

## Preaching the Passion: Mark 15 : 1 - 20

Begin by thinking about images from the news, images of prisoners who are tortured and abused, crowds demonstrating, wanting their own way which you may have seen over recent months or years. They are images which belong to the present, to today's world issues, today's people, today's religions, today's politics. Yet they can also take us back 2000 years to different issues, in a different place, in a different political climate, to a different religious scene, affecting different people. But perhaps they challenge us in the way we reflect on those involved in the events of the Passion of Jesus as we reflect on our lives and God's world today.

The part that we are thinking about today began early on the Friday morning with Jesus facing his second trial, this time before Pilate the Roman Governor. Jesus is alone, no disciples anywhere to be seen. The week had started with him surrounded by friendly crowds and 12 disciples. Gradually that number dwindled to 3 and then 1, but that one was Peter who denied knowing him. The vast crowd had evaporated, being no where to be seen when trouble lurked.

Those who had conducted the first trial had no power to sentence Jesus to death, which is what they wanted. That sentence had to be imposed by the Roman Governor hence the 2nd trial. The charges had to be more than blasphemy if Pilate was going to be able to act. It was a political set up. He would have wanted nothing to do with a Jewish religious argument so the Jews engineered the charges of perverting the people, forbidding them to give tribute to Caesar and calling himself a king. They were manipulating the situation to get what they wanted. They knew there was no truth in what they were accusing Jesus of and so did Pilate. Justice didn't come into the picture. Pilate simply wanted to get through the Passover season without any riots and so the questioning, such as it was, began. "Are you the King of the Jews?" "You say that I am" was Jesus' reply. Pilate continued his questioning but from then on Jesus remained silent. His silence said it all. He was an innocent, isolated man up against religious leaders who were full of fear and Pilate knew it. Jesus did not fight back, after all what could one person do when they were up against both religious and political systems who were threatened by him, threatened by his love and God's love for the world. How

many other people over the years have been silent, innocent and suffered at the hands of political rulers looking out for themselves, leaders such as Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Hitler, Stalin, dare I add Mugabe in Zimbabwe today?

Jesus, the accused, the victim, the innocent one, is silent. Pilate is taking the easy way out, ultimately not interested in justice despite knowing that Jesus was innocent. Pilate is someone caught between his own conscience, and the wishes of the majority. By going with the wishes of the majority he maintains the status quo, avoids trouble but also acts against his better judgement. The needs of the majority can still take precedence today over the suffering of an individual or minority at all levels of society – local, national and international.

The crowd, who were they? At least one of the books I've read this week suggests that the crowd was probably a very different crowd from the one that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It is suggested that they may have been a mob of Barabbas' supporters stirred up by the chief priests. Pilate offered them the chance to save Jesus, to have him released according to the tradition of releasing one prisoner at Passover time. At the very suggestion the crowd went mad. Pilate was going to go with the masses, he couldn't risk what might happen if he didn't. Confronted with a choice between Jesus and Barabbas we all know the crowd chose Barabbas. Barabbas was a leader of armed rebellion and people loved him for it. Jesus and Barabbas stood for two different ways of living, and as has happened time and time again over the centuries people have chosen hate and violence over love and peace. Think of Northern Ireland only this last week and Israel & the Palestine. The anger of the crowd emphasises Jesus' silence. People in a crowd often get carried along and behave in a different way than they would on their own. Crowds can be powerful and can be used to try to make a point. It's often difficult as individuals to stand up against a crowd for whatever reason but sometimes that is what we are called to do if we are going to challenge any of the injustices in our world today. The quiet life is not always the life to choose. On this occasion the crowd won and Pilate, choosing the easier option, released Barabbas and ordered Jesus to be flogged, tortured and then crucified.

We do not know anything about the soldiers as individuals but we do know how they behaved as people under orders. Jesus, like so many political prisoners before and after him is tortured and humiliated by them. Their logic had a brutal simplicity. He said he was a king so they dressed him up as one. A purple robe, but to put it on him they first stripped him naked (as human beings we are never more vulnerable than when we are naked), a crown of thorns on his head, that would scratch, and scar him. They made him a kind of pantomime king. Something to laugh at, to scorn, they mocked him, beat him, made fun of him in a way that bullies easily do when they have someone who is defenseless in their midst. Someone who won't fight back, who's a bit different, someone who remains silent. The actions of the soldiers was cruel but it was what happened and what can happen when people are following orders and not thinking for themselves as individuals.

There is still no peace in the land where this story took place and much that happens there the world does not know about.

This Lent I am journeying to Jerusalem with Christian Aid. It is a Lent course on their website which connects the events and places of 2000 years ago with what is happening today and each day has a new entry.

Military service is compulsory for most Jewish Israelis and some of the stories reveal actions of soldiers today similar to those that happened in the time of Jesus. Soldiers following orders are part of huge injustices. Yehuda, a young Israeli ex soldier, tells of a project called Breaking the Silence. It enables men and women to share their experiences and tell the world something of what is happening.

One ex-soldier wrote, "It takes time to understand that for three years we were not human beings. We were kind of zombies. If I was told - and I was told - to hit an old woman in the stomach with my rifle handle to shut her up, I would do it with out giving it a thought. .... once a team member went too far. He hit a person, pushed him, made him fall, kicked him, really hit him, it was a sixty year old man. ... there was no law and no judge in this company, everyone was doing whatever one felt like." We've heard it all before.

The former Israeli soldiers who are part of Breaking the Silence are making it their mission to spread the word about what happens in the occupied territories. Their goal is not to influence policy or castigate soldiers, but simply to announce to Israeli society: if you want an occupation, you should know that this is what it looks like. They are revealing and challenging some of the injustices that are going on in our world today. Their consciences won't let them stay silent even though their government dictates that they are not allowed to talk about their actions as soldiers.

Breaking the silence is a small step towards some good news but stop. Perhaps we have to wait for these stories because we're rushing ahead. In 2009 we know what happens after the story of the Passion. This isn't an easy place to be but perhaps we need to be patient, stay with what is happening on the Friday morning, try to feel the story of the Passion as it would have been, to feel the helplessness and hopelessness of the situation as it was.

The Passion story has a timeless, universality about it which can speak both to our individual experiences and to global issues. It is because of this story that many men and women have found the courage to speak out against wrongdoing and injustice. How will it speak to us as we continue to immerse ourselves in it this Lent and Holy Week, perhaps standing in the company of Pilate, the chief priests, the soldiers, the Friday crowd, Barabbas, Jesus or the absent disciples? Who will you choose to be with?