

Good Friday

John 18:1-11

Judas,

He washed my feet last night, but I feel dirty, so dirty. Dirty like I will never be clean again. No amount of ritual bathing, or prayers, or sacrifice can make me clean. The dirt is not in my skin but in my soul. The taste of the sauce on last night's bread – the last thing he gave me – will haunt my mouth forever. The bitterness of its flavour will never leave me.

How could I have done it? I was the one named for a great freedom leader of the past – Judas Maccabaeus, and Judah the father of the tribe of David. I had been brought up to look for the coming rescue of my people from the Roman oppression – oppression that was worse than the previous invaders of generations past. As a child I had been told of the repeated enslavement of my people by the various imperial powers... and their subsequent rescue from our God – the One who created the universe.

When I first joined the disciples of Jesus, I had high hopes. I heard him preaching about the "kingdom of God" being near. This is it, I thought. This is going to be our Messiah who, like Moses in the days of history, like Judas Maccabeus, my namesake, rescues us from the evils of oppression. But then... then... it's hard to explain.

He raises his friend Lazarus from the dead, would you believe, and I thought that was time for him to act. He came into Jerusalem parodying Pilate's procession, and I thought it was time. He gets a clear sign from heaven, and I thought that would be time. But no. He starts talking about his death. That is not how it should happen! The Messiah does not die – he needs to lead his people in open rebellion and rescue them. Where is the rescue in all of this?

So I go to the temple authorities thinking the threat will make him act. What does he do? He lets them arrest him and tells Peter not to start a fight. It's like he has given up, but then he has not given up – I can see that in his eyes. And I know that I have betrayed him.

From a distance, I see people gatherings to watch the spectacle and I wonder: where are you in the crowd?

John 18:12-18

Caiaphas

Sorry for pointing out the pragmatics, but it is better for one person to die than have all the people killed by Rome. Quite simply, we need to squash any dissent if we are going to survive as a nation. We have all seen what Rome has done in other rebellious provinces... Their response has been repeated by imperial powers throughout history and I presume that repetition will continue on for as long as we have history.

All we really want is to live a quiet life in our own land. Is that too much to ask? Apparently, it is. And I feel manipulated by Pilate, and Rome, and all the imperial authorities. You see, they made sure the Temple has control over the people,

because they know the people will listen to us as one of their own. At the same time, I have to feed the people Rome's propaganda to make sure I stay in my position. What happens if I don't? Rome does not want to make a hero out of me, so they won't do anything directly. Quite simply they will stir up the opposition to me from the people, use this as an excuse for a crackdown, and then leave the people to destroy me and my family. So I have few choices.

It doesn't really matter what I think about this itinerant teacher from the outer province of Galilee. It doesn't matter whether or not I see him as a threat. I have to hand him over to Pilate. As always, he will use this to extract more promises of loyalty until I am tangled and bound in my own words.

I look to my colleagues for advice and support; as I do so I wonder: where are you in the crowd?

John 18:19-27

Peter

It took bravery to stand up for my friend, and for what? He told me to put my sword away and just went with them. It took bravery to follow and enter the courtyard. Then I felt trapped. The gate was closed. If people knew I was one of the disciples, it would be curtains for me... and my bravery evaporated like a puddle in the blazing summer heat.

How could I? How could I do it? My best friend. All those years we spent together – learning, reflecting, sharing our joys and sorrows. All of that, and it came to me saying I did not know him.

Oh, I could justify it in a thousand ways, on one level that would not be a hard thing to do. But they would all be excuses and my heart would still cry out for my friend being questioned in a kangaroo court. The last time I see my friend I know that I said I did not know him. And the worst of it was that he knew, and the others knew, that I was a coward and denied him. All those people milling around – did they see what happened, were you there? Where were you in the crowd?

John 18:28-19:16a

Pilate

They all hate me. Rome didn't really want me to be appointed, but for the intervention of Sejanus. The Jews really do not want me... nor do they want portraits of the Emperor in their stinking temple, or the Roman coins, and there's rumours those Samaritans, who are also in my prefecture, have sent a messenger to report me to Rome for "cruelty." Ha, cruelty. I treat them lightly compared to what I could do, but there's also the rumour that Rome will be recalling me as soon as the Passover has been dealt with for another year. Then I would lose everything, including possibly my life.

I don't have too many options at this point, and it doesn't matter what I think of this person Jesus, who they have brought for execution. Their leaders, on the other hand, are manipulating me. As much as they hate the Samaritans, they hate the Romans more, so they are probably in cahoots with each other to get rid of me. I'm going to

show them who is boss and wring out of them every confession I can as to their loyalty to Rome and Caesar. Not that their words are worth much.

At least they've chosen a quiet time of day. Probably like me they are afraid of what would happen if they did this once the pilgrims who celebrated his entry into Jerusalem have woken up and hear the news. The Jewish leaders want to make sure it is a done deal before it is too late in the day. Maybe then I've got them on this one – they are scared of the people.

I thought I had them for a moment, but no, they had me over a barrel. If I let him free, I would have had the upper hand for a moment, but they would have told my superiors that I freed a man claiming to be a king and that would be treason.

As this man is led away to a terrible fate, I see the stirring crowds of people and the smaller crowd who have just left. Two groups of people with their own agendas. Where are you in the crowd?

John 19:16b-30

Blow out the candle.

Soldier

I've got to admit he was a bit of a comedian this one and it almost makes me sorry to be killing him now, but a job is a job and when it comes down to it, it's either him or me. My superiors would be more than just saying something if I don't follow orders.

But the other day he made me laugh with his donkey and the pilgrims gathered around mocking the might of Rome with their simple procession while Pilate rode into Jerusalem in splendour, surrounded by row after row of soldiers. I guess someone's nose got put out of joint at that point or maybe there is more to it than I can see.

It might sound awful to say it, but the more we bash him up before the crucifixion, the quicker he will die and that's kind of being merciful. It must be an awful death to have the brutality that can get inflicted by some soldiers as the better option. I guess the commanders see this as a bit of sport for the soldiers, it keeps the men happy and the people fearful. No different, in many ways, to being sent off as a gladiator, although the survival time is somewhat shorter.

These men being crucified won't need their clothes anymore, so there's a little bonus payment for the men in this task, plus a game of dice to pass the time while we wait for them to die. Not a bad day's work, all in all.

People are wandering in and out of the city. We always crucify people on busy roadways, just to remind the onlookers they really do not want to rise up against Roman power. The Jewish people believe that someone crucified is cursed because the person is hung between heaven and earth. That works for me to keep them under control. If nothing else, public executions scares the people into submission.

As always, there are so many reactions. Some people hurry past fearfully, others jeer or mock. Then there are those who have a sad look in their eyes. I watch the people going back and forth from the city and wonder: where are you in the crowd?

John 19:31-42

Mother of Jesus

I remember being wracked with pain when I brought him into the world all those years ago. The tiny baby in my arms. A fragile life that needed nurture and love. I prayed he would make it through infancy with all the diseases that babies can catch. I prayed he would survive his childhood and the accidents that could so easily kill a child. I have prayed over him every step of the journey and when he left home to teach the world about God's love, I kept praying.

Now I once again feel wracked with pain. His body is broken and torn by the vicious soldiers of Rome and with it I feel my body being torn in two as it had been when I brought him into the world. How can my little baby come to this point, strung up between heaven and earth, gasping out his last breaths.

No one should die like this. We all hope to die in our bed, surrounded by children and grandchildren, in the loving arms of our family. Being crucified does not just mean physical pain, but also the emotional pain of dying separated from family and all who love you.

Let me weep for my child. The tears will not stop. My heart is torn in two with the pain. This pain will never end. No Passover feast will ever be the same again. My boy is gone... my boy is gone.

How can people walk past? How can anyone continue living? Don't they feel the pain as I do? He and I are utterly alone. It is finished.