

## Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer

Prof John Morris, Wednesday of Holy Week, April 8<sup>th</sup>

9: *Prayer and the cross*; Psalms 91, 134; Chapter 3; Collects 1,2,3,7

Tonight, we have to move on from the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus' arrest to his trials and crucifixion. Unlike the gospel accounts of Jesus in Gethsemane, where there is really very little difference between the various gospel accounts, even a cursory reading of the gospels reveal many discrepancies in the accounts of Jesus' trial(s) and crucifixion, particularly the trial or trials. This is hardly surprising: none of those who were close to Jesus, or those who later writers might have sought information from, were present at any of the trials. Furthermore, in most accounts, it seems that Jesus said very little during either the trials or crucifixion, so we have few of his own words - words which might have been deeply etched into the minds of his followers - to guide our thinking. We do know, from contemporary writers such as Josephus, that Jesus was condemned to the Roman form of execution - crucifixion - by Pilate, and I suggest that the best approach to the gospel accounts of the words of Jesus in the last hours of his earthly life is to understand that the gospel writers were trying to present what the early church considered especially important aspects of Jesus life and teaching.

As I've already said, in most gospels Jesus says almost nothing during his various trials. In fact, interrogations might be a better word for the encounters with the high priests and Herod, because it was only the Romans who could pronounce a sentence of crucifixion. In the oldest gospel, that of Mark, it is only when Caiaphas asks "Are you the messiah, the son of the blessed one? (Caiaphas cannot of course speak the name of God) that Jesus answers "I am", then continues "and you will see the son of man seated at the right hand of God (literally 'the Power') and coming with the clouds of heaven". In Matthew and Luke, it is only the first part of Jesus' response to Caiaphas' question that differs: in Matthew Jesus says "The words are yours" and Luke "It is you who say that I am". So here, either directly or obliquely, Jesus is clearly stating his claim to be the messiah. And not only stating it, but continuing with a phrase that the Jewish authorities regarded as blasphemy and deserving death by stoning. Previously, you will remember that, when Peter blurts out that Jesus is the messiah, he is told not to say it openly. Luke's gospel has an additional interrogation by Herod, sent by Pilate because Galilee was in Herod's jurisdiction. Herod had clearly heard of Jesus and, apparently, hoped to see Jesus perform a miracle, but here again Jesus did and said nothing. What we learn from the Jewish trials is Jesus' clear statement that he is the messiah, one seated at God's right hand.

Of course, it was only in interrogations by the Jewish authorities that the question of Jesus' messiahship would be at all relevant. Pilate, to whom Jesus was taken in chains by the Jewish authorities, was only interested in worldly power and the possibility of a Jewish insurrection (an ongoing problem in Palestine at the time). It is only when Pilate asks him "Are you the king of the Jews" that Jesus speaks, saying "The words are yours". Otherwise in Mark, Jesus is entirely silent. In John, when Pilate asks the same question Jesus gives a similar brief answer "Is that your own idea or did others suggest it to you", to which Pilate blusters "Am I a Jew?", and John continues with a lengthy speech by Jesus saying that his Kingdom is not of this world. The Romans were clearly only concerned for their own power and authority. They weren't concerned about messiahship - they had their own pantheon - and having one itinerant preacher crucified was, in their minds, no price at all to pay if civil unrest could be prevented.

So Pilate had Jesus flogged and led away to be crucified, a bystander being forced to carry the cross.

On way to Golgotha, we have just one account of Jesus speaking briefly to the wailing onlookers; "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me. Weep for yourselves and your children". We, too, do not need to weep for Jesus, but for our sins and the sins of the world that led him to the cross.

Before being nailed to the cross Jesus was stripped, and all four gospels report the soldiers gambling for his clothes – here, there is no uncertainty because everyone watching could see. Crucifixions clearly drew crowds of onlookers and we are told that at least some of the disciples were watching at a distance. Before being nailed to the cross Jesus was also offered, but apparently refused 'wine mixed with gall' i.e. drugged wine. The 'gall' may have been hemlock, which Socrates used for his suicide, and which is known to dull the sensation from the hands and feet, or myrrh, which Roman soldiers often added to wine to deaden pain and help them endure the discomforts of military life. Why did Jesus refuse the narcotic drink? – perhaps so that he could keep praying to his Father; perhaps because in his divine nature he felt the need to experience the extremes of human pain. John Keble put it like this "Thou wilt feel all that thou might'st pity all" Jesus, deliberately choosing to experience the pain of crucifixion as the price for our redemption – his last selfless act of love.

When he was being nailed to the cross Jesus said "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Most rank and file Roman soldiers given this task would have had no interest in the religious beliefs of the Jews – so in terms of history, there is little to learn. In contrast, we can take comfort from this prayer of Jesus that we, too, may be forgiven our sins, but often we do not have the excuse that we did not know what we were doing – we were just either too weak or too selfish.

On the cross, Jesus speaks with the criminals crucified on either side, who appear to know one another, but who react very differently. One says "If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us" – a simple "Save me". But the other "Have you no fear of God; we're being justly punished for our crimes, but this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come to your kingdom" to which he receives the assurance "today you shall be with me in paradise". How often, when we are in trouble, are we guilty of thinking solely of our own safety, rather than asking for Jesus's help?

Jesus' concern for his disciples is probably never more clearly shown than when he saw his mother and the 'disciple who he loved' and he said "Here is your mother" and "Here is your son". We should have no doubt of Jesus' love for us and, if we aspire at the end to be with him in paradise, we should respond by acting out our discipleship.

And, finally, just before he died, Jesus says two very different things. "My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?"; the truly human cry of the Jesus' humanity. Would we not feel just the same? But also we see the divine aspect of Jesus, with his total confidence in God as his father "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit". All we can aspire to do, through faith, is to develop that same deep sense of God as our father that, when our own end approaches, we can commit ourselves trustingly into his eternal care. And we can only develop that deep sense of God's fatherhood with the help of the holy spirit and by prayer, deepening our faith in Jesus, so that we can echo, with confidence the words of the watching centurion "Truly, this man Jesus was God's son".