

MEDITATIONS LED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW – HOLY WEEK 2019

Introduction

I find preaching at Easter difficult. The temptation is to get into technicalities – bogged down with terms like sacrifice, atonement, redemption, ransom - trying through human ideas to explain what God in Jesus was doing ‘for us’ on the cross. All these ideas, metaphors, have their value, but all are unsatisfactory in one way or another. So, in our Easter liturgies, the Church involves us in another way – by experiencing. Already we have taken part in the Palm Sunday procession, we’ve heard the dramatised Passion reading. Later this week we’ll have our Walk of Witness through the streets of Hershams, and our Vigil service with its light and dark, silence and noise, and splashing water.

Tonight, and over the next two nights, I want to explore another way of putting ourselves in the events. I’m going to tell the story of Jesus’ Passion through the eyes of some of the participants – I have tried to be faithful to the biblical record but, in the tradition of the Jewish rabbis and *lectio divina*, have given myself permission to fill some of the gaps, to help us imagine ourselves into the characters.

So this evening, I want you to imagine yourself in a tavern in Jerusalem somewhere on the wrong side of town. It’s very late and at the end of the bar is a man more than a little the worse for wear, his name is Judas. He wants you to hear his story.

Monday - Judas’ story

I’ve been here in this stinking tavern all night – trying to deaden the pain.

A group of soldiers came in earlier (Romans) – noisy, sweaty, dirty – caked with blood, and worse. Been on execution duty and shouting about today’s deaths – revelling in the distaste of us more squeamish Jews as they went on about the gory details of pain and fear. Talking about Jesus – laughing at his less than athletic physique, and the ludicrous things he’d said:

- As they banged in the nails - “Father forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing” – as if - they knew only too well (and so I thought did I).
- And to his fellow miscreant – “Today you’ll be with me in Paradise” – in Hell more like (and me too).

Oddly, though, their centurion (rough fellow – seen him before) wasn’t joining in the fun – sat at the end of the bar – quietly sipping his sour wine – deep in his own thoughts.

Forgiveness – how could he forgive them – what right had he got to forgive – how can I forgive myself?

I’ve been with him, on and off, for three years. Over that time, I had my hopes. Can you keep a secret (not that it matters now)? I used to be a bit of a rebel – well more than a bit. The clue’s in the name – Judas, son of Simon Iscariot – some think the name means we came from Kerioth – well we did but, here’s the joke, it echoes the

name of our little band of assassins, the Sicarii – sneaking around in the wilderness, bumping off the odd wandering Roman or fellow traveller.

But low-level guerrilla warfare may be fun, but it's pretty counterproductive – encourages the Romans to come in heavy, and drives the villagers into the arms of Herod and his quislings. No, what we need is a real uprising and for that we need a leader, someone charismatic – and I really thought Jesus might be the one:

- Boy did he draw the crowds!
- Without going too far, he'd hint at being a potential king, an anointed one (Messiah in our language) and like all kings under the protection of his God – his 'son' if you like.
- They doted on him. Were you around last Sunday – when he rode into Jerusalem? The people went wild – pity he was riding a donkey rather than a war charger, he'd only have had to say the word (and to have had some swords in stock) and bang – the uprising, the new Jerusalem – goodbye Herod, goodbye Pilate, hello Son of David.
- But no, he seemed not to know his own power or, if he did, he seemed almost to lay it aside.
- What a disappointment – what else could you call it but cowardice in the face of such possibilities?

You know, I did like him and I think he liked me. After all, he chose me as one of his twelve, his inner circle. Mind you, they were a funny old mixed bunch:

- Peter – impetuous, always shooting his mouth off without the least understanding of what he was on about.
- James and John (with their ambitious mother) dreaming about cabinet positions in the new regime – without the least idea of what it takes to seize power.
- Thomas, old misery boots, always assuming the worst.

And all those women – Jesus could have had any of them – perhaps he did for all I know. That hussy Mary from Bethany – pretty little thing - all over him like a rash, wasting good money on fancy gifts.

But still, odd bunch as were, we might have formed some sort of court around the new king. I'd have made a good Chancellor of the Exchequer – I understand these money things. If only he'd listened to me ..., but instead all that natural authority wasted:

- Enough of a nuisance to the authorities to get himself noticed.
- Not enough of a nuisance to be effective.

Pity, because there are some real men out there – Barabbas – now he would have been a good member of the team, but he moved too quickly – should have built up his

power before the strike – free again now of course - so, if we could link him up with my old mates in the hills

But getting back to Jesus, he was becoming dangerous – he had to be stopped, so I popped in for a word with the priests – not my favourites, a shifty lot, but they know which side their bread's buttered - for the time being for the purpose of the revolution, what shall I call them - 'useful idiots':

- Keeping the peace, while we get ready.
- Not letting Herod and his family of degenerates get above themselves.
- Not giving Pilate his longed-for excuse to put the city to the sword.

So I had a gentle word in their ears, and I must have struck a chord because all unasked for out came a nice little bag of shiny stuff to sweeten my path. Of course, my idea wasn't to get him killed, just get him put away somewhere safe while things cooled down. So, find a quiet, dark secluded spot, a quick kiss to identify their man, and all done and dusted while the revolution looks for someone fit to be a real King of Israel.

then it all got a bit disconcerting:

- Jesus seemed to know what I was up to. Perhaps he's more subtle than I thought – perhaps he has his own spies – I've never been sure of that bloke Joseph from Arimathea – seems to have a foot in all the camps – could he have been whispering in Jesus' ear?
- And then Jesus kept banging on about his own probable death as if it was in some sense an object in itself - part of a bigger plan.
- And then, to cap it all, that final meal. Jesus follows his girlfriend's example and starts washing feet – like a servant. Wouldn't catch me doing that – I've got some pride!
- And then, at the meal itself, he starts wittering about the bread and wine as if it were his body and blood. He passes round the bread and the cup as we always do, but for me he takes a lump of bread, soaks it in the bloody juices of the lamb and pops it into my mouth. And then, cool as a cucumber, he sends me off "to do what you must do" – as if he knew, as if it was his plan, as if I was dancing to his tune.

But no, it ran according to my plan – I collected the boys in blue from the Temple, Jesus and the others went off to their night prayers, and a quick kiss, a brief skirmish and he's bang to rights. I only wish that, as they dragged him off, he hadn't turned and looked at me – he almost smiled.

But then it all got out of hand. Whether he's before the priests, Herod or Pilate, Jesus messes it up – refuses to defend himself - and the charges escalate to something capital – he gets himself condemned to death.

And I'm condemned as well, but to what?

- I've achieved what I wanted – he's out of the way – the field is clear for the revolution. So why does it feel like defeat?
- Why do I feel I got it all wrong?
- However much of this wine I drink, why do I keep tasting that bread and gravy that tastes like flesh and blood?
- Why do I keep hearing those words – “Do what you need to do”, when I want to hear “Father forgive him”?
- Why do I know I'm in Hell and will never, not today or ever “be with him in Paradise”?

Perhaps in a couple of days it will all look different, perhaps in a couple of days the light will return, but I don't think I've got that long. His death is on my hands and, as long as he's remembered, everyone will know it. I can't carry that burden. What if I've betrayed the only one who could have saved us? How could he ever forgive me? I cannot forgive myself.

This wine seems to have lost its effect. It's nearly morning - I must be ... gone. There's something I must do.

Tuesday - Caiaphas' story

How did I Caiaphas come to be High Priest of Israel; couldn't I have avoided this job? It's certainly not easy. On one hand, I'm supposed to be the expert in temple ritual and a model of religious purity, but on the other hand I always seem to be up to my neck in politics – messy, vicious power-politics.

As you probably realise, these days, there are three strands to power in Israel:

- First of course come the Romans - cold, brutal, dispassionate. We all know that in reality they could crush our little nation without even breaking into a sweat, but it suits them to maintain at least a semblance of local authority.
- And so they let Herod and his crew strut around as Kings of Judea – ghastly bunch, mad as hatters, and of course not really Jews by either blood or behaviour, but it suits the Emperor to have them there as puppets to do some of his dirty work – and as a counterweight to any Zealots who want to fight for real independence.
- And then there's us, the High Priests, trying to hold the ring. According to the scriptures our office goes back all the way to Jacob's son Levi and on down through Moses' brother Aaron, all the way to the present day. Other nations often see their King or Emperor as the main link with their god, the *Pontifex Maximus* (great bridge-builder) as the Romans call it, but for us Jews the role

of High Priest has changed over time. Sometimes we've just been the head of the Temple, sometimes we've been the King's closest advisor, but in the time of the Greek supremacy, under the Maccabees, some of my predecessors were even called *Ethnarch* – ruler of the race.

But now, as I say, the ultimate power lies with Rome. When my father-in-law Annas blotted his copy book some 20 years back, it was the Roman Procurator Valerius Gratus who stepped in and set me in his place. But the Romans were clever about it - as a member of Annas' family I had at least some rightful claim to succeed him. What's more, rather than sending old Annas off for a short, painful and doubtless terminal spell in the galleys, they let him stay on as a sort of High Priest Emeritus, no real power, but enough of a presence to keep the traditionalist old guard in their place (nice model that, you might want to try it with religious leaders in your days).

And so I'm involved in high politics, but I'm also a High Priest:

- I'm in charge of the worship in the Temple here in Jerusalem.
- I'm the only one allowed to enter the Holy of Holies to make sacrifices – to atone for the people – to try to wash away their sins.
- Some even say that by my office I've inherited a power of prophesy, but frankly I've never felt the inclination for that sort of thing – the age of prophesy is past – the focus today must be on survival.

So, to put it in a word, as I see it my job is one of preservation – to preserve the nation's cultural inheritance, to keep the Jewish faith and people pure – in a simple phrase, to keep the Temple standing.

And that's not easy. Even setting aside the Roman occupation and the Herodians, we Jews are a disparate, argumentative lot. We've got:

- The Pharisees.
- The Sadducees.
- Those lunatic Essenes out in the desert.
- The followers of that Baptism-fanatic John. We thought Herod had dealt with him a couple of years back, but the rump of his followers are still there by the Jordan and up in Samaria.

And then we've got the Jesus-freaks – possibly the most dangerous of all - but that Jesus is really difficult to tie down. Most of what he teaches is ok ish, a bit on the liberal side in his interpretation of the Law, but not much that's not within the broad sweep of Jewish thought. Much of it's based on Isaiah, so nothing to charge him with there. No, the problem's not what he teaches, but rather who he seems to claim to be, or perhaps who his followers claim him to be:

- Some of them see him as a messiah, a chosen future king, and that certainly puts the cat amongst the Roman and Herodian pigeons. We just about got away with it last Sunday when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, but another public demonstration like that and anything could happen.

- And so far as we priests are concerned, we've really got a problem with what he seems to believe about himself. He's never quite said as much, but he seems to think that he's got a closer relationship with God than even I have – sees himself as some sort of a Great High Priest. And his claimed special relationship with God seems a pretty disrespectful one. Of course, our all-powerful, unknowable, unnameable God is in a sense Father of us all, but that doesn't mean we can go around calling him *Abba*, 'Daddy'!

And then there are all these silly credulous stories about miracles – no, politically and for the spiritual health of the nation, Jesus has got to go.

Fortunately, we've got some spies in his camp. Even Jerusalem is a small town compared to the great cities of Rome and Athens – everyone knows everyone here. Judas has certainly been useful – we know his background as a rebel which gives us a lever over him, but actually all it needed was a purse of silver to buy his co-operation, and we've got other contacts as well.

So, with one thing and another, and not least that ludicrous story about Jesus raising that guy Lazarus from the dead, we got talking. The Council, however, was not of one mind. Indeed, I've got a pretty good idea that, just like we've got spies in his camp, Jesus has got the odd sleeper in ours. Well actually it's more than a suspicion - old Joseph from Arimathea, one of our Council, thinks he's below the radar, but we know he's secretly one of Jesus' sect. So, as we met in Council, the conversation swung back and forth as we struggled to come to a conclusion. I'm afraid I'm not a great orator, but for once I found the right words – I found myself saying that "it would be better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed". No idea where that came from, I'm not usually one for the neat phrase, it just came to me from somewhere, and its ring of truth carried the day.

So we slipped Judas his little bag of coins, and last night the plan went into action. The timing wasn't ideal, the run-up to the Passover and all that, but beggars can't be choosers and we needed to move fast as things were getting out of hand. The arrest itself went pretty smoothly – there were stories about some hothead waving a sword about and cutting off one of my servants' ears, but I've counted their ears and divided by two and there are none left over!

Annas had the first go at questioning Jesus. But the cheeky so-and-so wouldn't answer clearly – in one way at least he's a typical Jew, answering one question with another. Infuriating though – one of the lads gave him a bit of a slap, and then they brought him to me.

Again, we ran around the houses, but finally he spoke words of such blasphemy – describing himself as the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God – such blasphemy that, if it had been just down to me, I would have condemned him on the spot. But, of course, everyone had to be involved, so I had to send him on to Pilate, and Pilate sent him to Herod. Pilate tried to wriggle out of it, of course (no guts that man), but when we got the mob to shout for his death, Jesus' fate was sealed.

I must admit, however, to having a few qualms about all this. It tastes a bit too strongly of *realpolitik* and, even if Jesus is deluded about God, he does seem a decent human being – does he really deserve that ghastly death? But then my own words

come back to comfort me – “Better that one man should die for the people than the whole nation be destroyed”. My own words – I suppose they must have been ...

Still the story's nearly over now and, although I'm no prophet, there's one thing I can predict with confidence – in another 40 years no one will remember that man Jesus and, most importantly, the Temple will still be standing!

Wednesday - Malchus' story

You may be surprised to hear me say it, but I Malchus, slave of the High Priest Caiaphas, am actually quite content with my lot. To you who live in softer times, freedom to go where you like and do what you want is perhaps important, but I'm at least free from want, and free from ambition. I get three meals a day, a new set of clothes every year or two, and a blanket and a straw mattress to rest my bones at the end of the day. There are many worse off than me.

Of course, there are slaves and slaves. I was fortunate to pick up a bit of learning from my old dad, who was quite a scholar before he was taken captive in one of those Greek skirmishes and became a slave himself. So I can read and write a bit, and that raised my price when as a youngster I was sold off and found myself the property of Caiaphas. I gather you met him last night – not just a priest - quite the politician, shrewd and a bit ruthless - but a fair man in his way, provided you don't cross him. So I keep my head down, jump when he says 'jump' and endeavour to make myself indispensable – and so far it's worked. That said, I suppose in the background there's always the feeling that I'm somehow not seen as quite human. Different rules apply to us slaves – under Roman law, if we're called to give evidence in court it's always done under torture in case our loyalty to our master's too strong to let us speak the truth, and of course if we run away we risk the ultimate penalty reserved for the lowest of the low – crucifixion. But I try not to think about that.

Yes, many slaves are worse off than I am. Think of the poor souls in the galleys or in the mines – worked to death – useful while their muscles hold out, thrown on the scrapheap (literally) when they're too weak to justify their keep. Worst of all, the gladiators – mere meat for the slaughter - for the entertainment of the Roman mob.

No, my life's a lot better than that, but some slaves have really made it. In theory, we can own our own property and, if our master's generous, even put some money aside. I've known of one or two who over the years have saved up enough to buy their freedom – 'manumission' the Romans call it, or in more everyday language 'redemption' – if your master agrees, you can pay off your market value, the debt which holds you in slavery, and hey presto you're a free man. Sounds a bit scary actually, after many years a slave. But you've probably heard of Tiro, Cicero's slave and secretary. He was really clever, almost as clever as Cicero himself. Cicero, the greatest orator, politician and advocate of all time. Only problem was he spoke so fast that poor old Tiro couldn't keep up – had to invent something called 'shorthand' to get everything down as the words poured out. Anyway, Tiro was so valuable to his master that he accumulated enough cash not only to buy his freedom, but to settle down on his own country estate with a nice young wife – not many of us can aspire to that!

But there's another advantage of being a slave, and that's that we are, to all intents and purposes, invisible. Not quite human, we're part of the furniture, always there in

the background but, unless needed for some specific purpose, ignored. And so we see and hear a lot, sometimes things which would never be exposed to the critical gaze or ears of a free man. Generally, we try to keep schtum, but you have asked about this bloke Jesus and, seeing he's now dead and buried, I guess there's no harm in telling what I know – a lot of it's in the public domain anyway.

As you can imagine, I spend quite a lot of time going back and forth to the Temple – perhaps collecting something Caiaphas, or more likely his old father-in-law Annas, has left behind in the vestry, or perhaps tracking down some junior priest and summoning him to a meeting with the great man. I don't know if you've been to the Temple - I suppose that as Gentiles, you'd not be allowed beyond the outer courtyard, so you might imagine the Temple's a lovely quiet, peaceful, prayerful place, but actually it's quite noisy - animals for sacrifice need to be sold, and slaughtered, pagan money has to be changed for shekels, and there're always several groups of Pharisees, Sadducees and other opinionated rabbis and religious know-all's battling it out, interpreting the finer points of the Talmud. And that's where I first came across Jesus, with his scruffy little group of provincial hangers-on, rubber-necking at the new building works, but also drawing their own crowd of listeners – sometimes quietly teaching, but often loudly slagging off the establishment, and particularly the Pharisees – and people, lots of people, were listening.

And so it was that last week he came back to Jerusalem. I was doing a spot of shopping for the master, and could scarcely get to the market. The place was in uproar with people behaving as if the Messiah had come, screaming “hosanna”, laying out their best clothes and palm branches for Jesus' donkey to walk on, and mess over. And, if that wasn't bad enough, a bit after that, Jesus completely lost it in the Temple, running amok, knocking over tables and shouting at the honest tradesmen. I took the liberty of telling my master about that! And apparently Jesus had got previous - this wasn't the first time he'd disturbed the peace like that – once three years ago, and again last week – some people never learn!

And so I told my master – and he looked like thunder! Apparently, he'd already been collecting evidence to arrest Jesus and this was the last straw – the risk of civil unrest and Roman reprisals was simply too great. As I've said, Caiaphas is generally a fair man, but later that night at the Council I heard him say to them that in his view it would be better if Jesus was done away with rather than the whole people come to a sticky end.

So, a plot was hatched, and I played my little part, passing messages back and forwards to our man Judas, who was pretending to be one of Jesus' followers, but was actually in our pay. The plot was hatched – the arrest planned. Not that Caiaphas would get his own hands dirty No, he sent me, the invisible Malchus, along to keep an eye on what happened, while the Temple Police made the arrest.

It was really dark when we got to the garden and, at first, I thought our prey might slip away before we could spot him, but Judas knew his voice and recognised his shadow and so was able to pick him out for us. But things didn't quite go according to plan. I was just there to watch, but in the confusion somehow found myself in the centre of the action. One of Jesus's gang was a bit of a hothead and started waving a sword around. I'm not as agile as I was, couldn't duck in time, and suddenly I felt this terrible pain at the side of my head. I thought he'd cut my ear off – indeed in a flash of

torchlight I thought I saw it lying on the ground in a pool of blood, but a moment later Jesus himself called his guys off, and all I felt was a warm tingle and, when I got home, not a scratch. The imagination does strange things doesn't it!

Now I'm not going to tell you all about the legal hearings that followed – before my master, the Council, old Annas, Herod and Pilate. I was there for some of it myself, but you've already heard about all that from my master. But there is one more part of the story I can perhaps tell you. I wasn't there myself, but I heard about it later from my niece. (Yes, we slaves do have families and, if we're lucky, some of us serve the same master.) It was late that night, actually nearly dawn. Jesus was in custody and the arrest party and other hangers-on were out in the courtyard, just to be on the safe side in case anyone tried to spring our prisoner. Among them was my niece Miriam – I'm afraid to say a rather loud-mouthed young hussy, always up for a bit of banter with the more personable guards. They were all huddled around a charcoal brazier trying to keep warm, when a stranger sidled up – heaven knows how he got in. Disreputable looking character, looked as if he'd been living on the streets for a couple of years, and a bit blood-spattered according to Miriam – definitely a fishy character she told me. And somehow familiar. And then when he spoke, she recognised the Galilean accent and realised that he must be one of Jesus' troop of followers. In her usual sassy way, she challenged him, and of course he denied it. Others kept badgering him and again and again he said he didn't know Jesus. And then, just as the cock crowed, the first beam of sunlight fell on a window in the house, and there was Jesus looking out, down into the courtyard. Miriam said she might have expected him to look sorry for himself in view of the horrors he faced, but she says that isn't what she saw. He was sorry sure enough but, as she saw it, sorry for his friend, or even for her. But when she looked back to the light of the brazier, the Galilean stranger had gone and, when she looked back at the window, so had Jesus.

So, as far as I go, that's the end of the story. Some of my mates went along to the crucifixion, but I've no stomach for such things – one day, if I'm unlucky, if I can't stand my master any longer and try to run away, that's a penalty I might have to suffer – why should I remind myself of that possibility by watching someone else paying that price?

But I can't put it all entirely out of my mind. I'm sorry, I keep touching this ear, as if I'm making sure it's still there – what was that pain, did Jesus touch me, what was that tingle? Could I have been healed? And I feel really unsettled - can I really spend the rest of my life like this, a slave to my master, afraid to step out of line, afraid of freedom? Perhaps I should start thinking of buying my freedom, my redemption, but it's horribly expensive – if only I knew someone who would bear the cost.....