

## Maundy Thursday

Matt 27: 1 - 26

### Jesus is tried before Pilate



After his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is taken before the assembly of the Sanhedrin, the council of chief priests and elders of the Jewish people, and questioned. In Matthew's gospel, as in the other gospel accounts, Jesus answers enigmatically, but his answers seem to be sufficient to confirm the council in their view that he has blasphemed, and they call for him to face the death penalty. Because this is outside their jurisdiction, in the morning they send Jesus to appear before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who attempts to hear the case, even though the subtleties of what constitutes blasphemy in the Jewish religion are really rather outside his experience. All he really wants is a quiet life. As if that wasn't enough, he is further unnerved by a message from his wife, telling him of the nightmares this whole affair is giving her – and warning him to take care.

Like most Romans, Pilate is a deeply pragmatic man, good at doing what it takes to keep the peace in the patch of Roman Empire over which he had been given charge. Good, indeed, at doing whatever it takes even if that involves the execution of an innocent man. There must be no possibility of any embarrassing report of this affair getting back to Rome.

The love of God displayed in Jesus' vulnerability is thus brought face to face with the 'needs must' mindset of Roman governance and thus with the pragmatism of materialism and consumerism that has characterised so many human societies from that day to this. Even in Jesus' day, this is not a mind-set that is confined just to the Roman world. In John's gospel, as the narrative begins to turn towards the leaders' plotting to have Jesus killed, we hear the high priest, Caiaphas, saying that 'it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed'. The Romans were not the only pragmatists of the time, though none of them, of course, saw that although one man did indeed die this would not result in the disappearance of the Jesus movement, as both Jewish and Roman leaders hoped, but would instead result in its expansion beyond their wildest fears, covering, in due course, half the globe.

Verse 5 of W H Vanstone's poem 'Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense' begins to point us now to the inevitable conclusion of these events: *"Therefore he who shows us God /helpless hangs upon the tree / and the nails and crown of thorns /tell of what God's love must be."* Pilate's Roman pragmatism and Caiaphas' anxiety to keep the Jewish nation together at any cost find common cause, and the individual, Jesus, is sacrificed so that 'order' may be restored and everyone can move on with their lives.

But, as Vanstone's words indicate, God doesn't do love for the many at the expense of the one – or at least not in the coercive way that Pilate or Caiaphas understood it. God does love, and only love – which

is always poured out without measure on each and every individual in all their glorious variety and singularity. There may be many people, many individuals, in a society or nation, but God's love is unique and infinite for each and every one of them.

And again, this line of reflection has much to say to us in our present testing circumstances as a nation and as a world as we do battle with the global infection of Covid 19. One of the abiding memories I am sure many of us will have of these weeks is of the race against time to get sufficient high-tech ventilators and lower-tech protective equipment into medical and social care facilities across our nation. The ensuing discussion of who should have first access to which items of equipment has revealed the possibility of some underlying assumptions about who should have priority that have, thankfully, been repudiated by many. The idea that some hospital patients should be prioritised for access to ventilators or that some categories of workers should come further down the queue than others when awaiting personal protective equipment has, rightly, made many anxious. One person, or group of people, should not, we believe, be made to suffer or even risk death so that others may be given life, even as we acknowledge the practical difficulties that this belief brings us. This is an idea deeply rooted in Christian teaching and in our Christian heritage and is brought sharply into focus as we reflect on the political cross-currents swirling around Jesus at his trial.

Strangely, perhaps, this leads me directly into a place of thanksgiving. The care for individuals shown by medical staff, social care staff and the many, many volunteers who have come forward to help in myriad ways during this national crisis are a powerful reminder that, in a country that still has roots in Christianity, love for people as individuals is still paramount. And the revulsion expressed by so many at the idea that one life might be worth more than another is a repudiation of both Pilate's and Caiaphas' way of doing things. And for both these things, I give thanks.

Of course, we all know that sometimes difficult decisions have to be made about how, when and why to prolong invasive care for people who are very ill and I do not want to minimise that. But if, as far as is possible, such decisions are made in the interests of the one rather than the many, as I believe they are being made today, then Christ's lead is still being followed, and God's love is being shown. And again, I give thanks.

*A prayer:*

Caring and loving God, we thank you for all in our country today who are following in the footsteps of your Son our Lord and caring for so many in all kinds of need and distress. We hold before you all those who are ill in our land today, not only those with Covid 19, but the many others who are in hospital or awaiting treatment. Help those responsible for them, Lord, to care for them as you would, as individuals, each of whom matters intensely to you. We pray for those in the care or medical professions who carry the responsibility of overseeing appropriate care and treatment for everyone. Help us, Lord, to trust them to do their job to the best of their ability and to place them, our loved ones and ourselves into your loving arms. We ask this for the sake of your Son, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ      Amen