

**Benefice of Camelot Parishes**  
**Talk by Rev Tristram Rae Smith on**  
**Good Friday, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2018 South Cadbury**

**The events of last year**

Reading passion narrative this year reminded me of events of last summer

Attack on Westminster Bridge followed by series, Manchester, London and then Grenfell Towers

Happened to be at periphery of Westminster Bridge attack, imagine what would it be like to be caught up in centre ?

Announcement on tube, as though everyone knew what meant, thought someone falling under train

Every calm of bookshop, people talking about lockdown, what does that mean ?

Hearing news on mobile phone (not normally used)

Buses on Westminster Bridge at complete standstill, extraordinary sight

Police helicopters in air, roads blocked

Some taste of chaos and confusion of violence

Disruption to our lives may occur on much more personal scale, illness of those close to us, a sudden fall, sleepless nights

Again disorientation, meaning is not obvious and cannot immediately be grasped

**The confusion and chaos of violence**

So first of all the chaos and confusion of violence is very evident in the passion narrative.

It starts off with the disciples asleep at a vital point while they need to be awake. As so often with people caught up in life indeed world changing events, they just have no awareness of magnitude of what is about to unfold.

*Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?"*

And then there is the confusion of those who misunderstand Jesus' cry from the Cross

*And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*  
<sup>47</sup> *When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah."*

And there is the darkness, physical and symbolic

*From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.*

Actual violence is close at hand, shown in the swords and clubs of those who have come to arrest Jesus

*While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people.*

And in the murderous and irrational response of the crowd

*Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"*

The violence is not simply physical but verbal and psychological demonstrated in the mockery of soldiers, passers by, chief priests and even the criminals crucified with Jesus

*Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads*

<sup>40</sup> *and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."...*

<sup>43</sup> *He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'"*

<sup>44</sup> *The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.*

Deceit, denial and self-deception are another strand which adds to the darkness of the narrative

The arrest occurs through stealth and later false evidence is brought.

Judas repents of his betrayal but it is all too late

<sup>3</sup> *When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.*

<sup>4</sup> *He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself."*

<sup>5</sup> *Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.*

Peter does not accept that he will deny Jesus and indeed all the disciples desert Jesus.

### **The subterranean river**

In all of this chaos of confusion, violence and deception, is there any meaning or purpose to be found ? Perhaps not on the surface but rather like a subterranean river there is a hidden and underlying meaning which runs remarkably clearly through narrative when we are alerted to this.

We find a clue to this subterranean river first of all in the various Old Testament references in the narrative. They put us on our guard and remind us that we are not witnessing a random and meaningless series of events but that God is working His purpose out despite all appearances to the contrary. What is happening has been foretold.

Jesus refuses to fight by the sword telling us

*<sup>54</sup> But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?"*

In Jesus' reply to the high priest we find references both to the figure of the Son of Man in the book of Daniel and to the opening of Psalm 110,

*<sup>64</sup> Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

Nor is Judas' betrayal random, but it fulfils the words of Zechariah and Jeremiah in their references to 30 pieces of silver and the potter's field.

And both Jesus' cry from the Cross and the division of His clothing echo very precisely details from Psalm 22,

*<sup>35</sup> And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots;*

*<sup>46</sup> And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

And the other constant beat in the narrative is the steadfast and calm attitude of Jesus Himself, He understands what others do not and we are invited to trust His judgement.

He constantly predicts His betrayal and crucifixion. He sees the ointment which Mary pours on Him as preparation for His burial and when His is on trial for His life before Pilate, He is calm and quietly refuses to answer their charges

*<sup>11</sup> Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so."*

*<sup>12</sup> But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer.*

*<sup>13</sup> Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?"*

*<sup>14</sup> But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.*

In all of this, Jesus knows exactly what is happening.

So there is meaning in all of this if we follow Jesus but meaning is not on surface, runs like subterranean river through narrative.

### **Traversing through moral complexity**

So there is meaning in the narrative of the Passion even though we need to dig beneath the surface to find it. But for us in personal terms what meaning do all these events have ? Why is it so important to celebrate Good Friday with its stark, bleak and sombre mood ?

In moral terms we can indeed find black and white here. Violence and murderous desires of crowd on one hand, absolute innocence of Jesus on the other.

But maybe we can't identify ourselves with either side. The violence, confusion and deceit of the one side don't attract us and the steadfast and calm sense of purpose of Jesus seems beyond us on the other. Perhaps we might wish that there was some middle ground we could tread as we remind ourselves that moral dilemmas and responses can be very complex.

Maybe this draws us to the figures of Pontius Pilate and his wife ? They certainly don't seem to have abandoned any sense of what is right and wrong. His wife warns Pilate in a dream and Pilate desperately tries to find some compromise which will enable him not to send Jesus to the Cross.

But it does not work. There is no middle way, no compromise to be found between the steadfast integrity of Jesus refusing to deny who He truly is and the murderous instincts of the crowd. And Pontius Pilate may be able to wash his hands but he is not able to wash his heart of the stain of bloodguilt. For as the cricket ball tampering scandal and the fate of the captain Steve Smith has reminded us it is not enough simply to be aware of what is going on but to take no active part in it. As someone in charge you are still held responsible.

And perhaps we see something of ourselves here. The middle ground very often is where truth is found but not in this case. It is a matter of a straightforward choice, are we for Jesus and or are we against. And by ourselves we lack the strength to declare ourselves for Him.

Ball tampering- maybe Steve Smith wanting to turn blind eye, under pressure, not really my decision, but not excused

And yet middle ground still needs to be forgiven even if we think absolute purity lies beyond us.

What is to be done ? There is still hope, Good Friday is still good despite all the darkness of the awful events that unfolded. It is our reading from Isaiah that unfolds to us perhaps most clearly of any of our readings the meaning of Good Friday and why it had to happen.

Seen through the lens of Isaiah, Jesus' death is that of the Suffering Servant. And why did the Servant die ? The Servant died so that all our sins might be forgiven.

And to respond to that we don't need to try to find imaginative solutions to complex moral dilemmas. In this case they simply don't work. Rather what we are called to do is to acknowledge our own sinfulness and our need for these sins to be forgiven, to recognise the enormity of the cost that Jesus bore in dying on the Cross to enable us to be forgiven and then simply to respond in trusting gratitude.

*<sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.*

*<sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

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