Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church



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St John 5

Sunday 3rd July – Saturday 16th July 2022

Introduction

Scholars think that the work we know as St John's Gospel has its origins in the 70s AD but reached its final form at some point between the years 90 and 110. It differs from the other Gospel in the way it presents Jesus - through a series of seven "signs" starting with the Wedding at Cana and ending with the raising of Lazarus and a series of seven "I Am" speeches which reflect growing tension between the embryonic Church and the Synagogue. Christianity soon separated itself from Judaism and St John is a record of the start of this separation. Tragically, the way the writer portrays Jewish people were used by later commentators to justify murderous anti-semitism and it is hard to hear phrases like "the Jews" in this Gospel without a shudder.

Like the other Gospels it is anonymous but it does identify "the disciple whom Jesus loved" as a source. Its similarities in style with the three Johannine Epistles lead modern scholars to treat them as coming, if not from the same author, but from a community of authors. Of course, like many debates on Biblical authorship all this is speculation.

We're not as familiar with St John as it is not read through the year like the other Gospels are. Instead, large chunks are inserted into the Church year so we know some passages very well indeed and others not at all well. Over the next few months we will read our way through this Gospel allowing ourselves to read the entire book not just selected passages chosen by the Church for Sunday after Sunday.

Prayer

God of our tears
we bring to you the pain of our world,
our rage and our determination to make change happen.
Help us to use our faith in your sovereign power to make a difference,
that our resurrection hope will bring healing to our world. Amen.

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Sunday 3 July 2022 Psalm 98

The Rev'd Phil Nevard, Minister of Castle Camps URC, Whittlesford URC and Sawston Free Church.

Sing, sing a new song
to the Lord God
for all the wonders
He has wrought;
His right hand and
His arm most holy
the victory to Him have brought.
The Lord has published His salvation,
His righteousness
has He made known;
He showed to every heathen nation
that judgement issues
from His throne.

2: He has remembered all His mercy,
His truth declared to Israel;
the ends of earth
have seen His glory;
His ways in majesty excel.
Then make a joyful noise
before Him,
O all ye earth, His praises sing;
with loud acclaim let all adore Him
and let the joyful anthems ring.

3: Join to the harp
your glad rejoicing,
a psalm of adoration bring,
with trumpet and the cornet voicing
a joyful noise to God, the King.
Let oceans roar
with all their fullness,
the world and they
that dwell therein;
proclaim Jehovah's power
with boldness,
exalt Him ever and again.

4: Let all the streams in joyous union
now clap their hands
and praise accord,
the hills rejoice in glad communion,
and skip for joy before the Lord.
He comes, He comes
to judge the people,
arrayed in truth and equity;
the world shall He redeem from evil,
and righteous shall
His judgement be.

Dewey Westra, 1931
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You can hear a congregation sing this here
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHxYkOQVhNI

others. We weep when we experience the hopelessness and futility of life. We weep when we are amazed by astounding bravery or astonishing kindness. We weep when we encounter strong emotions.

We wept.

We wept when we saw the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We wept when images of the mass graves and senseless destruction were beamed into our homes. We wept in the face of Putin's cruelty and hubris. We wept in rage at Patriarch Kirill's subservience to his earthly, instead of his heavenly, master. We wept with amazement at the bravery of the Ukrainian people and at the courage of their comedian turned President.

We hope.

Through our tears we hope. Through Mary's tears she met the Risen Lord. Not recognising or understanding what God had done, Mary's tears turned to joy and an enthusiasm to tell others that could not be contained despite the strictures of status and sex.

We know.

We know that God is at work through our pain and our tears, our rage and our horror, our failure to understand and our inability to see God's presence. We know that resurrection is a past historical fact in the life of Jesus and our future destiny. We know that through God's saving love our world will be transformed and pain, mourning, rage and tears will end.

We Wait.

Until then we wait with our tears and our joy, our pain and our amazement, our rage and our determination to make the world better. We wait knowing that one day, in God's good time, all things will be put right but that, until then, we are the agents of God's change in our amazing, but broken, world.

And in the midst of my struggles.
May I be open to receiving again your unexpected presence,
In the gifts of your creation,
In the presence of your Son,
And through the power of your Holy Spirit.
Turn my puzzling into trust,
My questioning into faith,
And my life into living in your way of love. Amen.

Saturday 16 July 2022 St John 20: 11 - 18

The Rev'd Andy Braunston is the Minister for Digital Worship and a member of the Peedie Kirk URC in Orkney

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Reflection

We weep.

We weep when we are sad. We weep when we see and feel the pain of

Reflection

Sing a new song to the Lord! The urge to sing a new song is common in the Psalms, and I don't know if you are already reminded of the battle lines drawn in your church about how acceptable it is for a worship leader to suggest singing a new song, one the congregation haven't sung before. Most of the grief is about tunes not words, you can get away with pretty much any words you choose as long as they know the tune! I've sometimes been tempted to set a cake recipe to Bunessan and see if anyone notices.

The Psalmists, though, are not talking about tunes. The Psalmists are discovering the joy of having new words to sing - new things to say about God. Suddenly it's a very different conversation. God is doing something new, new songs will have to be written. It's not that the old ones need to be replaced, it's that the old ones no longer cover everything we have discovered! God's hymnbook will always need supplements.

The United Reformed Church is 50yrs old this year and part of our celebration is a hymn/song writing competition. As we look ahead to whatever future we might imagine we have, my prayer is that we won't forever find ourselves mangling old words into new tunes to make them sound fresh, but rather we will find ourselves overflowing with joy, finding new words to describe the new things that God is doing in our lives and in the world. Is God doing something new in your life, in your neighbourhood, in your church? Almost certainly the answer is yes, but maybe you haven't noticed? Go out and have a look, but beware, you may find yourself singing in the street!

Prayer

Loving God,
Our thirst for the new is almost insatiable;
New car, new phone, new hair, new gadgets;
New structures, new committees, new job descriptions, new initiatives.

Maybe that's part of how we are made,
In the image of a God who is always doing something new.
May your Spirit point us to
the compassion-expanding new,
The justice-deepening new,
the love-enriching new.
May your Spirit always have a new song for us to sing. Amen

Monday 4 July 2022 St John 18: 1 - 11

The Rev'd Sue Henderson retired URC minister worshipping at the United Church, Bradford on Avon

After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.' This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken, 'I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.' Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?'

Reflection

Here is Jesus, face to face with the crowd. He is making certain of the safety of his disciples when suddenly one shouts and Peter flings his blade has been speculation that she imagined a graverobber might have taken him away and she then fled in fear and anxiety to the two disciples to alert them to what had happened.

These two ran off together to look into the tomb to see what she was referring to. They discover, not just the absence of a body, but the presence of the wrappings that the body had been in. If the body had been taken by robbers, the assumption is that they would have taken these wrappings. The path is opened to coming to a different conclusion.

However, although John's Gospel then refers to one of the disciples seeing and believing, at this point it's not clear what exactly they thought that they were seeing, as the Gospel passage refers to them 'not understanding the scripture.' They were not necessarily thinking that the resurrection itself had happened.

It's not until Mary encounters the risen Jesus, who at first she takes to be the gardener, that the truth of the resurrection comes home.

Coming close to the risen Jesus, and understanding the deeper meaning of the scripture, were not at this moment quick or immediate ways to faith. Wrestling with what was happening, being puzzled by what scripture was saying, characterise this moment in the lives of Mary and the two disciples. It comes as a reminder that today the journey of faith can have twists and turns, and moments of bewilderment, on the way to encountering the otherness and presence of God.

The role of hope becomes key – hope in the midst of struggle and despair and uncertainty, hope that holds open the possibility of new ways of seeing and understanding and encountering the fullness of God.

Prayer

Loving God, giver of hope,
May I glimpse your gift of hope in the times of my bewilderment,

Prayer

Lord God, we hold before you
situations of death and destruction …
Thank you for people
who bring dignity to others in their helplessness.
Keep alive within us all
the promise of your resurrection.
Lord in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Friday 15 July 2022 St John 20: 1-10

The Rev'd Dr Elizabeth Welch, retired minister, active theologically and ecumenically, member of St Andrews Ealing.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Reflection

Mary Magdalene was bewildered. She came to the tomb, saw that it was empty, and assumed that someone had made off with Jesus' body. There

towards Malchus, cutting off his ear. Peter is not a swordsman, and he isn't helping Jesus in the right way either.

Have we tried to help Jesus in the wrong way? Even when our intentions are good, like Peter, we can do a good thing in the wrong way. Have we approached an unbeliever in a way that actually made it harder for him or her to hear the Gospel? Have we displayed behaviour that made it more difficult for them to respond to the Gospel than before they met us?

Peter was looking at things with the wrong perspective. He saw the mob as a problem, so he just attacked. But Jesus looked beyond the mob and linked up with the will of the Father. "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" If we aren't careful, we will be using up all our energy looking at the immediate problem instead of trying to discover God's will in the situation. Are we working ourselves to exhaustion trying to solve a problem and getting few results? Perhaps we need to pray as Jesus did and ask how God wants us to respond.

John makes some things really clear for us in this passage. Jesus was not to be taken against his will; he willingly offered himself. He wasn't a victim of the angry mob; he was in control the whole time. What a comfort to us in our own lives when circumstances do seem out of control. Jesus knows and is working in the events and circumstances that we encounter. We can find courage to trust him, even when we don't understand everything that is happening.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I want to learn the spiritual lessons that You would teach me, and to live in willing obedience and utter dependence upon You. May I never fear the cup of difficult circumstances that I may have to face in life, but live my life as You intended, learning obedience by the things that I may suffer.. so that in all things I may say: Your will not mine be done. Amen.

Tuesday 5 July 2022 St John 18: 12 - 18

The Rev'd Peter Moth,retired minister and broadcasting executive, St Andrew's, Kenton, Newcastle upon Tyne

So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. The woman said to Peter, 'You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?' He said, 'I am not.' Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing round it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

Reflection

At supper that last evening Jesus tells his disciples, "Where I am going you cannot come". Peter responds: " I will lay down my life for you." Five hours later, at the house of Annas, he is asked if he is a disciple and declares "I am not". He repeats the denial twice. There are five hours between the two events; John takes five chapters to record what Jesus tells them about the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the consequences. In those five hours they learned that he must leave them and be betrayed. Small wonder Peter found it hard to take, and characteristically vows: "I will lay down my life for you". Five hours later he denied he ever knew him.

We are always quick to condemn Peter for his denial and desertion, but it is easy for us; we weren't there. And is it really that simple? Jesus had told Peter that he will be betrayed and each time Peter had protested. In those five long hours he tells them he will go away and they must accept that.

spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Reflection

I am moved by the care, compassion and dignity offered to Jesus by Joseph and Nicodemus in a chapter that is full of cruelty, threat, fear and inhumanity.

One of the difficulties of writing a Daily Devotion reflection at the moment is the fast pace at which events are moving in our world. Of necessity we have to submit our thoughts many weeks before they are published. As I write this, news is reaching us from Ukraine of heart rending violence and destruction. We are mindful too of similar situations in other parts of the world.

What price an act of kindness? Can healing find a tiny crack of entrance through unbearable pain as one human reaches out to another with love? Jesus is dead. What does it matter if or how he is decently buried! Life has gone. It is over. And yet, of course, it does matter. It matters greatly. Burial rites are not just a cultural form that human societies go through because 'that's what we do'. Through the request to take Jesus's body, and through the myrrh, the aloes, the linen cloths and the new tomb in the garden, these two influential Jewish leaders shout out to us across the intervening centuries. "There is an alternative narrative," they say. "Some of us believed him. Some of us did protest the injustice of his treatment, even though we were overruled. Some of us finally came out of hiding and made our stand publicly."

All power to those who act with integrity and courage in places of horror.

as the perfect offering. By his sacrifice, Jesus becomes the new Passover Lamb thus removing the sins of the world. Whilst the original Passover Lamb led to the liberation of a people from bondage, the new Passover Lamb liberates the world from sin.

When a soldier pierces Jesus' side to make sure that he is dead, it is to remind us of the writer's claim that Jesus willingly gave his life that we might have life, and in abundance, "so that you also may believe." For the writer, blood and water point to Jesus as the source of life and this final act of violence against Jesus becomes an image declaring that life flows out from Jesus' death.

This is the beauty and the pain of the Incarnation. The Word became flesh to be crucified, to be pierced and eventually placed in a tomb. It is such flesh that reveals the amazing and extravagant love of God.

Jesus lays down his life in love for those whom he loves, and, in doing so, the meaning of both 'life' and 'love' are redefined. Such selfless love becomes the only true source of life. It is this love of Jesus to which we are called: to give to the end without counting the cost or holding back.

Such extravagant and amazing love
demands my soul, my life, my all.
What will this mean for me?

Thursday 14 July 2022 St John 19: 38 - 42

The Rev'd Dr Gwen Collins, retired minister, member of Avenue St Andrew's URC.

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the

Was Peter so downcast at the thought of losing his master, and so disillusioned when Jesus refused Peter's attempts to defend him with a knife at his arrest, that he finally gave up? It is not for us to judge; our own discipleship can be equally despondent. In these five hours and five chapters, Jesus talks of the Way, the Truth and the Life. The Way was hard and Peter stumbled; the Truth was harder and Peter needed time to work it out – it took him three days; but when he came to the empty tomb he found a resurrection that made sense of everything. And so must we.

Prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ, who are the Way, the Truth, and the Life:
suffer us not, we pray you, to wander from you, who are the Way;
nor to distrust you who are the Truth;
nor to look for strength anywhere but in you,
who are the Life; ever living and reigning
with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen

Wednesday 6 July 2022 St John 18: 19 - 24

Professor Graham Handscomb member of Christ Church URC Chelmsford

Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.' When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?' Jesus answered, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?' Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Reflection Speaking Truth to Power

Reading these verses afresh we realise how strongly they resonate with

our present age where authority figures and those in positions of power claim that truth is relative, facts are negotiable and alternative. Woe betide any ordinary citizens who suggest otherwise.

Jesus is questioned about two things which the authorities may have believed to be interrelated. He is asked about: his disciples, presumably alarmed regarding their perceived role in any possible insurrection; and about the nature of his teaching, concerned perhaps about what messages he had given about himself as a messianic king.

In this politically charged and dangerous situation, Jesus' responses are admirably adept and sure-footed. He straightforwardly states that he has done everything in public, and witnesses could be found to establish what has been said and done. In ironic contrast to the religious authorities questioning him, nothing has been underhand, subversive or clandestine. Jesus has always operated openly, above board and with candour. Such a perfectly reasonable point is seen as impertinence and Jesus is struck; the universal response of unprovoked brutal authority to the truthful statements of the innocent.

There is a power play going on here … but it is Jesus who is in command. Ironically the intolerant response of the authorities betrays their impotence. His unwavering and simple commitment to truth-telling places him in charge: "Jesus, in full control of the situation, appeals to what he has said; nothing has been out of place, he has made a perfectly proper legal point." (John Marsh).

There is a great solace, a great hope here for all those persecuted down the years for simply maintaining the truth. No matter how crushing and virulent the response, the truth will out.

Prayer

Dear God, today, more than ever,
it seems that truth is under attack.

Prayer

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly-minded,
For with blessing in His hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.

(from the Litany of St. James, written in the 4th Century)

Wednesday 13 July 2022 St John 19: 31 - 37

The Rev'd Nicola Furley-Smith, Secretary for Ministries

Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows[g] that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.' And again another passage of scripture says, 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced.'

Reflection

Here, within the holiness of the day of Preparation for Passover is 'business as usual'. As the priests begin their paschal slaughtering, the writer's parallel with Jesus as the Paschal lamb is overwhelming. When Pilate orders that their legs be broken so that they might die sooner, we learn that Jesus is already dead. The mention that none of Jesus' bones are broken echoes the instructions for the preparation of the Passover Lamb

fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Reflection

What an emotionally charged reading this is for a Tuesday morning in July. This narrative is at the heart of our faith. Volumes of books, articles and undergraduate essays have been written about atonement, sacrifice and suffering and all the details surrounding them but ultimately it boils down to a tortuous death by execution witnessed by the closest family in the depths of despair. We are often reluctant to stay in this moment especially as we know the end of the story is coming very soon.

As a teenager in Staffordshire singing JS Bach's St Matthew Passion annually the most moving moment of an overwhelming musical experience was always the profound silence after the death of Jesus. The conductor would lay down her baton and simply stand for what seemed like an eternity. In that moment everything stopped. In that moment sounds ceased and you could barely breathe. You were remembering and entering into a turning point in history that could never be undone.

Of course the music then moved on as the narrative moves on. Practicalities click in very quickly. After all Jesus died just before the sabbath started and things had to be done at speed and this is mirrored in Bach's setting of the story. There are loose ends to be tied up, arrangements to be made, rituals to be honoured.

But in the end all is silence. All we can do is dwell in that silence for as long as we can bear it for therein lies our own discovery of what salvation means to each one of us and to the world. No book, no essay, no sermon can persuade or convince us at this moment of Jesus' death. It is in the silence that truth and meaning are found.

(Written on Good Friday 2022)

But Jesus shows us the Way.
In his footsteps he keeps us on the narrow path;
and he shines a startling light
so that all is revealed;
nothing is hidden and the truth of the Kingdom reigns supreme. Amen.

Thursday 7 July 2022 St John 18: 25 - 27

The Rev'd Neil Thorogood, Minister of Trinity-Henleaze URC (Bristol) & Thornbury URC

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, 'You are not also one of his disciples, are you?' He denied it and said, 'I am not.' One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, 'Did I not see you in the garden with him?' Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

Reflection

So it comes, just as Jesus said it would. The first denial, as John paints the scene that night, has Simon Peter challenged by the servant-girl at the high priest's door, "Aren't you a disciple?" "I am not." (18:15-17).

As well as the dark there's the cold. John's gospel begins with light coming into darkness (1: 5, 9). Now, the darkness closes in and the world grows colder. Little wonder Simon huddles by the fire. He's close to the heart of the heartbreak as Jesus stands trial. He's as close as he dares to be. He's being as faithful as he can be, surrounded by the power and threat of those who want Jesus and his followers gone. Is he desperately plotting a rescue? Perhaps he knows the only thing left to do is stay as close as he can, watching, listening, terrified, waiting. But, whatever fragile faith and courage keeps him by the fire simply can't endure the heat of their recognition. The accusations hit him too fast. Almost before he knows it, the denials have tumbled out and the cock crows.

Few of us, I imagine, risk our lives for Christ the way Peter is being asked

to. Countless Christians have, of course, across the centuries. Many do now. But denials can maybe slip out in less dramatic fashion. Following Jesus becomes a bit awkward amongst friends or family who find it a mystery. An opportunity to voice faith slips past us. Peter fails here. Maybe that's as much a story we know as any of faith's triumphs. In time, John will have Peter's denials reworked. That's for later. For now, for today, maybe this story is inviting us to sit with times when we haven't done so well as disciples or churches. Maybe, with Peter, we're in a moment of confession and lament. And even here, God is.

Prayer

Forgive us, Jesus, when we falter.
We watch Simon's fireside suffering,
Recoil at his denials and yet…
And yet we know how testing times can come our way;
The chance to share our deepest faith just gently escapes,
The Spirit's voice gets drowned out by other arguments,
The witness and worship become a bit of a sham.
Hold us, Jesus, in such times.
Hold us and save us.
If we deny you, forgive us. Amen.

Friday 8 July 2022 St John 18: 28-38

Fay Rowland, author and researcher, worshipping at Christ the King, Kettering

Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' (This was to fulfil what Jesus had said when he

from my white Christian friends, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Yet, I see much transformation today because we didn't get over it. Historic policies and appointments, churches taking anti-racism conversations seriously. Theologians— like my friend Anthony G. Reddie— are no longer on the sidelines of Church academics but recognized resources on the frontlines of the church.

I'm proud that we didn't "just get over it". And I'm glad that the community of this Evangelist never got over it but kept telling the story.

And they passed it on to us.

Prayer

"When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide."

Congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis' final written statement before his death on July 17, 2020.

Tuesday 12 July 2022 St John 19: 25 - 30

The Rev'd Carole Elphick Retired minister worshipping at Muswell Hill

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to

to see who will get it.' This was to fulfil what the scripture says,

'They divided my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.'

And that is what the soldiers did.

Reflection

I am struck by the perspective by which the Evangelist of this Gospel re-tells the crucifixion. This is at least 60 years after the moment.

It's like me (born in 1978) reflecting on the Holocaust or the era of lynching of African Americans. More than likely, the writer wasn't there but is viscerally connected to it. This brutal story has been told many times to them. They know the effects of imperial brutality.

But the graphic narration makes you think they were truly there. The global necessity of the writing on the Cross says that Pilate wanted everybody to know. The soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothes was a common imperial custom of not just eliminating the accused but ensuring they die dishonourably.

This is one of those passages where the presence of "the Jews" has been tragically misinterpreted. John never speaks of a whole group's responsibility. What John does describe are all the major and minor players involved—the cogs in the wheel of brutality, and their pastimes. The lottery for Jesus' clothes makes one imagine a crude sacrament in the religion of Caesar being performed.

Perhaps the Christians of this Evangelist's time had their share of people who told them to "just get over it". It was so long ago, move on!

Two years ago, as people of colour and our allies protested globally against white supremacy, brutality and innocent deaths, that is sadly what I heard

indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

Reflection

"Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him well." If you are anything like me, you picture Morecambe and Wise mucking around with a skull. Did you know it's a mis-quote? I'm so familiar with Eric and Ernie's version that I remember it better than old Billy Shakespeare's.

Here's another: "Do you take this man?" … "I do."

Except it's not 'I do', but 'I will.' It makes a difference. Little words can mean a lot. *(Editor's Note - "I do" is used in Scotland!)*

There's a little word in today's passage that means a lot of Words don't get much shorter than that.

"My kingdom is not of this world." That's how many of us remember it. Jesus is explaining that he's not the 'riding on a noble steed, vanquishing the enemies' type of king that many were expecting, and that's true. But it might sound like his kingdom is other-worldly, ethereal, nothing to do with the here-and-now, and that's not.

The Greek word for ‘of’ is another short one: ‘ek’. It means of, but also out of, either physically (like ‘exit’) or logically – the reason or source. ‘My kingdom is not from this world.’

So where is it from? Where does ‘kingness’ come from?

Here in the UK we’re celebrating our Queen’s diamond jubilee, but some time over the next few years we’ll be mourning her loss and proclaiming a new king. Who proclaimed Jesus king?

It sure as heck wasn’t Pilate!

That’s what Jesus was saying: ‘Yes, I have a kingdom, but it comes from a much higher authority than this world. I’m not a king because the Roman Empire recognises me, or because the Jewish people call me that. I’m a king because God says so. My identity and calling are from God, not from this world.’

So what about us? What about me, what about you?
Are our identity and calling from this world, or from God?

Prayer

God of eternity, God of present,
God of there and then, God of here and now,
may I find the source of my being in your love,
may I know the base of my calling in you,
may I rest content in hearing you call me your own. Amen.

tracking the sun.

I encourage you to sing the psalm paraphrase, set to the strong tune ‘Ellacombe’.

Prayer

We praise you, God of grace and holiness.
Like the sunflower, we turn our faces towards your glory.
When we are tempted to compare ourselves
favourably or unfavourably with others,
remind us that because of your action
we are in Christ Jesus.
In Christ we find our right-standing,
our holiness, and our liberation.
Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory! Amen

Monday 11 July 2022 St John 19: 17 - 24

The Rev’d William Young, pastor Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ, Washington DC

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’ Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, ‘Do not write, “The King of the Jews”, but, “This man said, I am King of the Jews.”’ Pilate answered, ‘What I have written I have written.’ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, ‘Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it

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You can hear the tune suggested for this hymn, Ellacombe, here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NMXsBB5o0g

Reflection

Holiness is the keynote of this psalm. In the paraphrased version, God 'reigns in holiness and light' and in response human beings are urged to worship and praise God, confessing God's holy Name. In the original text there is the strong suggestion of humans trembling and inanimate creation quaking in the presence of the holy God. This primal response of creation before its Creator reflects God's awe-inspiring otherness.

In the presence of the Lord's overwhelming holiness, our puny attempts to be holier-than-thou on the human level are relativised. Our pretence to be better than, or sometimes worse than, the other person is exposed as futile. The only comparison worth making is a contrast. The holiness of God who 'rules in righteousness' is absolute; any holiness that the human being has is God's gift through covenant relationship.

To understand the holiness that human beings receive from God, the Apostle Paul points us to its source not in ourselves but in Christ: "No place is left for any human boasting in the presence of God. Because of God's action you are in Christ Jesus. God has made Christ our wisdom and in him we have our right-standing, our holiness, and our liberation." (1 Corinthians 1:29-30) This is good news because it shifts the focus away from oneself toward Christ. Christ mediates God's holiness to us, and we 'by grace restored from sin and all its stains' find our true selves and highest calling in glorifying God.

When we join in the hymn in praise of God's glory, singing: 'Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might' we experience, momentarily at least, blessed self-forgetfulness as we are caught up with the faithful in heaven and on earth. That moment of communion, when we are aligned with the holy God in praise, may be likened to a field of sunflowers all facing and

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After he had said this, he went out to the people again and told them, 'I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' They shouted in reply, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a bandit. Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.' The people answered him, 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.'

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?' Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.' From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the people cried out, 'If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.'

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was

about noon. He said to the people, 'Here is your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.' Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

Reflection

People often get anxious if the Church is seen as too political. When I studied for my degree we looked at the, then new, Faith in the City, report which the Church of England produced. The government of the day branded it as Marxist. Even now if the Church "strays" into politics, people can get uneasy. Yet in today's passage we see brutal politics at play.

The people, egged on by their leaders, bay for blood fearful that Jesus' claims to kingship would bring down the wrath of Rome. These fears weren't unreasonable - the Romans did end Israel's statehood - something not recovered until our own age. Pilate is worried, not so much by Jesus who, irritatingly, doesn't give easy answers, but by the people who are being stirred up. Pilate knows if he puts a foot wrong the chief priests would be writing to Rome saying he'd ignored a rebel who set himself up as a king. So Pilate bows to the politics of the day and has Jesus killed - the people weren't satisfied with a simple flogging.

Since its earliest days the Church has tried to explain Jesus' death in ways which are decidedly unpolitical. We like to puzzle about what atonement might mean, and how Jesus' life, death and new life relate to forgiveness for sin and our lives now. All this is interesting and good but, at the same time, I'm always a little worried that we miss the naked politics at play - the people's, Pilate's and Jesus'.

Jesus treats Pilate with some disdain and reminds Pilate that his power comes from God not the emperor. Both of these are deeply political things to do - to show disdain to the occupying power and to show that, even in all the might, power and pomp of Rome, God reigns was very brave. How do we tell our political masters now that they will, one day, have to give

an account to the King of the Ages?

Prayer

O God of earth and altar,
bow down and hear our cry,
our earthly rulers falter,
our people drift and die;
the walls of gold entomb us,
the swords of scorn divide,
take not thy thunder from us,
but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches,
from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches
that comfort cruel men,
from sale and profanation
of honour and the sword,
from sleep and from damnation,
deliver us, good Lord!

GK Chesterton

Sunday 10 July 2022 Psalm 99

The Rev'd Dr Julian Templeton is Minister of St John's United Reformed Church New Barnet

The Lord is king,
enthroned in might
on wings of cherubim;
he reigns in holiness and light,
bow down to worship him!
Beyond all majesty and praise
his holy Name confess:
the King of everlasting days,
who rules in righteousness.

2: Of old to priests
and prophets known
with trembling, fear and awe,
he gave his people, set in stone,
his statutes and his law.
By those who called upon his Name
the voice of God was heard,
his presence shown
in cloud and flame
when they obeyed his word.

3: O magnify the God of grace who hears his people's cry,
and come with songs before his face, exalt his Name on high!
to see at last, by grace restored from sin and all its stains,
the holy mountain of the Lord where God in glory reigns.

Timothy Dudley Smith