

*The soldier with his spear*

When you've preached often on Good Friday and heard John's extraordinarily dramatic account of Jesus' trial and death over and over again, you think you know all the characters in the story pretty well. There's Simon Peter, warming himself by the fire in the high-priest's courtyard, and denying Jesus three times. And how many sermons have been preached on Peter's failure, Peter who had promised so much, vowing allegiance to Jesus right to the end, promising faithfulness even when everyone else abandoned Jesus – and yet who bottled it when the moment came? And there are the religious authorities, Annas and Caiaphas, who see Jesus as a risk, a threat to the fragile status quo and who hand him on to Pilate. We often hear about them and Jesus' mockery of a trial before the Jewish Council. And of course there's Pontius Pilate, supposedly the judge of Jesus but who finds himself judged by his prisoner; Pilate who's supposedly the representative of the mighty Roman Empire, but who seems to find himself painted into a corner by this strange Galilean with his elusive answers and his strange, enigmatic silence. I've heard many sermons on Pilate – and preached a few. And then there's Mary, Jesus' mother and the one who is known as the Beloved Disciple and who stand at the foot of the cross and find themselves entrusted into one another's care, she taken into his home, the beginnings of the new community that will emerge out of Jesus' death. And yes, that is a scene that has been well covered in sermons and paintings and hymns.

But what about the soldier? What about the soldier with his spear who pierces the side of the wounded Christ. We usually skip over him. We don't think too much about him and what he was doing and why. Yet it is a wonderfully revealing moment in the death of Jesus and one that bears pondering for a few moments.

So firstly, what do we know about this man? Well, we know that he had a grisly task. Crucifixion, you see, was an exceedingly cruel means of execution. And the Romans often left the bodies of their crucified victims up on the crosses to die their dreadful lingering deaths and then to rot and to be eaten by the vultures as a warning, a deterrent. Jewish sensitivities, however had to be observed. Bodies writhing in agony on their grim scaffolds could not be left

overnight to taint the Sabbath day, and so the soldiers come to break the legs of the crucified ones. The mechanics of crucifixion need not detain us, but suffice to say that when the legs are broken the victims can no longer lift their weight to ease the pressure on their lungs and so they suffocate - a mercy of sorts, insofar as death is at least hastened. Jesus, however, will not die that way. The Roman soldier came to break Jesus' legs - only to find he was already dead. I wonder if he felt cheated. I wonder if he was a sadist who enjoyed inflicting this final agony on these miserable wretches, already tortured beyond imagination.

But the fact that Jesus was already dead was significant for this reason. In the context of John's Gospel it meant that Jesus would not have death inflicted upon him - no, he would determine his moment to die. In other words, no-one takes Jesus' life from him - he lays it down when he chooses. As he said earlier in John's Gospel, '... I lay down my life, to receive it back again. No one takes it away from me; I am laying it down of my own free will.' In other words, he is in charge. He, and not Rome, chooses his moment. And this is very much John's portrayal of Jesus. John, like all the Gospel writers, is writing his account of Jesus' life after Jesus' resurrection and for John even more than all the others that affects his depiction of Jesus, who is painted gloriously. It's as if his triumph over death is being read back into his life, as if the light of the resurrection is shining back over Jesus, portraying him even before and during his crucifixion as one who is contemptuous of death, refusing to be controlled by it, but who is sovereign and regal even as he goes to his execution. He is in charge, even of his death. That is why he is so intimidating to Pilate in that role-reversal where prisoner and judge exchange places. That is why in John Jesus' being lifted up on the cross is presented as an enthronement, his crucifixion a coronation. Note one little detail of Jesus' execution. After Pilate has condemned him he is taken away and dressed up as a king, as in the other gospels. They put the crown of thorns on his head and dress him in purple and call him King of the Jews - but there is no reference to them mocking and ridiculing him the way they do in other gospels. And the reason they don't mock is that in John they are actually acknowledging, despite themselves, that he really is king. That is why Pilate insists on that sign on the cross - not 'he said he was the King of the Jews', but 'the King of the Jews'. In John's Gospel Jesus goes to his death regal and sovereign and in control of events - the Lord of Glory.

And along comes this soldier and his spear. Why does he thrust it into Jesus' side? Is it not clear that Jesus is dead? Is he just making sure? Or is this one final gesture of contempt? One of the sickening features of war is the shameful reports you hear of dead bodies abused and violated on the battlefield, any shred of dignity denied them in their death, and perhaps there was something of that here. We can imagine this soldier with a chuckle stabbing his spear into the dead Christ, expressing all his contempt and disdain for these wretched Jews whose nation he, a proud Roman, had been sent to occupy. Here is one more degradation, the final humiliation of this so-called Messiah.

But what happens next? Well, we are told that 'at once blood and water came out'. Blood and water – what's the significance of those? Well, of course they are symbols of life. The Jews were familiar with water as a crucial agent, bringing life out of the earth, bringing life to parched crops, transforming deserts into gardens. And the Jews believed that blood was the very carrier of life, that the life is in the blood and that's why they dealt so carefully with blood. Water and blood, symbols of life – that is why they are represented in our two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, because these are means by which new life is imparted.

So there we have it - the Roman spear is thrust into Jesus' side, the final indignity, the final desecration of his body. But God meets that gesture of contempt by pouring blessing out of Jesus' limp body. Death's final blow, courtesy of that spear, is met by rivers of life. And Jesus remains in charge, right to the end. And of course the blood and water prefigure Jesus' resurrection. As they pour out of his body so he bursts out of the tomb, overflowing with life.

So we come today and stand at the foot of the cross and look up, just like that soldier with his spear. And we see Jesus exalted, his cross a throne, the King of kings in all his majesty. John's message is clear - this Jesus is no victim. He is in no way at the mercy of events, in no way subject to the priests or the politicians or the Pilates of this world. All the powers of death have conspired against him. All the forces of sin and evil and wickedness have come to a point at the tip of that soldier's spear as it was thrust into his side. And out of his side come blood and water and life. The world does its worst to Jesus, and Jesus triumphs over it. And he dies with a cry not of despair but of triumph: 'It is finished!'

This is the Christ who we are called to enthrone in our lives. We who are often at the mercy of life; we who are often subject to the whims of what the world throws at us. We come to the cross, and we bow. Amen.