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Diocese of Chelmsford

Sermon

The Death of the Messiah

Palm Sunday – 25 March 2018

SERMON (podcast)
for Palm Sunday 2018 (25/3/18)
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Palm Sunday has two clear themes: first Jesus rides into Jerusalem; and then we hear the reading of the death of Jesus. Whether or not you have a procession featuring a donkey, and whether or not you're doing a full dramatic passion play, today rams home the journey of Holy Week: the people receive Jesus rejoicing but five days later they jeer him as he dies a horrible death.

Here I want to look briefly at the different Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus. In the deepest sense they are the same. Therefore the different emphases in each are even more significant as we seek to draw very close to Jesus in his passion.

First a word about "passion". For us it means strong emotion, passionate. But that's not its original meaning and not what it means here. "Passion" really means "being done to". It's the root of words like "patient". Being done to, helpless, unable to act. That's why the chapters in each Gospel that talk about the crucifixion are known as "passion narratives": they tell us how Jesus was "done to".

As we go on this journey, we need to clear our minds about what we think we know. A lot of Christian piety and art focus on the suffering of Jesus, and films like Mel Gibson's *The Passion* depict blood and gore and endless whipping.

But none of that is central in the Gospels. Certainly Jesus suffered. But the Gospels know that tens of thousands died like this, whipped and crucified. This was ordinary suffering. The Gospels only spend one verse on the crucifixion itself because it is not the **suffering** of Jesus that is extraordinary but the **person** of Jesus as he undergoes it, because it's God who's being crucified.

First to Mark and Matthew. Their accounts of the death of Jesus are very similar - at points almost word for word. And it is very familiar territory for us as western Christians. It is very much the lens through which western art and spirituality have seen the death of Jesus.

From the last supper onwards the stress is on abandonment. Jesus prophesies that the disciples will fail him, and they do - falling asleep in Gethsemane and running away when Jesus is arrested. In Gethsemane itself Jesus' behaviour expresses the mood. And after his arrest, Jesus ceases to act almost completely. He is literally "being done to". Jesus is "handed over" - a word used again and again in the Passion Narratives; he is rendered helpless.

There are moving stylistic touches. When Jesus is slapped, Mark and Matthew explicitly refer back to the suffering servant in Isaiah 50 - but of course they expect us to know that in Isaiah this goes hand in hand with the promise of vindication by God.

In Matthew and Mark, at the cross, is the bleakness of a terrible death, Jesus cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He is quoting the opening of Psalm 22. But there's a twist even there - the evangelists again expect us to know that although Psalm 22 begins with abandonment, it ends as a song of praise.

Luke's biography of Jesus is a strong contrast. His Gospel as a whole shows Jesus as friend of our frailty and as example of how to face trials and persecution. So in Luke at the last supper there is no prediction that the disciples will fail; no sense of abandonment. Indeed throughout the passion narrative in Luke there is a deep sense of Jesus' continuous communion with the Father. In Gethsemane he does not fall prostrate but kneels, ready to face what is coming, and he even heals the servant's ear. At the cross he prays for those who crucify him and welcomes the penitent thief to paradise.

Through these unique features Luke gives a very different version of Jesus' death. In Luke Jesus' last words from the cross are again a quotation from the Psalms. But this is no cry of abandonment. Rather Jesus quotes a line from Psalm 31 expressing obedience and trust - "into your hands I commend my Spirit" - words that we will hear again from Luke on the lips of Stephen as he is stoned to death.

John's Gospel adopts a wholly different structure from the other three, and the only miracle all four have in common is the feeding of the 5,000. That's of course highly significant but needs to wait for another podcast!

John's account of the death of Jesus is also a huge contrast. For one thing, the date and the time are different: it is the day *before* the Passover, not - as in the other Gospels - the day of the Passover; and Jesus begins his journey to the cross at noon, just as the Passover lambs are being prepared. The message is clear: Jesus is the new Passover lamb who will obliterate the need for further sacrifice.

From the beginning Jesus is in control. He is active; what he says leads to outcomes. He has absolutely no doubts or questions, and has no need of help. At his arrest he speaks the divine name "I am" (unfortunately translated in most Bibles as "I am he") with the extraordinary result that the soldiers fall flat on their faces. There is an absolute sense of Jesus' continuous communion with the father. Again no sense of abandonment or desolation. In the trials Jesus takes control. He has no need of help - John insists that Jesus carries his own cross; there is no place in John for Simon of Cyrene. And Jesus' final words from the cross - this time not from the Psalms - is a cry of triumph: "it is completed!" He is even active in death - blood and water flowing from his wounded side.

This is all just a thumb nail sketch. But it is supremely important - the New Testament gives us three contrasting and complementary pictures of the death of Jesus. None of them answer what may well be our most urgent questions - why did Jesus die? what does his death mean? What they do is set before us the crucified Messiah and invite us to respond.

That's our job this Holy Week - to enter deeply into these contrasting narratives of the same extraordinary 24 hours. To walk very closely with Jesus, holding together all these ambiguities - abandonment and communion, despair and trust, tragedy and triumph. But ultimately to stand before the cross and know just how much God loves us.

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