

Good Friday 2023 - Three Hours' Devotion Address 2

READING 2

Matthew 26:47-68

The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus

47 While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. 48 Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him." 49 And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Hail, Master!" And he kissed him. 50 Jesus said to him, "Friend, why are you here?" Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. 51 And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. 52 Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" 55 At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. 56 But all this has taken place, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples forsook him and fled.

Jesus before the High Priest

57 Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Ca'ïaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. 58 But Peter followed him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. 59 Now the chief priests and the whole council sought false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, 60 but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward 61 and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days.'" 62 And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no

answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” 63 But Jesus was silent. And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” 64 Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” 65 Then the high priest tore his robes, and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. 66 What is your judgement?” They answered, “He deserves death.” 67 Then they spat in his face, and struck him; and some slapped him, 68 saying, “Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?”

ADDRESS 2

Trials are irresistible. On Wednesday, the Old Testament reading at mass was Isaiah 50, a passage prefiguring Jesus’ own trial scene in Matthew 26, in which he suffers the indignity of having his accusers spit in his face.

I gave my back to the smiters,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I hid not my face
from shame and spitting.

7

For the Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been confounded;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

8

he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary?
Let him come near to me.

The success of any kind of legal drama on television or radio is evidence enough that courtroom dynamics are endlessly fascinating to us. It is not just the intrigue of whether or not justice will be served; we are compelled to watch people under pressure.

This week, the news has been full of another trial: Donald Trump, sometime president of the United States but now just an ordinary citizen, stands accused of 34 felony counts of falsifying business records, and was arraigned on Tuesday. He has pleaded not guilty to all of them.

There could not be a bigger contrast, of course, between the Son of God and a belligerent, spoilt autocrat. But it is eerie to look at still photographs of the indictment hearing, to see the sulky, petulant, rather inhuman face that once held so much power, that person who gave rise to so much violence, and fed the flames of a growing culture of intimidation and bullying, and to reflect that his followers are still very much for him.

Writing in the Atlantic this week, Tom Nichols described Trump as having complete and long-standing contempt for the law. It is satisfying to watch such a person face prosecution, to congratulate ourselves for understanding that nobody, least of all a problematic former president, should be above the law. We might feel that we are the goodies on this side of the television or computer screen, looking at what's happening to the baddies on that side. But we must not forget that a mob mentality sweeps up everyone in its path. The culture of bullying that Trump promoted, and the violence that was incited and led to riots at the Capitol Building, my former place of work, on January 6th, 2021 following his defeat in the 2020 presidential election, is no different, really, than the violence that stirred up a mob against Jesus two thousand years earlier. All violence is violence.

Even in the face of his own arrest, Jesus remains the archetype of goodness and mercy and gentleness. He rejects violence, even when it is the desperate act of one of his own followers against one of his persecutors, because he rejects the harming of human beings.

The failure to understand what Jesus is about is perfectly captured in this small incident, in which his follower cuts off the ear of the high priest's slave. It seems very strange that anyone who had been with Jesus for any length of time would think that violence is the answer to conflict. In any case, Jesus says, it is pointless to resist. The second act of this drama has begun; things are now in motion. Furthermore, why bother attacking when Jesus himself could appeal to God the Father, if he wished it, and be sent twelve legions of angels? Violence is not only pointless, it is wrong: because it only begets more violence: "all who take the sword," he says, "will perish by the sword."

The rhetoric and structure of Matthew's gospel is persuasive on this point: that Jesus had to submit peacefully to what was about to happen to him in order to fulfil the scriptures. But, at the same time, there is a deeper truth behind the behaviour of this archetype of goodness, mercy, gentleness, and truth.

Jesus is not just playing along with a script, fulfilling the scriptures because that is what the drama demands. The deeper truth is that he embodies the overturning of the ancient human belief that pride and power and strength are of utmost importance. The uncomfortable paradox that Christians subscribe to is that things the powerful perceive as pathetic are, in fact, good and even blessed: meekness; mercy; mourning; hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

The Beatitudes, from the beginning of Matthew chapter 5, the Sermon on the Mount, have formed the centrepiece for the Bishop of Oxford's daily reflections during Lent. Among them are two that connect us to Jesus' arrest and trial: "blessed are those who mourn" and "blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake".

Jesus' sorrow -- his mourning -- is so much a focal point of the previous moment, the agony in the garden. And now he faces those who would falsely accuse him, persecuting the most righteous man who ever lived. His sorrow is balanced by his authority and the fulfilment of his own will, as well as that of God: "all this has taken place," he says, "that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." He rebukes them gently,

that they have come to arrest him as they might have arrested a violent criminal, “with swords and clubs to capture me”, when “day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me.”

There is great irony in this passage. Judgement is passed on the one who will be the judge of all; and Jesus is accused of blasphemy when in fact the high priest’s blasphemy is against the Son of God, as the Sanhedrin accuses him of falsifying claims about himself. They search for false witnesses, and can find none, but eventually someone comes forward to tell the truth.

The truth, which is that Jesus will die bodily and be resurrected in three days, is too much for us all, and too much for the high priest, even when it is uttered metaphorically in words about the temple. He does not even respond to it. We might be reminded, when we read of Jesus’ silence, of that verse from Isaiah again: “therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame”.

And why is Jesus condemned to death, in the end? For saying something that is just as true, just as simple: “I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

The truth, spoken simply, sounds so outrageous to them that the high priest flies into a hysterical fury, tearing his clothes. “He has uttered blasphemy,” he says, and the way his words are recorded makes it sound like a scream. “Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgement?” They answered, “He deserves death.”

The pitch of the drama has been rising and rising, a courtroom atmosphere like none before or since. There is something about the intractable calm of Jesus that seems to madden his accusers and drive them into a rage.

A few minutes ago we reflected on our own part in this drama. Peter, who ten chapters earlier, in Matthew 16, correctly identified Jesus as the

Christ, is a good stand-in for us here. He knows who Jesus is, and he stays nearby to watch, to see how it will all end. We are doing just that as we travel through the story today. We know more than the high priest Caiaphas; we, at least, understand who Jesus is. But the way in which he will fulfil the scriptures, and the deep mystery behind the sacrifice that is about to take place, the nature of the atonement that is being enacted, is all still obscure to us. As CS Lewis, a great friend of this church, once put it: "A man can eat his dinner without understanding exactly how food nourishes him. A man can accept what Christ has done without knowing how it works: indeed, he certainly would not know how it works until he has accepted it."

We must stay with Peter, who sits down with the guards a little distance away to see how it will all end. We may think we know, but we cannot begin to understand it unless we travel with Christ into the deepening darkness, watching him endure increasing violence with patience, gentleness, and love, and remembering that that love is all for us.

Amen.