

During this season of Holy Week David and myself are sharing some thoughts around the central theme of 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?'. Over the course of these nights we are looking at some of the participants in the whole drama. David began last night with Peter. Peter so courageous, so faithful and yet so vulnerable. He was the one who confessed Jesus as the Christ, he was the one who declared that he would stand by him, who followed him into the courtyard of the High Priest's house – and yet he was the one who denied that he ever knew him and wept bitter tears of remorse and repentance. It is Peter's very humanity that makes him so attractive; it is in and through his very humanity that Peter comes through as a champion of the Gospel.

Over the course of these nights David is tackling two of the disciples, I will be looking at two representatives of the establishment; the High Priest and Pilate, figure heads of the religious and political establishment of their day. That sharing out of themes was not to the forefront of our minds as we sat over coffee in the Rectory. I thought over that as I watched Songs of Praise for Palm Sunday the other night from Canterbury Cathedral. In the course of the programme the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop Julian Welby, was reflecting on the meaning of holy Week for him in his own faith journey, his experience of prayer, of personal loss, the meaning for him of the cross as an expression of God's unconditional love for him. One aspect of the Holy Week story that he felt uncomfortable with, as head of an institutional Church, was the reaction of the religious establishment to the figure of Jesus.

Religious establishments can be suspicious of what they see as a maverick element. We have to look no further than the history of our own two churches to see an example of that. John Wesley, an ordained priest of the Church of England, following his conversion experience at a Moravian Church Service, when his 'heart was strangely warmed', sought renewal in the Church of

Jesus was sentenced to death for blasphemy. He claimed a unique identification with God that he and God were so close that what he was, God was; and what God was, he was. No wonder Caiaphas was consumed with rage, declaring that Jesus was condemned by his own words.

There was a sense in which Caiaphas was right. You cannot be neutral in the face of someone who makes himself out to be the Son of God. We must either worship him and give him our life – or utterly condemn. In the words of C S Lewis, Jesus was either right, or mad, or utterly evil.

We are not dealing this week with the romantic death of an attractive young man who was hard done by. The Christian Church has not been built on the admiration of his teaching or sympathy for his death. Admiration or sympathy do not sustain people or give them hope. It is built on the fundamental assertion that he who was lifted up on the Cross was nothing less than the Son of God. He was crucified because he identified his message with the heart and mind of God. The tragedy is that Caiaphas and the religious tradition that waited for the coming of God's Messiah, was not able to recognise him when he stood before them.

To Caiaphas and the Council that night, the issue was simple; if what Jesus says is true we must worship; if what he says is false he is a blasphemer and must be destroyed. There was no middle way, detachment was impossible.

Thankfully nowadays, we do not put people to death for blasphemy. But perhaps with the gentleness we have lost some of the passion. A priest of the Church of Ireland, known as Woodbine Willie to the troops he ministered to in the trenches of the First World War, put it rather nicely in a poem called

'Indifference'. At Golgotha, he said, they responded to Jesus with Passion, but...

When Jesus came to Birmingham
They simply passed Him by,
They never hurt a hair of Him,
They only let Him die;
For men have 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 winter rain
That drenched Him through and through;
The crowd went home and left the streets
Without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall
And cried for Calvary.

God can deal with our opposition far easier than he can deal with our indifference. Opposition at least shows that we care, that we are thinking about the issues.

The Church makes great claims for Jesus:

we believe that God was with him, that God was in him.

God was among us in Christ, among us in the streets of Jerusalem, in the Garden of Gethsemane, raised high on the Cross.

he died that sins might be forgiven, he died that we might live.

Whatever else we may say about Caiaphas – at least he took these claims seriously.

Lesson Mark 14:53-65

⁵³ They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. ⁵⁴ Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. ⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. ⁵⁶ For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷ Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, ⁵⁸ "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.' " ⁵⁹ But even on this point their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" ⁶¹ But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" ⁶² 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.' "

⁶³ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? ⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All of them condemned him as deserving death. ⁶⁵ Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophecy!" The guards also took him over and beat him.