jesus from a long time back, from all he had heard about him, and he would like to see him perform a miracle. He questioned Jesus at considerable length, but Jesus gave him no answer. He would not save his life by playing up to a man like Herod. The priests and the scribes were there, vigorously pressing charges, but Herod decided that Jesus was a fool. He and his guards made fun of him, dressed him in a royal robe and sent him back to Pilate.

We are told that from that day on, Herod and Pilate, who had been glowering enemies, became friends. Perhaps Herod appreciated the compliment of Pontius Pilate recognising his jurisdiction, even here in Jerusalem, and perhaps he enjoyed having the representatives of the Sanhedrin obliged to take notice of him and urge their case before him, even tho he was not King in their city. Pilate and Herod had traits in common. Neither of them would have the slitest scruple about slaughtering any number of their enemies, with or without trial, but neither of them felt they had anything to fear from Jesus, or anything to gain by killing him. And neither of them wanted to be the tool of the Sanhedrin. I think it was probably this realisation that they had common ground in their distance from and hostility to the confounded scheming and narrowness of the Sanhedrin that brought the two autocrats together.

But something even more remarkable was happening, to involve the whole power of government in the province. Both Herod and Pilate were in Jerusalem for the Passover, and it was not out of personal piety, in either case. Altho the Romans had divided the land of Palestine so that Judea and Galilee were under separate administrations, even the Roman-appointed King and the Governor were constrained to recognise the force of the tradition that centred on Jerusalem. They had to be present, the one to show his face and the other to see that order was maintained.

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It's as if, in the very moment of Jesus' defeat, the rule of God is already expanding, exponentially. Jesus' teaching and his work was never unpolitical, but, as I pointed out before, he confronted those civic and political forces that were embodied in the traditional leaders of his people, the heads of the local assemblies, the wealthy, the pious and respected, the educated, the legal experts and finally the priests in Jerusalem. He had ignored Herod as an irrelevance, and did not challenge the power of Rome. But now, when his confrontation with the leaders of his people comes to its climax, Rome and King Herod are both drawn in. God has decided that they will be there, like the gentiles once summoned to Samaria to witness God's judgement on Israel,² only this is God's judgement on them too, for they have no justice or strength, only idle curiosity looking for amusement, and embattled power in combat with its reluctant subjects. Events have dragged them into the spotlight of history, where the kingdom now confronts and exposes them as well.

They are drawn like characters in a Greek tragedy, entangling one another in their predestined fate, only they are none of them puppets in the hands of destiny; they are human beings making their own decisions according to their own characters and interests, and the vast resourcefulness of God incorporates their behavior into the revelation of the kingdom. In the end, the kingdom of God does confront and challenge the power and the politics of Rome.

In sending Jesus back to him mocked as an innocent fool, Herod had strengthened Pilate's hand, and perhaps he appreciated it. The Jewish leaders had brought up Jesus' activity in Galilee and now he could tell them that the Jewish King over Galilee had found nothing with which to charge him. Neither Pilate nor the King had found anything deserving the death penalty, so Pilate proposed to let him go after a flogging. A Roman flogging could be as cruel as death. There was no mercy or justice in Pilate, only a determination to outmanoeuvre his enemies in the Sanhedrin. But his concession was taken as a sign of weakness.

They demanded that, if anyone was to be set free, it should be Barabbas (a man held in prison for riot and murder).³ The meeting degenerated into a shouting match, with the representatives of the Sanhedrin determined to

² Amos 3: 9

³ I have said that Luke is a skilled and careful storyteller, and so he is. But even great Homer sometimes slips up. This is one point where Luke's account is disjointed, since he has not told us, as Mark did, about the custom of the Governor releasing a prisoner in honor of the festival.

show their strength of will. Three times Pilate protested that there was no case to be found against Jesus, that their outrage should be satisfied with some lesser punishment, and three times they demanded that he be taken away and crucified. In the end, it is Pilate who gives in. Rome bows to the obstinate demand of her subjects. Pilate gives the verdict. Jesus is to be handed over for crucifixion, just as they want.

Three times Pilate argues with the Sanhedrin, and three times they repeat their demand that Jesus be crucified. It is a set piece. To repeat yourself three times is to put your meaning and intention quite beyond doubt (like the Muslim who declares three times that he divorces his wife). The Jerusalem leaders are determined that Jesus shall be humiliated and killed. Jesus' execution is a political murder, carried out for the same reason that political murders have been carried out then and since, in most countries: someone is a thret to established power, and established power has the power to kill.

It is not a uniquely Jewish crime and there is no ground for an anti-Semitic interpretation of the events. The pattern of power and abuse runs thru Christian history too: Joan of Arc, Watt Tyler, Thomas More, Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara, Oscar Romero, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and recently Natalia Estemirova.⁴ There are countless others who didn't make the history books, who were too small to be remembered, but a serious enuf thret to be eliminated by the powers that ruled them. For the coup that brought the dictator Suharto to power in Indonesia, the CIA provided a list of "communists" (workers, trade unionists, political activists) who were slautered with a hundred thousand others to further American interests. When Australian journalists were murdered at Balibo, where they had witnessed the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, the Australian government was more concerned with protecting its oil interests than bringing the truth to light. Murder and the cover-up of murder runs in the political fabric of even our most respectable and constitutional democracies.

Luke was concerned to show what the death of Jesus was and what was the role in it of the complex of ruling powers in Jerusalem. For Jesus himself is come to rule, and with the full authority of God. He is the true ruler and king and governor in Jerusalem, and that this, his execution, is the beginning of his rule, is God's judgement on everything that human powers construct by way of government and dominion over one another. His death is judgement on the understanding and practice of every Jewish or gentile

⁴ One of a number of human rights campaigners in Russia who have been murdered for their political and moral stand.

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government when power is its source or its goal. Every government that relies on power, even the civilised and holy ones, will kill those who stand in the place of God. For God subverts power.

They led him out to be crucified, and Simon, a Cyrenean making his way into the city, was conscripted to follow him, carrying the beam for his execution. There was a large crowd, and among them some women who wailed and lamented for him. It was probably a common practice, either generous-minded women who felt it was too cruel that anyone, even a criminal, should go to his death unlamented, or professional mourners provided by good people who felt that this was only proper for a human being and a Jew facing his end. It is a sharp contrast to the gloating and mockery of others who were there to see their enemy die.

Jesus turned to them and said: “Daughters of Jerusalem. Don’t weep for me but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never gave birth and the breasts that never fed a babe!’ They will start saying to the mountains ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills ‘Cover us!’ If this is how the green wood burns, how will it fare with the dry?”

This gospel opened with the story of a barren woman rescued, saved from humiliation and pain by the longed-for blessing of God. Life, a child, birth – from a womb that had seemed to be dead; healing and hope in the compassionate touch of God, and the ending of an innocent woman’s shame. Now, as it draws to its conclusion, we face the prospect of history become so terrible that those who have borne children to face its cruelty are the ones considered cursed. If this, the death of Jesus, is how humanity’s plans and progress work out in the innocent, how will it be for all those who are guilty? If this is how the powerful, the rulers of nations, deal with the green growing timber of the Son of Man, what will they do with the helpless mass of humanity, as redy for the flames as dead and dry sticks? If the goodness and justice and resourcefulness of God does not rescue the Son of David from such suffering, what disasters lie waiting for a people altogether unprepared for them?

The day will come when the vision of the prophet Hosea will be fulfilled, and, faced with the terror of evil or the terror of God, people will cry out to be hidden, to be spared exposure, for the mountains to fall on them and the hills to cover them up.⁵ The women of Jerusalem must weep for themselves and for their people in the days to come.

⁵ Hosea 10:8, cf Isaiah 2:10

There were three criminals to be executed that day, and when they got them to the place called the skull, they crucified Jesus with the other two, one on each side of him. And Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

We have come to the critical point of the gospel, the fulfilment of Israel's history and her prophets. Jesus had said that he would die in Jerusalem, Jerusalem that always killed the prophets. He would fulfil not only what the prophets had said but what they had done and suffered. His life and death would be the seal and confirmation of the life and death of all the prophets, who had spoken out to declare the will of God and had suffered the consequences in the wrath of the nation's powers.

Luke's gospel is largely shaped by the journey of Jesus, and because of the way he spreads the themes (money, power, judgement, prayer and so on) in bits and episodes throughout the gospel, there are journeys within the journey. The series of sayings that draw our attention to the Son of Man is one. Another is the meaning of Jesus' death in relation to the prophets. That relationship and its significance unfolds gradually through a number of events and sayings that lead up to this moment of his crucifixion.

We who have constricted the death of Jesus into one doctrinal interpretation tend to think that the prophets' role is simply to foretell the great act of atonement. But it is clear from Luke's gospel, when we attend to it, that Jesus follows in the steps of the prophets, matching their lives of protest and challenge, speaking out for the will of God when the will of God was unwelcome to the powers that ruled, and that this was the journey to his death. He is killed for the same reason that they were rejected or killed: power will always want to crush, if it can, the word of God.

Once, he had denounced those leaders of Galilean society, the Pharisees and the experts in the Law, condemning their obsession with correct behavior that just forgot about justice and the love of God.⁶ He reminded them then of the long line of prophets that had been sent to such as them, only to be rejected. "This generation will be held to account for the spilt blood of all the prophets, from the foundation of the world to the murder of Zechariah in the Temple." Jesus saw a history of evil, the typical pattern of which is the rejection by the strong of those who represent the way of God, culminating in his own day. His anger at the oppressive behavior of the Pharisees was

⁶ 11: 37 – 54

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expressed in the sharp denunciation: “You witness what your ancestors did and you approve it. They did the killing and you build the tombs.”⁷

Then, when some Pharisees warned him of Herod’s intentions, he had sent back the message that he would continue his work, because it was unthinkable that a prophet should die anywhere else than in Jerusalem.⁸ On that occasion the thought of the city that “killed the prophets and stoned the messengers sent to her” filled him with pity, and longing to gather her people into safety. The warning that she would be abandoned by God is one of deep concern for his own.

When at last he came in sight of the city, he wept. His longing had become the longing of regret for what, as he now knew, could not be. “If only even you had understood in time the way that leads to peace! But you are blind to it.”⁹ Now he could only lament the future, the inevitable destruction that she had undergone before in the Babylonian war and would surely suffer again, since she was, as then and always, stubbornly resistant to the call of God.

Jesus did not go thru life fixed in some single eternal conviction. His emotions changed, and what was uppermost in his consciousness changed, and, like every human being, he grew into the fullness and wholeness of his emotional response to the experiences of his life and the people with whom he shared it. In this case, he had moved from the anger that denounced, warning fiercely of the accounting to come, to pity and tears for the city he loved. It is not that the pity denies the anger, or that the anger denies the pity. His heart is big enough for both, and the truth is that in the heart of God, there is both, and both must be faced. The crucial encounter, the meeting that will shape the kingdom, and in it the whole of human history, is with the anger and the pity of God.

So, when he tells the good women of Jerusalem, “Weep for yourselves and for your children,” it is not in bitterness, but in sharing the last thing he has to share, his sadness for the city of his people. There is still the warning, but it’s as if he knows that it’s too late now for the warning. They can only weep, as he has wept, for what is going to be.

Now, when they nail him to the cross, that moment has come in which the cry had gone out from the prophet Zechariah: “The Lord will see this and avenge it!” Jesus’ cry is different: “Father forgive them, for they don’t know

⁷ 11: 48

⁸ 13: 33 – 35

⁹ 19: 41 – 44

what they are doing.” The prophets spoke as voices for God, knowing God’s will and God’s justice, and Zechariah had borne witness in the end to the justice and the anger of God: “The Lord will see this and avenge it!” but Jesus speaks as the Son of God, knowing the heart of his Father: “Father, Forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”¹⁰

Jesus’ death is in the line of the prophets, of those who before and since, have stood up to power, speaking out when the will of God is opposed by the will of government, or of the governing classes, and have paid the price. If his death has value, it is a value to be shared by all those before him and after him who have spoken up for justice, integrity, care, compassion, generosity, freedom, for all that is truly human, and have borne the consequences at the hands of hostile power. If his death is vindicated by God, that vindication will be shared in part by all those who have faced power as he faced it and have spoken out for the true future of the people. God’s vindication is for all those who, after Jesus, have also taken up the cross.

And if Jesus prays for forgiveness, that is because he knows the heart of his Father, the prodigal Father, and knows that forgiveness is there. He has not taken back the anger, for the anger is anger at real injustice, oppression and evil, and he knows what the consequences of another failure to accept God will be. But he knows also, as some of the prophets knew, that in the end, the compassion and pity of God will be reaching out to offer forgiveness.¹¹

Some of the leaders were there, surveying their triumph. They mocked him: “He was good at saving others. Let him save himself, if he’s the Messiah, God’s chosen one.” The soldiers also made fun of him, acting like cup-bearers to a king, but bringing him vinegar. “If you’re the king of the Jews, save yourself.” The publication of his crime, attached to the scaffold, said simply, “This is the king of the Jews.”

¹⁰ Some manuscripts, even some reliable ones, do not have this verse. Therefore, altho it is generally accepted as original, the consideration arises, what do we make of it, if it is an addition? As with the “cup of the new covenant”, if there has been a change, it is an early change arising from the conviction of the first generations of Christians. In Luke’s sequel to the gospel (the “Acts of the Apostles”) the prayer of forgiveness is echoed in Peter’s proclamation to the people of Jerusalem, acknowledging that neither they nor their leaders knew what they were doing (Acts 3:17), and in the dying prayer of the martyr Stephen (Acts 7:60). It is therefore most probably Luke’s own account, and even if it is a change, it is integral to the early material that Luke used, and to which he referred in the Acts.

¹¹cf Hosea 3: 1 – 5; Isaiah 1: 18; Micah 4: 10, 7: 18 - 20

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The irony is deep and critical, for here is indeed the king of the Jews. Once again the leaders condemn themselves by the charge they make: not what Jesus had actually sed, but what they themselves had tried to make him say. They mock him as if he had put himself forward as the Messiah, which is just what he had not done. Only now is he claiming his kingdom, and only in this way. The soldiers' brutal parody, and their copy-cat charge, is doubly ironic. They mock his imagined pretensions, but this very execution of theirs, Jesus nailed up to a cross to die in torture and shame, is God's answer, God's final and fundamental answer to all the claims and pretensions of power. This is the King of the Jews. This is the Kyrios.

One of the criminals executed with him joined in the abuse, but the other rebuked him:

“Have you no fear of God, when you are under the same judgement? We are rightly punished, for we deserve the penalty for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he sed, “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus sed to him: “I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

(24: 40 – 43)

We need not be troubled that the dying criminal, in torture on the cross, makes such a “pretty” speech. Luke is not trying to give us a verbatim report and his hearers would not expect it. He gives the man the speech that is right for the occasion, that means what he was trying to say in whatever groaning, gasping language he was able to utter, and which conveys, rightly and clearly, true judgement on the case of Jesus. Luke did not think that the innocence of Jesus could be taken as understood by all who heard or read his gospel. Here and elsewhere,¹² he felt that it needed to be authoritatively stated. Jesus is innocent. Sharing the fate and humiliation of criminals, he is nonetheless blameless.

And Jesus' answer is the act of a king, declaring judgement and pardon. He is speaking today and his words will have effect today. There is no delay or postponement of the kingdom, as if his death is a setback, but here in Jerusalem, where he had come to claim his kingdom, he now takes up his kingly role, giving judgement and pardon. “I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

It was about midday and the sun was obscured. It was dark until three. The curtain before the sanctuary of the temple was torn in two,

¹² Luke 23: 27; Acts 2: 22

and Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Then he breathed out his spirit. (23: 44 - 46)

We need not speculate what natural phenomena might have caused the darkening of the day, but what we are to realise is that this event, the death of Jesus, is of cosmic significance. To say that the whole of human history turns about this point is to tell less than the full story. The universe itself is changed by the crucifixion within it of Jesus, the Lord. The very presence of God to his people is from this moment on a different footing. The curtain that screened off the innermost sanctuary, where the chosen priest alone went in to burn incense, is torn in two and there is no longer a private and holy place for the presence of God. It is now as open as a public hilltop where prisoners are executed.

The centurion in charge was affected by what he had seen. He acknowledged the rightness of God and said, "Truly, this was an innocent man." And the crowd that had gathered for the spectacle was changed and chastened. The mockers had melted away and those who were left went home overawed by what they had witnessed and beating their breasts. This is an event to change the world, to change the most sacred fundamentals of Israel, to change and to soften hearts. Much will be different.

A number of his friends and the women who had followed him were there, at a distance from the cross, witnesses to what had happened. There was a man from Arimathaea, named Joseph, a member of the Sanhedrin but a good and just man who lived in the hope of the kingdom of God - he had not agreed to their plan and its carrying out. This man now went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then, taking it down, he wrapped it in a shroud and put it in a tomb cut from the rock, where no one had yet been laid. It was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb, and how the body was placed in it. Then they went back and got ready the spices and ointments for entombment.

(23: 49 - 56)