

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

PASSION SUNDAY

SUNDAY 17 APRIL 2011

Mr Robert Sanderson

“Jesus’ Passion”

This morning we have been on a journey. A journey of Jesus’ last days according to Matthew. A journey that followed three years of teaching, healing and preaching that was centred on the poor, the blind, the widows, the sick, those in prison, the outcasts, the oppressed. This was Jesus’ passion. He was passionate about building the Kingdom of God on earth – what it would be like if God ruled the world. A world filled with peace and justice. This was his passion and it cost him his life.

I

We cannot really understand the events of Holy Week without understanding something about the social and political structure of the times.

The Judean monarchy was abolished in 63 BCE when Rome took over the Jewish homeland. Rome ruled through the high priest and the temple along with the local aristocracy. Those with wealth were trusted. This was how Rome governed its territories. It worked effectively as long as Rome’s demands were met: loyalty to Rome, order was maintained and the taxes to Rome were paid.

Eventually the aristocrats squabbled over leadership and Rome appointed Herod “The Great” as ruler. Herod was very unpopular as he milked the country dry with his exorbitant taxes which went into rebuilding the Temple. This made him very unpopular and when he died in 4 BCE, there was a revolt. Rome marched in and split Judea into three parts each ruled by one of his sons. Herod Antipas ruled the Galilee (where Jesus came from). Philip ruled north-east of the Jordan. Archelaus ruled Judea and Samaria from Jerusalem. In 6 CE, Rome removed Archelaus and sent a Roman Governor to rule from Jerusalem.

This changed everything. Rome assigned the administration of the country to the temple and it became the political and economic hub. The temple was used for collecting the taxes. There were tithes (20% of production), a temple tax, and the temple had to collect the tribute to Rome. The small group of wealthy and powerful people who controlled all this were not personally corrupt. Most were probably fine members of the society. It was their role in the system of domination that they designed, made sure that it worked and then reaped the vast rewards.

The High Priest was responsible for running the temple and trying to keep a balance between the demands of Rome and those of the population. Borg and Crossan (*The Last Week*, 2006) describe the role of the temple this way. “The center of a domination system was *legitimated by theology*: its place in the system was said to have been given by God. Temple theology continued to see the temple as the dwelling place of God, the mediator of forgiveness through sacrifice, the center of devotion, and the destination of pilgrimage.”

This sketch of the times gives us a good idea of the foment of political unrest at the time.

This was the Jerusalem Jesus entered on this day in 33 CE.

II

And so we turn to the journey which we will examine in more detail.

When we see references to the 'Jews' in the stories of Holy Week, we must be aware that this is a mistranslation of the word – it should be 'Judeans'. This was the land of Judea. This misunderstanding has caused enormous confusion and harm to Jewish people. Think of how clearer this becomes when Pilate asks 'Are you the King of the Judeans?' We must also remember that Jesus was a Galilean, and those in the great city of Jerusalem regarded the Galileans as uneducated yokels.

Jesus was a Jewish teacher. He worshipped the God of Abraham and Moses. He spoke out against what was happening in the temple, and incurred the wrath of those trying to balance God's Law with Roman power. For him it was impossible. A choice between them had to be made. Should he follow God or Rome? Should his way be the way of justice and righteousness, or domination and expediency? He had no doubts about which was the right path and no illusion as to the outcome. Those who were out to get him sought to take him secretly because he had a popular following. What they did not want was a public revolt at the time of the Passover when there were 200,000 pilgrims in the city.

Jesus is not only betrayed by Judas, he is eventually deserted by all his other disciples. When Jesus prays in Gethsemane, he naturally wants to avoid the brutal crucifixion but he prays "Father... your will be done." It must be said that it is not God's will or expectation that Jesus is killed. What is meant here is that Jesus prays that he has the strength and courage to continue to proclaim God's Kingdom in spite of the consequences. God does not want Jesus to die – nor any other martyr for that matter.

When we come to the events of Jesus before the High Priest, all the Gospel narratives have led most Christians to place the major blame for the death of Jesus on all the Jewish leaders. And, by implication, on 'the Jews'. This is completely wrong and has had a devastating impact on Jews and Jewish communities throughout the ages. Borg and Crossan have this to say:

"The temple authorities did not represent the Jews. Rather than representing the Jewish people, they were, as local collaborators with imperial authority, the oppressors of the vast majority of the Jewish people. They did not represent the Jewish people any more than the collaborationist governments of Europe during World War II or during the time of the Soviet Union represented their people."

Jesus comes before Pilate where there is a 'crowd'. We do not know how big this crowd was (probably only a handful), but it was certainly not the same crowd who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem. This idea of the same 'crowd' has proved to have a dark side. The Oberammergau Passion Play has been held every 10 years in thanks for delivery from the 1634 plague. Hitler had seen it in 1930 and 1934 and used it to denigrate the Jews and hold up Pilate as racially and intellectually superior. (See Crossan, *God and Empire* 2007) I understand that recent performances have modified the content somewhat. But some passion plays will be held this week all over the world in which the Jews will be maligned and the crowds attending will be asked to participate by cheering Jesus at the beginning and shouting "Crucify" later.

The whole story of Barabbas and Jesus is a puzzling one which Matthew takes from Mark. It is most unlikely that the authorities in Jesus' time would be prepared to release a violent revolutionary like Barabbas back on the streets. It is much more likely that it reflects the events of Mark's time in 66-70 CE during the uprising that resulted in the destruction of the temple. When Pilate asks the 'crowd'

whether he should release Barabbas or Jesus, he is offering a choice between two revolutionaries – the violent Barabbas or the non-violent Jesus. Many of those in the Jewish homeland had chosen violent revolution and the retribution from Rome was devastating. The intent of this passage is clear; God's way is the non-violent way.

Pilate washes his hands of Jesus' death and declares he is innocent of his blood. This may be a very dramatic gesture but, despite the crowd's acceptance, Pilate cannot pass off the responsibility because Jesus is now subject to the full Roman 'process'. First there is what we would call torture. Stripping the person naked, flogging him, poking fun at him, hitting him, humiliating him – all designed to remove his dignity and self-worth. For a political prisoner it was clearly designed to reduce to nothing all that he stood for. And then there was the cross. Crucifixion was not used for ordinary criminals. It was reserved for those who challenge the social order and disturb the 'Pax Romana' (Peace of Rome). It was designed to be a public deterrent to all who see it. Today, we would probably describe it as state sanctioned terrorism.

The reality of crucifixion was far worse than the artistic representations we are used to seeing. Many of these have a distressing but beautiful dignity about them. Nothing could be further from the truth. Crucifixion involved carrying the cross piece to where the upright was already in place. The person was then tied to the crossbar which was fixed, not up high as we are accustomed to seeing, but quite low down. Nails are then driven through the ankles into the sides of the upright. It was designed to be a long and painful death. Most would take 2 or 3 days to die. The body was low down so that scavenging dogs and carrion birds could remove the bones and there would be virtually nothing left to throw in a mass grave. The intention is clear – there is nothing left of that person or of what he stood for. On Jesus' cross was the sign 'King of the Judeans', intended by Pilate to mock both Jesus and his accusers. (Borg and Crossan)

Jesus' only words on the cross in Matthew are from Psalm 22. "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is one of the great Psalms of lamentation in which the poet, like Job, has trusted in God all his life and now feels totally abandoned by everyone and by God. But in the second half it is a paean of thanksgiving for deliverance. For both Mark and Matthew this is a statement that Jesus' suffering will yet be vindicated. That the Friday events are not all there is – there is more to come.

When Jesus dies the curtain of the temple is torn in two. A very special symbol that indicates something extraordinary has happened. The Holy of Holies, the place in the Temple where God resides, is now revealed. The Centurion declares "Truly this man was God's Son!" This is a statement that the Jerusalem and Roman authorities have failed in their attempts to eradicate Jesus from history. From a Roman's point of view, it is an acknowledgement that Jesus is in direct opposition to the emperor because 'Son of God' is one of Caesar's names.

Finally, it needs to be said that the synoptic Gospels all recount that the disciples, the men, desert Jesus before his crucifixion.

But the women remain.

They are with him in his humiliation, his agony and his death.

They are waiting.

They are still with him when he is laid in the tomb.

And they wait.

And they continue to wait...

We have been on a journey with Jesus. A journey filled with choices. Choices that Jesus had to make. Choices that the disciples had to make. Choices that the High Priest and powerful had to make. Choices that Pilate had to make.

On the journey you may have identified with one or more of these people and the choices that confront them.

Some may have had more meaning for you than others.

Some choices you may have found incomprehensible.

On the journey you may have recognized elements of our society or some other society.

Some problems may seem insurmountable.

Some issues may seem unjust.

We are left with the question, 'How do you react to this?' I will leave that for you to think about.

The journey we have taken is the journey of everyone who follows Jesus on the Way.

We walk with him. We fall asleep on the way. We fail.

We betray one another and deny Jesus. We grieve.

We are profoundly sorry.

And yet, the promise of transformation remains.