

## Good Friday Reflections: 30 March 2018

### Denying Humanity

We probably read or hear about Jesus' crucifixion in the Gospels so many times that we develop a level of immunity to their stark portrayal of the most painful and shameful form of death that existed in the Roman Empire.

Dare we spend these few minutes on this most poignant and somber of days reflecting more deeply on the cruel and obscene power of crucifixion – its utter denial of its victim's humanity.

The extremely offensive nature of the cross results in very few detailed accounts of its usage in ancient writings – it was too horrible and shameful to bear repetition – the passion narratives in the gospels are actually said to be the most thorough descriptions that exist. In his examination of crucifixion, Martin Hengel explains that its practice varied widely thus allowing “the caprice and sadism of the executioners [to have]...full rein.”<sup>1</sup>

Torture before crucifixion was common, Hengel writing that “in Roman times not only was it the rule to nail the victim by both hands and feet, but that the flogging which was a stereotyped part of the punishment would make the blood flow in streams...presumably Jesus was so weakened by loss of blood that he was unable to carry the beam of the cross to Golgotha.”<sup>2</sup>

I went to see a wonderful dramatization of Handel's Messiah on Wednesday night, live-streamed from the Bristol Vic. The depiction of Jesus' torture and death, the pain and the blood, the mocking and utter abandonment from others was shocking and moving, but a striking difference between this portrayal and the real dehumanization of the cross was that the actor playing Jesus remained clothed throughout.

The victims of crucifixion were naked, their genitalia often impaled on the cross as well as their hands and feet to cause maximum shame. There was no carefully placed loincloth covering Jesus' genitals.

We read in Matthew's gospel that Jesus was stripped, not once but at least twice. The writer tells us that this stripping was not witnessed by a few mocking spectators but was in front of a whole cohort of Roman soldiers.

In our familiarity with the words, do we stop and allow ourselves to dwell on what this reveals about the dehumanizing nature of Jesus' torture? A cohort is approximately 500 men. Jesus was mocked, spat at, tortured and repeatedly

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, London, SCM Press Ltd, 1977, p. 25

<sup>2</sup> Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, p.32

stripped of his clothes in front of a huge, jeering multitude of 500 powerful, uniformed men. Although we know no more details, this deeply humiliating and terrifying experience in a culture driven by the dynamics of shame and honour, offers us the insight that Jesus was the victim, not only of an obscenely cruel death, but also of sexual torture and sexual violence.

For all those dehumanized in our world today, whose stories, like the story of Jesus we too easily become immune to - the victims of rape and sexual abuse, trafficking, war, ethnic cleansing, physical, emotional and mental violence, for the asylum seekers, for those waiting their lives out in refugee camps and detention centres, for all those whose suffering, shame and trauma make them feel utterly abandoned, hopeless and alone, this man Jesus has been there, this man of sorrows, this man whose dehumanizing death we remember today, he knows and he understands...

## Defying Brutality

Love defies brutality through the courage to follow, to wait, to watch, to remain present in the midst of unimaginable loss, hopelessness and grief.

Love defies brutality through resistance to scapegoating, through refusal to join the legalistic, fearful majority and condemn an innocent man.

Love defies brutality through reverence and respect, not for political and religious powers, but for the lifeless, violated remains of the Rabbi on the cross - the one who promised revelation of God's kingdom is not abandoned to be the food of dogs but bravely laid in a rich man's own tomb.

Love defies brutality through tenderness, through gentle caring for that battered, bloodied body, re-clothing the man Jesus with clean linen and laying him to rest in safe and peaceful darkness.

For Jesus laid in the tomb and for others who grieve the loss of those they love...the words of Malcolm Guite

Here at the centre everything is still  
Before the stir and movement of our grief  
Which bears it's pain with rhythm, ritual,  
Beautiful useless gestures of relief.  
So they anoint the skin that cannot feel  
And soothe his ruined flesh with tender care,  
Kissing the wounds they know they cannot heal,  
With incense scenting only empty air.  
He blesses every love that weeps and grieves  
And makes our grief the pangs of a new birth.  
The love that's poured in silence at old graves  
Renewing flowers, tending the bare earth,  
Is never lost. In him all love is found  
And sown with him, a seed in the rich ground.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2016, p.43