

The People on the edge of the Passion

A week of prayer to prepare for Holy Week

Introduction

Holy week is coming up very soon. During Holy Week we focus our attention upon the events leading up to the passion and death of Christ before celebrating the joy of his resurrection. There are many characters within the passion narratives of the gospels. Some of these characters are obvious. Pilate, Herod, and Judas all had important roles to play with the drama of our salvation and it is often useful to reflect upon their motives and actions because these teach us things about ourselves and help us to pray for our suffering world. Yet there are other characters hovering on the fringes of the biblical narratives who also have stories to tell and things to teach us. This prayer booklet focuses our attention upon some of these people. Many of these characters are completely silent. Other characters only have a sentence to say, and yet that sentence can be an important one as it was in the case of the centurion who sums up the nature of Christ within a few brief words at the foot of the cross.

This series of meditations is designed to be used over a week beginning on a Monday and finishing on a Sunday, but can be used anytime during the Lenten period. You may wish to use them during Holy Week. Each meditation contains a biblical passage, some thoughts upon the passage and some questions to think and pray about.

Monday + The Terrified man

Jesus came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

Immediately, while Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled." All of them deserted him and fled.

A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked. (Mark 14:39-51)

This mysterious young man only appears once in Marks gospel. Given that Mark is extremely economical with his words, the fact that he has devoted an entire sentence to this stranger is interesting and his identity has intrigued and puzzled Christians for centuries.

Some people say that the man was Mark himself, others think that he was another disciple such as James or John. The other puzzling fact is why is the man only wearing a loincloth? Some explain this by saying that he has been recently roused from slumber by the noise of the marching guards and is running to warn Jesus. Yet whoever this stranger was, he did not stay with Christ. He was so keen to get away from the arresting soldiers that he left all of his clothing behind him.



Pause for thought...

- Do you ever run away from difficult situations?
- When you do so, are you losing something? If so, what are you losing?
- What is it that makes you feel exposed or vulnerable?
- Share some of these thoughts with God in prayer, but in the knowledge that you are clothed and surrounded with the goodness and love of Christ himself.

Tuesday + Malchus

While Jesus was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? (Luke 22: 47-52)



I find this one of the most moving stories in the gospels. Jesus is in the middle a most terrifying experience. He is helpless; he is surrounded by brutal guards; he has just sweated blood whilst praying the garden of Gethsemane and he is at his most vulnerable.

Then Simon Peter tries to defend his master. St John amplifies these words of Luke and tells us that it was Peter who committed this crime and also gives this nameless slave a name, Malchus. Peter's defense of his master is brutal, clumsy and ultimately pointless. He strikes this slave of the high priest and cuts off his ear, maiming and scarring him. Yet Malchus is a slave. He has no choice but to obey the orders of his master who owns him as if he were a piece of property or be brutally punished himself.

This act of Peter is nasty and violent, more reminiscent of the ways of war, and so different to Christ's command to turn the other cheek. Yet, even in the midst of being arrested, Jesus has compassion for Malchus. He does not see a man who is threatening him, but rather a slave who has been injured and is bleeding in the garden, and so he offers his healing touch to the wounded man, restoring his ear to him. This is not just a healing act, it is an act of forgiveness and understanding, and what makes it so moving is that even at this most vulnerable point in his life, Jesus is thinking of others rather than himself.

Pause for thought...

- What other stories of Christian forgiveness have you heard lately?
- Is there anything or anyone you need to forgive?
- Pray for a greater awareness of the needs of other people around you. As you go about your daily life pray for the people you pass in the street or see in the supermarket.

Wednesday + The bullying soldiers

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. (Mark 15:16-20)



The context of this incident, (which is mentioned by all of the gospel-writers) is that Jesus has just been condemned to death and some soldiers (we do not know their story or motives) call together the whole cohort to bully this condemned man.

A cohort was a large number of soldiers, perhaps 600. This was not a small act of intimidation; it is a public and shameful spectacle. Many of us have seen the television footage or pictures of the coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Yet when we compare these images to this account of the “coronation” of Christ the awareness how shamefully he was treated strikes us afresh. Christ is crowned alone, with no supporters whatsoever; his crown is a twisted device of torture with two inch long thorns, a mockery of a victor’s laurel wreath; and he is bullied and saluted in jest. Yet the soldiers’ words “Hail, King of the Jews”, spoken in mockery, were actually true!

We can only wonder at the motives of these soldiers who did this; those who crowned him with thorns, gave him a reed as a sceptre and dressed him in a purple cloak. Were they all as evil as they seem? Perhaps some of the soldiers were as horrified as we are but were afraid to speak out and contradict those who had the power.

Pause for thought...

- Are there times when you are swayed by pressure from others into doing things you do not want to do?
- Are you afraid to speak out when you see injustice?
- Spend some time praying for innocent victims of oppressive regimes and prisoners of conscience.
- Ask God to help you have the courage to speak out against injustice when it is necessary to do so.

Thursday + Pilate’s wife

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time, they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So, after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." ... So, when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." (Matthew 27:15-19, 24)



We know the name of Pilate's wife from other historical documents. Her name was Claudia Procula, and it was said that she was a granddaughter of Augustus Caesar.

She is a puzzling figure within the passion narrative with her vivid dream about Christ's innocence and suffering. I find myself willing her to persuade Pilate to let Jesus go, and yet if her words had been truly heard and Pilate *had* let Jesus go, then the act of our salvation would not have taken place.

Despite her high class ancestry, she remains nameless in this narrative and her words are not truly listened to. She knows that Jesus is innocent and yet there is nothing that she can do to prevent him being crucified.

Pause for thought...

- Pray for women throughout the world who feel nameless, powerless, and voiceless.
- Are there times when you feel that your voice isn't being listened to?
- Do you truly listen to the voices of others? Resolve to listen to other people's voices, particularly the quieter voices around you.

Friday + The centurion

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Matthew 27: 50-54)



The centurion was charged to keep watch over Jesus. Given that centurions normally lead a cohort of one hundred soldiers it is curious that someone in such a senior position was charged to keep watch over a lowly condemned criminal. Perhaps the authorities were still a little afraid of Christ, even though he was helpless upon the cross. It must have been a grim task, watching while someone slowly bled, suffocated and died. Yet, at the moment of Christ's death, the signs accompanying his passing were so spectacular that this man calls Jesus the Son of God. Luke adds that the soldier "praised God" (Luke 23: 47)

We don't know for sure what happened to this particular centurion after these events. Did he become a follower of "The Way" of Christ? Or did he simply view Jesus as the son of a deity in a similar way to the heroes of ancient Greek and Roman legend?

Pause for thought...

- Pray for those who wait and watch by the dying today.
- Pray for those members of the armed forces and the general public who have had to witness terrible and traumatic events.
- Have you ever perceived the glory of God in an unusual place or at an unusual time? Give thanks for those moments in your life.

Saturday + Joseph of Arimathea

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. (John 19: 38-42)



There are many legends of Joseph of Arimathea such as the legend that he was Jesus' uncle and visited Glastonbury, but ultimately, we don't really know all that much about him. We know that he was a rich man and a prominent member of the Jewish council. We also know that he was a secret follower of Jesus, yet the death of Christ made Joseph step out of the shadows. We also know that Nicodemus and Joseph wrapped the body of Jesus with an enormous amount of spices. Perhaps the lavish nature of this generosity expresses the fact that they were trying to give him as royal a funeral as they could given the shortage of time before the Sabbath began. Yet this generosity perhaps expresses the levels of their devotion to him, especially as handling a dead body would make them ritually unclean and unable to participate in any of the Passover or Sabbath devotions. At this point in time Joseph has nothing to gain and everything to lose by publicly declaring his faith in Jesus, yet he courageously goes straight to Pilate and requests the body of Jesus. He is brave, generous, and humble, being willing to get his hands dirty to follow his master.

Pause for thought...

- Pray for those who have to be disciples of Christ in secret and those who risk their lives to follow Christ.
- Is God calling you to be more generous or courageous in your faith? How might you do this?

Sunday + Mary the wife of Clopas

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.' (John 19: 25-26)

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. (Matthew 27:55-56)

There were so many women standing at the foot of the cross. These two passages list just a few of them. Sometimes I wonder if the reason that Christ first appeared to these women after his resurrection was because they were the ones who had stayed and experienced the full horror of his crucifixion. Yet it was probably easier for them than for the men. They were not considered a threat by the Roman authorities and they were more easily able to melt into the background. Some biblical scholars link Clopas in this passage of John to Cleopas in the gospel of Luke.

Perhaps this Mary was therefore the other unnamed disciple on the Emmaus road. We do not know this for sure, but we do know that Mary, the wife of Clopas was faithful to Christ and stayed at the foot of the cross whilst he was dying, offering what help and comfort she could by her very presence in this place.



Pause for thought...

Sometimes the greatest thing we can do is to stay somewhere or stick to something, even though it is difficult to be there, or hard to watch.

- Pray for those who are determinedly staying in a difficult place at this moment in time.
- The word “consolation” comes from the Latin *con solus* being with the one who is alone. Think of someone who has been with you when you have gone through difficult times and give thanks for them.
- Ask God how you can be a better help and consolation to others.

Lent 2021