

## **SERMON FOR GOOD FRIDAY 2024**

God of wisdom, grant, we pray, that the words we have heard today may be grafted in our hearts so that they may bear much fruit for your Kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

One of the interesting aspects of our commemoration and celebration of the great three days of the Christian year, is how we as Christians respond to the world around us during this time. No doubt there will be many sermons preached and many discussions had about how our society, while it takes advantage of a four-day long weekend at the beginning of the school holidays, more or less ignores what we Christians are up to this weekend. There will be much hand-wringing to be had today about the footy matches being played this afternoon and this evening on this sacred day.

But I wonder of the events of nearly 2000 years ago in Jerusalem were any different. As pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem for the Passover, no doubt there were caravans everywhere blocking the roads and slowing down traffic. The markets would have been bustling with activity with locals complaining about all the tourists around the place.

Meanwhile, crowds would have been gathering to watch the spectacle of a wandering Galilean preacher, Jesus of Nazareth, being put to death just outside the city. The usual crowd of grisly sightseers would have been keen to see the action. After his gruesome exhibition was over, no doubt the crowds would have dispersed and gone home to get on with life as usual. And the same goes for the following day, as people would have gone about their usual observance of the Sabbath while the Gentiles in town did their usual activities, ignoring local religious custom in the process.

No doubt the talk of the town would have been the crucifixions. No doubt people would have remembered things differently. Some would remember Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" and recalled a beaten, bloodied and pitiful figure hanging there. Some perhaps would have recalled seeing a more noble character, seeing through the blood a strong and gracious individual, worthy, not of contempt, but admiration.

That is certainly the picture you get from the four gospels. John's Jesus is strikingly different than the one portrayed by the three other evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke and nowhere is this more striking than in the garden. In the descriptions of the Passion provided the other three evangelists, there is always a moment of agonizing self-doubt when Jesus asks, even begs, his heavenly Father to remove from him the possibility of suffering and death, but then Jesus comes through this moment of testing and doubt by affirming, "not my will, but yours, be done". There is no doubt in John's portrayal of Jesus. Quite the opposite. It is not just a few guards or temple police that come for Jesus, but an entire Roman cohort of 480 soldiers. And when they answer Jesus' bold question, "Who are you looking for?" Jesus replies with the Greek form of the divine name, "I Am." At this pronouncement, the whole cohort is thrown to the ground. Though they have come to arrest Jesus with weapons they are powerless in his presence and fall prostrate as if in worship.

When Peter tries to defend him by attacking one with his sword, Jesus orders him to put away his weapon and asks, "Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?"

Jesus, it is clear, gives himself up by his own choice. This is the mission and destiny for which he has been born.

Another example is John's portrayal of the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. In John's account, he bends to the will of the crowd and agrees to have Jesus crucified even as he declares Jesus' innocence. Pilate is a complicated figure, trapped by forces larger than he can imagine. He scornfully, or is it wistfully asks, "What is truth?" Ironically, he is standing in the presence of truth.

Yet another example is that Jesus needs no help carrying his cross in John's gospel. Simon of Cyrene is not mentioned in John. And throughout John's passion, the cross is not Jesus' moment of humiliation, but rather of his glory. When Jesus is on the cross. Jesus utters no cry of despair in John but instead fulfils prophecy, makes domestic arrangements for his mother, and finally dies saying, "It is finished." But our English translation doesn't accurately convey what Jesus is saying at this crucial moment. Jesus is really saying, "It is accomplished" or as we like to say in a more modern style, "Mission accomplished!"

The great irony of John's passion is that in Jesus we see God's strength, majesty, and might revealed amid the pain and humiliation of crucifixion. While there is tremendous value in the more "human" portrayal of Jesus in Mark or the more compassionate Jesus in Luke, John's depiction of the Passion of our Lord reminds us that, ultimately, Jesus is Lord.

It's important though to keep in mind that the portrayal of Jesus in John's gospel isn't of the strongman who in spite of being crucified, remains in charge throughout. John still portrays Jesus as the one who triumphs through love. For Jesus is, in John, the Good Shepherd, the one who gives his life for his sheep, who triumphs through love, and who gives his life for the world God loves so much.

Perhaps the comfort we can draw from John's portrayal of Jesus is that when we feel most vulnerable, most broken, most hopeless, it may be that John's picture of Jesus will remind us that God in Jesus joins us in absolute solidarity by taking on our life, even to the point of death.

Today, while the world goes on around us as if nothing is happening, we remember that vulnerability is more powerful than violence, forgiveness and self-giving love are more powerful than hate and that God's promise of life is stronger even than death.