**LENT REFLECTION 5**

**Matthew  . Chapter 27 vv 15-37. ( NRSV )**
 Now, at the Festival the  Governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner called (Jesus)\* Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom  do you want me to release for you, (Jesus)\* Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?”  For he realised that it was out of jealousy that they had handed Him over. Whilst he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, “ Have nothing to do with that innocent man , for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.”
  Now the chief priest and elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and have Jesus killed. The governor said again to them, “ Which of the two do you want me to release for you? And they said “Barabbas.” Pilate said to the , “ Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah? “ All of them said, “Let him be crucified! “ Then he asked, “ Why, what evil has he done? “ Bu they shouted all the more, “ Let him be crucified!”
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.
Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered some thorns into a crown and they put  it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before Him and mocked Him saying, “ Hail, King of the Jews! They spat on him and took the reed and struck Him on the head . After mocking Him  they stripped Him of the robe and put His own clothes on Him. Then they led Him away to crucify Him. As they went out they came upon a man  from Cyrene, named Simon; they compelled this man to carry His cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha ( which means Place of the Skull) , they offered Him wine to drink, mixed with gall;  but when he tasted it He would not drink it. And when they crucified Him they divided His clothes among themselves by casting lots; they sat down there and kept watch over Him. Over his head they out the charge against Him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.’
    \*Omitted in other ancient authorities. Barabbas means …son of the father.

**Collect**

True and humble King,

Hailed by the crowd as Messiah:

Grant us the faith to know you and love you,

On the way of the cross,

Which is the path of glory.

**Reflection**
This reading is a short section only of the whole ‘ passion narrative’ to be read on Palm Sunday , in addition to the Gospel reading for the blessing of the palms. Passion , in this context means ‘ suffering’ ( from the Latin passio)  and refers specifically to the last three days of Jesus life, but the Church calls the two weeks leading into it ‘ Passiontide’ . For the Jewish faith this is the time of the Passover, commemorating  the deliverance  of their people from Egypt.  So we begin with the setting of the Festival into which Jesus passion and deliverance of all humanity will be woven. Jesus has already been arrested and brought before Caiaphas the high priest. Now bound, He is ‘handed over ( a phrase used several times ) to the Roman governor of the Province, Pilate, who was amazed by Jesus silence under interrogation. Now he offered the crowd the chance for Jesus to be released  at the festival ( which is described as a custom, but there is no historical backing to this). He  is aware that the chief priests and scribes ‘ handed him over’ out of jealousy. In addition to this, most tellingly- and in Matthew only- ,we learn that Pilate’s wife warns her husband to keep clear of ‘ that innocent man’  ( Tradition  has it that she had a sense of Pilate ‘s name being  echoed through the centuries…’ crucified under Pontius Pilate ). Despite this and despite his own conviction that Jesus  is innocent  Pilate does not stand out against the crowd  who are incited by the Jewish leaders to free ( Jesus) Barabbas the criminal, rather than Jesus the Messiah. Pilate acts, not just to keep order,  but out of self- preservation and in a travesty of justice, in giving in to the crowd. Unfortunately it is all too easy to envisage this happening in our present World. We see him try to absolve himself publicly from blame  ( think of some recent political scandals) . After washing his hands ( a Jewish not a Roman practise) and declaring himself innocent, and after flogging  Jesus, he ‘ handed Him over’ . Flogging was a known practise designed to weaken prior to crucifixion.
  Matthews design is to make clear that responsibility for Jesus death lies with the Jewish religious authorities. The people answer ‘ His blood be on us and on our children
   Jesus is now in the hands of the soldiers who strip Him ( an humiliation used eg on those destined for the gas chambers in WW2) . They dress Him in a soldiers red cloak as if it were the emperors purple cloak; the crown of thorns probably imitates the emperors crown  with radiant spikes; the reed suggests the emperors staff, held  in the right hand as a sign of authority. There is further gratuitous cruelty before Jesus is again dressed to be crucified.
 It was not unusual to ask another person to help the prisoner carry the cross but we may ponder on Simon, from Cyrene in Libya. He may well have been black . Perhaps he stood out from the crowd. Mark describes him as the father of Rufus and Alexander, mentioned in Acts 19 v 33 and  Romans 16 v13. He is now caught into the passion through no will of his own and drawn into the terrifying privilege of assisting Jesus in his hours of anguish. We too at times, may be asked to help carry the overwhelming burdens of others. In the words of a recent hymn  we are here to ‘ help each other walk the mile and bear the load. ‘
  Reaching the crucifixion site, Golgotha, and offered a wine mixed with something to dull pain, Jesus refuses it. There is no dwelling on the extreme agony of crucifixion ; it is only stated that once it’s done the brutalised soldiers, indifferent to Jesus suffering, cast lots for the division of His clothing . Jesus is dying for these very men. These events have scriptural overtones from the O.T., especially psalms 22 and 69. As is usual the charge was written over His head ( ‘ This is Jesus’ —- Matthew only ) ‘The King of the Jews.’ Pilate is responsible for this, possibly in mockery of the Jews.
   Of course irony runs through the account. Jesus is mocked , by soldiers and others, for being who He actually is.  All authority is His. There was no legal offence against the Roman Empire, other than being a possible threat if He actually  claimed to be King in this worlds terms, which He did not. His death is entirely in the hands of His own religious authorities, yet with that complete lack of integrity in Pilate allowing it to happen. Yet it HAD to happen, to fulfil Scripture.
The Passion  account may be so familiar to us that we do not properly enter into its reality. Holy week helps us to do this. Here we see Jesus in solidarity with all, down the ages and to our day, who suffer injustice, ill treatment, torture and death for their faith, or for conscience or for others. Suffering may cause us all at times to doubt a good God and yet, for me, it is at the heart of Christianity that God does engage with the harsh realities of the human condition; finding the remedy in Christ  crucified…. and risen. We might enter holy week with gratitude to God, so invincibly with and for us through life’s struggles. As it rehearses the passion of Jesus, Holy Week helps us to make the connections between the old , old story of Jesus and His love and our own stories. Our suffering and that of others, gains meaning in the light of the God who, in Christ, embraces suffering for our sake and transforms it into the stuff of glory.
    We need to remember always that the worlds salvation comes through a Jew… Jesus.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER OR DISCUSS**

How does it resonate with you that Jesus is apparently powerless and in the control of others; that He is handed over to various groups and His body is mistreated.

Christians can sometimes be tempted to gloss over Holy Seek in order to get painlessly to Easter. What do we lose by doing this.

Does reflecting on this passage  alter your understanding of God? Does it help you to realise more fully how profoundly we/ you are valued by God.

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