

Holy Week Compline Talks 2015

Monday 30 March Prof John Morris

The conflicts on the cross

Tonight we turn to conflicts on the cross. Some of you may be surprised to learn that we have more historically contemporary records of the crucifixion of Jesus than of his life, for which we really only have the four gospels, each of which records the crucifixion, but written at least 40 years later and Acts & St Paul. For the crucifixion we also have the Jewish historian Josephus, who writes “Pilate condemned him to be crucified” and the Babylonia Talmud Sanhedrin “On the eve of the Passover they hanged Yeshu”.

Crucifixion developed from the practice of hanging a criminal put to death by stoning (the Jewish death sentence). Under the Roman occupation of Judea crucifixion was a commonplace punishment for non-Romans, especially for disloyalty to the Emperor and State (“Are you the King of the Jews” asked Pilate). It is not unexpected therefore that Jesus was crucified with two thieves or bandits. Hundreds or even thousands more such malefactors met the same fate. Also, executions (whether Tudor in Wolf Hall, or modern in Saudi and elsewhere), can be a public spectacle and the gospels report various groups of people around the cross or ‘at a distance’. All gospels mention Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross, only Luke mentions Jesus words to the women of Jerusalem on the way to Golgotha.

In the Gospels, the evangelists find not a single Jew (passer-by or priest) to say a kind word about Jesus; the offer of vinegar, or of wine mixed with gall was more likely to come from a desire to prolong some awareness and see if Elijah would come and save Jesus, than any pity. All the gospels but not Luke mention the soldiers casting lots for Jesus garments, but since this is said to fulfil the scriptures and Romans did not wear Jewish clothing this is probably a later addition.

In Mark, the earliest gospel, conflict with the onlookers is reported “And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying ‘Aha, you who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross’. So also the chief priests and scribes saying ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the ‘King of Israel’ come down from the cross that we may see and believe’. Mark also has the two robbers reviling Jesus.

As usual, Matthew follows Mark rather closely, but adds “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him; for he said “I am the Son of God”.

The compassionate Luke has two interesting additions – possibly of his own creation. The first comes after “there they crucified him” with Jesus saying “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” – however, exactly who the “they” are is apparently not clear. Most think that the evangelists imply the Jews, as this would be in harmony with the views of the early church (Peter says something very similar in Acts that the Jews acted out of ignorance). Interestingly Jesus’s statement, so typical of his thought as revealed in the Gospels, is not in any other gospel narrative of the crucifixion and is also absent from some editions of Luke. Also, although one criminal says “are you not the Christ, save yourself and us”. Not a surprising statement perhaps – how often when we find ourselves with a problem of our own making do we look for someone else to help us out of the mess.

But then the other rebukes him saying “Do you not fear God, seeing you are under the same sentence? And we indeed justly for we are receiving the due reward of our sins, but this man has done nothing wrong” And he said “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.” To which Jesus replies “Truly I say to you today you will be with me in paradise”.

Similar sentiment to Jesus gospel statements “In my Father’s house are many mansions – if it were not so I would have told you so” and “I go to prepare a place for you”.

John, says that Jesus mother and her sister and the disciple whom Jesus loved (probably James a son of Zebedee) were at the cross but does not mention any chief priests. John also has the touching story of Jesus commending the disciple to his mother and vice versa “and from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.” Again – the care that Jesus showed for others write large.

Why might the onlookers have thought that the miracle-working prophet Elijah might come to save Jesus? There was a widespread believe that the return of the Messiah would be preceded by the return of others such as Elijah. Hence they misinterpreted Jesus cry “with a loud voice” Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani? “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The meaning is the same as the opening of Hebrew psalm 22 with which the listeners would have been familiar from synagogue readings. However, interestingly the evangelists give the words not in Hebrew, but in Aramaic – Jesus’ native tongue. Here then, is potentially the last and greatest conflict for Jesus – believing throughout his life in his mission as God’s chosen son and messenger (though not in any sense the Jewish expectation of a warrior or king messiah), and even though the gospels have Jesus repeatedly preparing his disciples for his suffering, we can only guess at what was going through his mind as it became clear that he was to die on the cross. All of us in extremis might well be tempted to use the same phrase. Could it have been a phrase to express religious incomprehension at the time? – we shall never know. Matthew, Mark and Luke all report one last cry before death, but only Luke gives it as a peaceful parting prayer ‘Father into thy hands I commend my spirit’. Interestingly, all three synoptic gospels record the Roman Centurion, head of the execution squad and a gentile to boot, saying that Jesus was ‘a son of God’ or ‘an innocent man’ – further evidence of the approach of the early church to exonerate the Romans and place the guilt on the Jews.

However, this Lent, as Christians we should not leave the last conflict of doubt in his mission “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani” as the last word, but look forward to the resurrection on Easter day. Whatever Christ felt as the death of his mortal body rapidly approached, we are the people of the resurrection, and believe that the death of the physical body is a prelude to a greater, if unknowable life in the presence of our Lord. That is not to say as some do that this earthly life is merely a prelude – it is our chance to carry on Christ’s work. But, whatever conflicts life throws in our direction, that is the great hope of the good news of the Christian message.