

# Actors of the Passion

A meditation for Holy week and Good Friday inspired by the book *'The Way of the Cross'* by Richard Holloway (first published in 1986, by Penguin, as the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book.)

## The Killing

That was the day they killed the Son of God  
On a squat hill-top by Jerusalem.  
Zion was bare, her children from their maze  
Sucked by the dream of curiosity  
Clean through the gates. The very halt and blind  
Had somehow got themselves up to the hill.  
After the ceremonial preparation,  
The scourging, nailing, nailing against the wood,  
Erection of the main-trees with their burden,  
While from the hill rose an orchestral wailing,  
They were there at last, high up in the soft spring day.  
We watched the writhings, heard the moanings, saw  
The three heads turning on their separate axles  
Like broken wheels left spinning. Round his head  
Was loosely bound a crown of plaited thorn  
That hurt at random, stinging temple and brow  
As the pain swung into its envious circle.  
In front the wreath was gathered in a knot  
That as he gazed looked like the last stump left  
Of a death-wounded deer's great antlers. Some  
Who came to stare grew silent as they looked,  
Indignant or sorry. But the hardened old  
And the hard-hearted young, although at odds  
From the first morning, cursed him with one curse,  
Having prayed for a Rabbi or an armed Messiah  
And found the Son of God. What use to them  
Was a God or a Son of God? Of what avail  
For purposes such as theirs? Beside the cross-foot,  
Alone, four women stood and did not move  
All day. The sun revolved, the shadows wheeled,  
The evening fell. His head lay on his breast,  
But in his breast they watched his heart move on  
By itself alone, accomplishing its journey.  
Their taunts grew louder, sharpened by the knowledge  
That he was walking in the park of death,  
Far from their rage. Yet all grew stale at last,  
Spite, curiosity, envy, hate itself.  
They waited only for death and death was slow  
And came so quietly they scarce could mark it.  
They were angry then with death and death's deceit.

I was a stranger, could not read these people  
Or this outlandish deity. Did a God  
Indeed in dying cross my life that day  
By chance, he on his road and I on mine?

*Edwin Muir (d. 1959)*

## The Traitor: Mark 14: 43 – 45

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.' So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him.

Why? Judas, Why? We shall never know exactly, why.

One tradition says that Judas was persuaded to become Caiaphas' secret agent, commissioned to plot the downfall of Jesus. Whether this is true or not he certainly became a tool in the hands of the enemies of our Lord.

Or did he do it for money? He was, apparently, the disciples' treasurer. If he was a thief, as John maintains, then it is possible that he betrayed Jesus for a handful of silver.

Neither of these explanations is convincing. Perhaps the real clue lies in his name 'Iscaiot.' The Latin word 'scarius' meant a dagger-bearer, a knifer. Possibly Judas belonged to the company of the 'Sicarii', fanatical Jewish nationalists, pledged to the violent overthrow of their Roman masters, and saw in Jesus a heaven-sent leader who would unite the country in rebellion against Rome.

When Judas realised that Jesus did not plan to go the way of armed revolt, his disappointment could well have led him to betray Jesus to the authorities. Or could Judas have planned to force the hand of Jesus by exposing him to danger, in the hope that he would react violently in his own defence, firing a revolution which would result in overthrowing the Roman oppression. To his horror, Jesus did not respond in the way Judas hoped. Could this be the explanation for Judas trying to return the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood'?

Devastated by the realisation that he has delivered Jesus to his death, and that his life's dream of revolt and political independence had come to nothing, he hung himself, and entered history as the greatest traitor of all time.

Christians do not really identify themselves with Judas. Yet it is possible to claim to be a follower of Jesus, but like Judas, try to have things on our own terms. Judas had his own plans, his own policy, his own style, believing that they were like Christ's. Similarly, members of today's church believe that they can enlist Christ to their cause, ignoring both his words and judgements.

That is why we bring all our fear and distrust to the foot of the cross; all our weaknesses and greed; all our hate and bitterness. But Judas also had a noble vision of a liberated Palestine. We have to bring not only our weaknesses but our strengths, too.

Judas could have been a prince among the apostles if only he had learnt to follow Christ instead of trying to lead him. Alas, I, too am Judas Iscariot.

## The Deserter: Mark 14: 70 – 72

Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, 'Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.' But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know this man you are talking about.' At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' And he broke down and wept.

In the drama of the suffering and death of Christ there are all sorts of players. But the character with whom we most easily identify ourselves is Peter. Peter, the deserter, the boastful and impulsive leader. Peter, the man who denied his master. His role is the most heart-breaking. It brings a lump to our throats.

After the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter followed at a safe distance. As he waited the result of the trial he was challenged three times by onlookers, 'Surely you are one of his followers!' Each time he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know this man.' After the third denial the cock crowed. Peter, remembering Christ's words, broke down and wept.

How often have we tasted those tears of regret? We can understand Peter because of his short comings. He found following Jesus almost impossibly difficult.

'Peter, the rock' was a nickname given to Simon by Jesus. Not a very apt name for a man who crumbled again and again. He failed Christ in the little things, just like us, and was overcome by fear when the supreme test came. Peter misunderstood much about Jesus but knew that he forgave sins on once, not twice, but always.

We can learn from Peter, who had the humility to struggle on in spite of repeated failure. He fell at every fence, but he picked himself up and carried on. Only the proud and self-pitying are defeated by failure. Peter knew he would not be judged by his successes but by his perseverance. Tradition holds that at his execution he asked to be crucified upside-down because he felt unworthy to die in the same position as his Lord.

Ordinary Christians can take courage from Peter's example. No matter what your failures are, do not give up the struggle.

## **The Accuser: Mark 14: 53, 60 – 64.**

They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled.

The high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?'

Jesus said, 'I am; and

"you will see the Son of Man

seated at the right hand of the Power",

and "coming with the clouds of heaven." '

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?' All of them condemned him as deserving death.

After the events in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was brought before Caiaphas, the High Priest. Jesus was sentenced to death for making claims that no-one ever made before. He implied that he and God were so close that what he was, God was, and what God was, he was. This angered Caiaphas so much that he tore his robes, and said that Jesus had condemned himself.

Most people can admire Jesus' ethical teaching and noble death. These do not scandalize people. But he was either insane or the Son of God, and you must take sides on this issue. You either worship and adore him or condemn him to death. It is better to be a Caiaphas and enemy of this man, than an indifferent onlooker. They crucified Jesus on a charge of blasphemy. He claimed to be the Son of God, a claim that no Jew could tolerate. Detachment wasn't possible then nor is it today, although we would not resort to execution.

Studdert Kennedy made this point: at Golgotha, men at least crucified Christ, they responded to him with passion, but

When Jesus came to Golgotha, they hanged Him on a tree,  
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;  
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,  
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed him by  
They never hurt a hair of him, they simply let him die;  
Foe men had grown more tender and they would not give him pain  
They only just passed down the street, and left him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do'  
And still it rained, the wintry rain, that drenched him through and through;  
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,  
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

*G. A. Studdert Kennedy, 'Indifference.' 1927.*

What Caiaphas did was better, much better. Who can be indifferent to Jesus – God among us; in the dust and tears of Galilee, in the streets of Jerusalem, in the olive groves of Gethsemane? God among us high on the cross. Who can be indifferent? Certainly not Caiaphas. But what about us? Will we stand back for ever?

## **The Politician: Matthew 27: 24 – 26**

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

The Christian creed says, 'Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried,' fixing the crucifixion in history. Pilate, the governor of Judea from AD 26 – AD 36, showed very little understanding of the Jews and their obsession with religion. He was ruthless in suppressing religious violence during the ten years of his governorship.

By the time he encountered Jesus he had become very tired and cynical. Pilate and his wife were sympathetic towards Jesus. He did try to release Jesus but human affairs rarely allow a simple choice. If he released Jesus he would provoke a riot. Reports of such a riot would be sent to Rome and undermine his authority. Jesus was innocent and to kill him was against Roman Law. How was he to act? Jesus could see his dilemma and had compassion on him.

Pilate made the inevitable decisions. He sacrificed one innocent man for the sake of maintaining peace. The decision was wrong. But what other decisions was possible? We would have done the same. We often have to turn our backs on the needs and demands of others because we have other responsibilities, families, jobs, and unavoidable obligations.

We are Pontius Pilate every day we make the decision to hand over Christ and he allows himself to suffer at our hands. He has compassion for our predicaments. He does not hold back until we make the right decision. He comes to us in spite of our sinfulness, and the cross is the demonstration of this incredible love. We are Pontius Pilate because our Lord allows himself to suffer at our hands. He becomes the victim of our dilemmas and weakness and bears them in his own body on the tree

## **The Executioner: Matthew 27: 33 – 36**

And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him.

Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate were responsible for the death of Jesus, but they did not do the dirty work themselves, such men never do. It is always someone else who hammers in the nails.

The soldiers who laid Jesus on the cross and drove the nails through the thin flesh into the beam behind, had nothing against Jesus. They probably had never heard of him and would avoid looking him in the eyes.

Usually victims cursed and swore, it took several men to hold them down but this one was different. You could sense a terrible sorrow in him; an ancient longing which made everything seem strangely distant. It was happening here and now, but it seemed to be happening somewhere else, beyond time. It was as if a great door shut suddenly and a cry pierced you as if God wept. And he prayed, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.' Then you lift the cross into the socket up there on the hill, and that door shut again, and again that cry, somewhere else out of time. Hastily you pick up your tools and walk away.

History is full of these men who under orders build the gallows; others send the victims. They serve the gas ovens, others sing the papers and send women and children to their deaths. Every tyranny in history has been built on their compliance, their reliance on wages.

But we are all enclosed in this web of guilt. It is in our name that young men with guns parade the streets of war torn countries. We exploit and degrade one another in ways we do not even know. There is no way out of this web of guilt and responsibility for one another. Mine are the hands that hammer in the nails, not another's.

The cross of Jesus is for us an object of sorrow and joy. Sorrow because we crucify our Lord daily. Joy because the moment we band in the nails, he forgives. His cross will have the victory. His love will win. He knew it. It cost him dear. That is why he said, 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to me.'