

Monday in Holy Week **John 19.1-16**

The Strength of the Cross

The next two evenings we focus on John's account of the suffering and death of Jesus, as told in his chapter 19. This evening we think about the strength of the cross – a surprising concept considering how weak Jesus was there, pinned down, nailed to the wood.

Listen for the power dynamics here in John's account of the events that lead up to the crucifixion: :

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.

Who is in charge here? Who is in control? The Romans? The Judeans? How is that control being exercised? By Pilate? By the Chief Priests? By the mob? Or the person standing still in the midst. The quiet one in the middle, around whom the storm is breaking?

Who is afraid? We know Jesus is afraid – or at least that he has been, as he had asked the Father to take this cup of suffering away. Who would not be. Jesus' divinity does not protect him from the fear that is only human.

But what is striking here is that the man supposedly in charge, Pontius Pilate – *he* is afraid. The emperor's representative is panicking.

He is afraid of the crowd and their shouting – and the things they are saying about him

He is afraid for his position – the mob are getting to him, shouting 'we have no king but Caesar!' Could the rabble actually be more loyal than his imperial majesty's representative?

He is also afraid of his conscience. He knows Jesus has done no wrong, and would have loved to find a way to release him. But he can't. Or cannot find the courage to do so.

Fear is a terrible motivator for those who hold authority. For those who have power. They fear losing their reputation. They are afraid of their time coming to a sticky end. It verges on paranoia. If they have stayed in power by treating people unfairly or cruelly, they can be sure there are people out to bring them down.

And we have our fears too, whoever we are, wherever we stand in the pecking order. Fear that others will take our place. Fear that we won't match up to others' expectations. Or even to our own expectations of ourselves. Fear of losing our grip. This can result in us treating others badly. And with justice not being done.

So whilst in the Gospel account of his last days, Jesus has all the moral authority, the moral strength, at the same time he is simply an easy target – the one who 'should die for the sake of the people' as the high priest had said. He is the expendable one, killed to stop a riot, to preserve the delicate power balance between Rome and Judea. So the one who the day before had taken the towel and washed his disciples feet, Jesus, who took the form of a servant, now takes the weakest place, the lowest place of all. If there is strength in the cross, it is not in manipulation, coercion, might, or control. The opposite is the case. The strength and authority of Jesus is in his capacity to stay there no matter what they do to him – it is his staying power. Staying true to justice and to truth itself. Challenging the powers that be.

I wonder if any of you have been to the Scottish island of Iona – the place where Irish monks set up a mission community from which most of northern England derives its Christian roots. It is a beautiful place, where the soft air of the western sea and the sound of the seabirds enfold the buildings and life of Iona Abbey, restored and renewed in recent years by the Iona Community. I went there as a student, on my own, and rough camped on top of the one hill on the island.

In the morning I went down to the Abbey outside which there stands a huge stone cross, known as St Columba's Cross, named after the first Abbot and leader of the monastery there.

I arrived just coach party of blind people arrived off the boat from the mainland. They were enjoying the sounds and scents of the sea, but could only imagine the scenes being described to them by their guide. But as their guide finished her description, she suggested, if they wished, they should go and feel for themselves in their hands the strength of the cross that had stood there since the days of the early saints. Then, one by one, and then in groups, these blind people stepped forward, and held, felt, and even hugged this cross. 'You can feel how strong it is.'

That image has never left me, and I leave it with you. Feel the strength of the cross. This week, know the power of the cross.

Not coercive. Not manipulative. But enduring, solid, reliable – there for you, for me.

The strength of God's wisdom and love. God's power revealed in weakness. The power of love to change lives, and to change the world. To follow Jesus is to find this strength, to feel it and know it for sure.

I have small Celtic crosses here to remind you of this. Something to hold close. Our hidden strength – Christ and him Crucified.

WE ADORE YOU O CHRIST AND WE BLESS YOU, BY YOUR HOLY CROSS YOU HAVE REDEEMED THE WORLD.