

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD (5 April 2020)

Judas to Betray Jesus

Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

The Passover with the Disciples

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.

When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."

Institution of the Lord's Supper

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Jesus Foretells Peter's Denial

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus

While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him." And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left him and fled.

Jesus Before Caiaphas and the Council

Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to

make? What is it that these men testify against you?" But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

Peter Denies Jesus

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Jesus Delivered to Pilate

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

Judas Hangs Himself

Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

Jesus Before Pilate

Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

The Crowd Chooses Barabbas

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" And he said, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

Pilate Delivers Jesus to Be Crucified

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

Jesus Is Mocked

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

The Crucifixion

As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not

drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

The Death of Jesus

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Jesus Is Buried

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The Guard at the Tomb

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard (Matthew 26:14-27:66 – ESV).

Introductory notes

General

"What can we learn about the events of Jesus' last days? One thing is certain: he was condemned to death during the reign of Tiberius, by the governor Pontius Pilate. We have that information from Tacitus, the famous Roman historian (*The Annals*, 15, 44, 3). Flavius Josephus says the same thing and adds some interesting details: Jesus 'attracted many Jews and many people of Greek origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation lodged by some of our leaders, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him did not stop loving him' (*Jewish Antiquities*, 18, 3, 3). These details coincide with what we know from the Christian sources. We can summarize them as follows: Jesus was executed on a cross; the sentence was handed down by the Roman governor; he had been accused earlier by the Jewish authorities; Jesus alone was crucified, with no attempt to eliminate his followers. This means that Jesus was considered dangerous because he denounced the roots of the prevailing system, but neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities saw him as the leader of an insurrectionist group; otherwise they would have taken action against the whole group. In this case it was enough to eliminate the leader, but at the same time they needed to terrorize his followers and sympathizers. Nothing could do that more effectively than a public crucifixion, witnessed by the crowds that filled the city." (José A Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*, Revised Edition, translated by Margaret Wilde, Convivium Press, 2007/2015, 353.)

There are remarkable similarities in the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' passion and death. All of them make similar references to the following:

- The treachery of Judas – only Luke and John link Judas' betrayal with "Satan"
- Peter's denial – the foretelling and the actual denials
- The prayer in the garden
- The arrest of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane
- Jesus before the Sanhedrin
- Jesus before Pilate
- The crucifixion

- The burial
- The empty tomb

There are also some significant variations in the Gospel accounts:

- Only the synoptics tell of the actual moment of treachery of Judas, the preparation for the Passover, the institution of the Eucharistic meal, the moment Jesus is taken before Pilate, the mocking of Jesus on the cross.
- Only Matthew tells us of the death of Judas and the guard at the tomb. He is also the only one who has Judas join in the questioning as to who will betray Jesus. Interestingly enough, Judas calls Jesus “Rabbi”, the others call him “Lord”. In fact, Judas is the only one to call Jesus “Rabbi” in Matthew’s Gospel.
- Only Matthew, Mark and John tell us of the crowning with thorns
- Only Matthew and John speak of the option for Barabbas – Matthew makes much more of it than John
- Only Mark has the young man who runs off naked when Jesus is being arrested
- John’s account of the actual death of Jesus differs from that of the synoptics

Specific

The plot to betray Jesus: Given that the religious authorities had already determined to kill Jesus, their challenge was to bring this about without starting a riot among the many people who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover: “We should understand that with Jerusalem thronged with pilgrims, including many who had come up from Galilee for the Passover, an open arrest was fraught with danger. Who could tell what the public reaction might be? The high-priestly party did not want to provoke a riot, but they did very much want to remove Jesus from the scene.” (Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, W.B. Eerdmans, 1992, 650-651.)

Matthew is the only Gospel that has Judas’ words: “What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?” Judas may quite simply have been looking for money? Did he weigh up the implications and consequences? Perhaps not or perhaps he assumed that Jesus – whom he knew to be a wonder-worker – would handle whatever situation arose.

The Passover with the disciples: Matthew’s account of Jesus’ last Passover follows Mark 14:12–31.

“The essential features of the Passover celebration include the eating of the roasted lamb, the sprinkling of blood upon the entry to the house, the avoidance of leaven and the eating of unleavened bread only, and the consecration of the first born. In Jesus’ time Passover was one of the pilgrimage feasts (Exod 23:14–17; 34:18–26). The goal of the pilgrimage in Jesus’ day was the Jerusalem Temple: ‘Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place which he will choose: at the feast of unleavened bread (= Passover), at the feast of weeks, and at the feast of booths’ (Deut 16:16). Within this

pilgrimage framework the Jerusalem Temple became the center of the Passover celebration. While compliance with the pilgrimage regulation was far from perfect, Passover surely was a time in which the population of Jerusalem swelled, with pilgrims perhaps outnumbering regular inhabitants two to one. The festival began at sundown, on the fifteenth of Nisan; according to Jewish reckoning the day began at sundown. On the afternoon of the fourteenth of Nisan, lambs were ritually slaughtered in the Temple and then brought to the households where they would be eaten.” (Daniel J Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Liturgical Press, 2007, 369-370.)

In the time of Jesus, the people had adopted the Greco-Roman habit of reclining at special meals such as the Passover meal. The custom was to put the food in big dishes in the middle where all could reach it. Hence Jesus’ words that “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me” can be taken as an indication that the traitor is someone at the meal and Jesus knows who it is. Matthew then relates the exchange between Jesus and Judas, making it clear that Jesus in fact knew that it was Judas.

When Jesus says, “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him”, he is making it clear that the Father’s will is unfolding here. This moment, despite appearances, is not in the hands of human beings but in the hands of the loving Father who will have the final victory through the death of Jesus.

We do not know at what point the Christian community began the liturgical celebration we know as “Eucharist” or “Holy Communion” or exactly how they conducted that celebration. However, St Paul’s reference to the “Lord’s Supper” in a liturgical context in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 – a letter probably written in 57 CE – would suggest that soon after the resurrection the Christians began to celebrate Eucharist in some form, following Jesus’ instruction at his last meal with them. It is entirely possible that the descriptions of that last meal in the Gospels reflect early Christian liturgical practice.

The Jewish Passover – celebrating both liberation and covenant – is the context for what will become the central act of Christian worship: “Whatever the precise nature of the Last Supper, the background for it was Passover. An essential element of Passover was the meal shared by the household. This central Passover institution becomes the vehicle for Jesus’ climactic meal with his disciples—a meal that recalled the many meals throughout his public ministry, that expressed the bond existing between Jesus and his own, and that pointed forward to the future meal of God’s kingdom. This meal also expressed the covenantal relationship between God and Israel (see Exod 24:3–11) that had its roots in the experience of the first Passover. The Passover theme of liberation from slavery finds an echo in Matthew’s addition to the words over the cup ‘for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matt 26:28).” (Daniel J Harrington, *op cit*, 371.)

Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away: The Greek verb used here, and translated as “fall away”, is *skandalizō*. Some translations have “I will never be

scandalized". The noun is *skandalon*, meaning "stumbling block" or some kind of obstacle that trips one up. Matthew has used the word *skandalon* earlier in 16:23, where he describes Peter's response to Jesus' prophecy of his passion and death in Jerusalem. There may be some irony in the fact that, in that earlier exchange, Jesus is rebuking Peter for being a *skandalon* and here Peter is protesting that he will never be a *skandalon*. We should also note that, in that earlier incident described in chapter 16, there is a deep ambivalence exposed in Peter – the voice of the Father is contrasted with the voice of Satan, the rock is contrasted with the stumbling block. The whole text is worth citing. When Jesus asked the disciples who they believed him to be, it is Peter who speaks up:

"Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'. And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! **For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.** And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this **rock** I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven'. Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you'. But he turned and said to Peter, '**Get behind me, Satan!** You are a **hindrance** to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man'."

those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas: "While some kind of hearing involving Jesus most likely took place at the house of Caiaphas, that an official trial involving the whole Sanhedrin (council) occurred during the first night of Passover is very unlikely on all counts. On the historical level there are problems with this scenario. The house of the high priest was a very unlikely setting for a meeting of the 'whole Sanhedrin'. Moreover, there is some confusion over what the 'whole Sanhedrin' was. Was it a religious or a political body? Was it functioning as a 'supreme court?' Or was it simply an investigatory committee, or an *ad hoc* committee charged with carrying out a specific task? Apart from the place and nature of the Sanhedrin there is doubt whether this kind of meeting of major Jewish officials ('the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin', 26:59) would have occurred on the first night of Passover." (Daniel J Harrington, *op cit*, 379.) Luke and John make it clear the Sanhedrin (council) was involved but the meeting took place the following day.

"In teaching about the Jewish 'trial' of Jesus it is important to be clear about the differences between the Johannine and Synoptic versions, and to recognize the historical improbabilities connected with the Synoptic scenario. The two charges against Jesus must also be carefully examined with an eye toward what they meant in Jesus' time and how Christians would have interpreted and understood them. And the negative and positive

dimensions of Peter's denial of Jesus deserve equal attention, along with Jesus' own example of fidelity and honesty." (Daniel J Harrington, op cit, 383-384)

The death of Judas: "Matthew's chief interests in the story of Judas' death involved the fulfillment of Scripture and the shameful behavior of the chief priests. That Judas betrayed Jesus and met a violent death needed explanation not only for Jewish Christians but also for those outside the Matthean community. The explanation most satisfying to Matthew was that these events took place in accord with the Scriptures. He was also adding to his negative portrayal of the chief priests: They recognized that their thirty silver pieces was blood money. Still they paid off Judas with it, and disposed of the money in buying the potter's field. Yet they too acted in fulfillment of the Scriptures. (Daniel J Harrington, op cit, 387.)

The king of the Jews: This is a secular version of "Messiah". It would have had disturbing overtones for the Roman Governor.

The crucifixion: This is a Roman punishment. If Jesus was to be found guilty of blasphemy, the Torah – Leviticus 24:16 – would have demanded death by stoning. However, as we are reminded in John 18:31, the Jews were not allowed to condemn anyone to death. Matthew – following Mark – is anxious however to hold the Jewish authorities responsible: "His blood be on us and on our children!" This is a well-known biblical formula – see Leviticus 20:9–16; Joshua 2:19–20; 2 Samuel 1:16; 14:9; Jeremiah 51:35.

Golgotha: The Latin translation is *calvaria* from which we get the English word, "Calvary". The term "skull" may refer either to its function as a place of execution or to its physical shape (a hill like a skull). In view of Jewish and Roman execution procedures, it must have been outside the city walls – see John 19:20; Hebrews 13:12; Matthew 21:39.

King of the Jews: All four Gospels tell us that this was the sign above Jesus as he was hung on the cross. John adds that it was written in three languages – Hebrew (ie Aramaic), Latin, and Greek. This is probably a signal to anyone who might have ideas about contesting the Roman rule. It is also profoundly ironic to the believer.

If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross: We recall the temptations of the devil when Jesus fasted in the desert – see Matthew 4:1-11, especially verses 3 & 6.

APPENDIX

The horror of the crucifixion

Jesus hears the verdict in terror. He knows what crucifixion is. He has heard about that terrible punishment ever since he was a child. He also knows there is no appeal. Pilate is the supreme

authority. Jesus is a subject of a province occupied by Rome, with none of the rights of a Roman citizen. Everything has been decided. The bitterest hours of his life are ahead of him.

In those days crucifixion was the most fearful, terrible form of execution. Flavius Josephus calls it «the most miserable of all deaths», and Cicero describes it as «the crudest, most terrible punishment”. The three most ignominious forms of execution among the Romans were a slow death on the cross (*crux*), being devoured by wild animals (*dammatio ad bestias*), and being burned alive on a bonfire (*crematio*). Crucifixion was not a simple execution, but a slow torture. The victim's vital organs were not directly damaged, so death could last many hours or even days. Furthermore, it was customary to combine the basic punishment of crucifixion with other types of humiliation and torment. The historical details are chilling. It was not unusual to mutilate the victim, put out his eyes, burn, lash, or otherwise torture him before hanging him on the cross. The methods used were left entirely to the sadism of the torturers. Seneca tells of men crucified head-down, or obscenely impaled on the post of the cross. In describing the fall of Jerusalem, Flavius Josephus says that the vanquished «were whipped and subjected to all types of torture, before being crucified beside the walls... Out of anger and hatred, to mock them, the Roman soldiers hung the people they caught in different ways, and there were so many victims that there was not enough room to put the crosses, nor enough crosses to hang the bodies». Jesus' crucifixion apparently was not an act of unusual barbarity on the part of the torturers. The Christian sources mention only the flogging and crucifixion, along with different kinds of mocking and humiliation.

The cruelty of crucifixion was intended to terrorize the population and serve as a general deterrent. It was always a public act. The victims were left totally naked, dying in agony on the cross, in a visible place: a well-travelled crossroads, a small hill not far from the doors of a theatre, or the place where the crucified person had committed the crime. The spectacle of those men writhing in pain, moaning and cursing, was unforgettable. In Rome there was a special place for) crucifying slaves. It was called the *Campus Esquilinus*. This killing field, full of crosses and instruments of torture, usually surrounded by vultures and wild dogs, was the most powerful deterrent. The little hill of Golgotha (place of the Skull), not far from the city walls, near a well-travelled road to the Ephraim gate, may have been the «killing field» for the city of Jerusalem.

Roman citizens were not subject to crucifixion, except in extraordinary cases or to enforce military discipline. It was too brutal and shameful, the typical punishment for slaves. It was called *servile supplicium*. The Roman writer Plautus (c. 250-184 B.C.) describes how easy it was to crucify slaves in order to terrorize others, cutting off any attempt at rebellion, escape, or robbery. It was also the most efficient punishment for anyone who dared to rebel against the Empire. For many years it was the most common instrument for «pacifying» rebellious provinces. The Jewish people experienced it repeatedly. The historian Flavius Josephus reports four massive crucifixions in one period of seventy years, around the time of Jesus' death. In 4 B.C. Quintilius Varus crucified two thousand rebels in Jerusalem; between 48 and 52 A.D.

Quadratus, the legate of Syria, crucified all the people captured by Cumanus in a confrontation between Jews and Samaritans; an uncounted number of Jews were flogged and crucified under the prefecture of the cruel Floras in 66 A.D.; at the fall of Jerusalem in September 70 many defenders of the holy city were brutally crucified by the Romans.

Those who pass by Golgotha on this April 7, 30 A.D., do not see an uplifting scene. Once more, at the height of the Passover festivities, they are forced to witness the cruel execution of a group of convicts. They won't be able to put it out of their minds at tonight's paschal meal. They know how that human sacrifice ends. The ritual of crucifixion requires the bodies to be left naked on the cross as food for the vultures and wild dogs; what is left will be buried in a common grave. Thus their name and identity are erased forever. Maybe it will be different this time; it is only a few hours until the beginning of Passover, Israel's most solemn feast day, and among the Jews it is customary to bury the victims of execution before nightfall. In the Jewish tradition, «anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse». (Thus Deut 21:22-23: «When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night on the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse».) [From José Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation* (Revised edition), translated by Margaret Wilde, Convivium Press, 2007/2015, 369-371.]

Reflection

Do you know anyone who has never failed at anything? If the truth be told, some of life's most effective – if painful – learning experiences can come through failure. Responding well to failure is a critical part of becoming a mature adult human being. Today's Gospel – the passion narrative from Matthew 26:14-27:66 – includes reports of two of the best-known failures in history – Judas' handing Jesus over to the authorities and Peter's denials. All four Gospels give strikingly similar accounts of both. What is of particular importance in those accounts is the very different way Judas and Peter each respond to their failures.

Recall the account of Judas' betrayal of Jesus. We are told that “Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests and said, ‘What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?’ And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him”. The Greek verb – *paradidōmi* – can mean “hand over” or “deliver” or “betray”. In the English Standard Version used here, it is translated once as “deliver” and once as “betray”. However, some form of that Greek word is used ten times of Judas in this narrative and it is normally translated as “betray”. This suggests a negative view of Judas in the early Church. That may be related to Judas' negative view of himself: “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood”. He then went out and hanged himself. For Judas, his failure was a death-dealing moment.

Peter also betrayed Jesus. He did this despite his brave protestations of loyalty: “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” When Peter realized his sin – “the rooster crowed” – “he went out and wept bitterly.” We know from subsequent events that

this was a moment not of despair but the beginning of a profound conversion for Peter. For Peter, his failure was a life-giving moment.

Recall the story of David's horrible failure – see 2 Samuel 11:1-27. No words can adequately describe his wickedness in betraying Uriah so he could take Bathsheba, Uriah's wife. Yet, as Matthew reminds us in his genealogical account of the birth of Jesus (see 1:1-16), David and Bathsheba together play a significant role in the Messianic lineage. Does this suggest that the Bible trivializes wickedness when it suits? That it does not much matter if you side with the kingdom of evil?

On the contrary, the Bible is the story of an infinitely loving God constantly, repeatedly, speaking to each of us the words of redemptive love in the face of evil – evil that we choose more or less wittingly and willingly or evil that we find ourselves more less caught up in unwittingly and unwillingly. The essence of the biblical revelation is that God is always there for us – no matter what. Unlike Judas, Peter seems to have known this deep in his bones. What is more, he knew in his bones that this man Jesus was somehow critical to God's redemptive love. What do you think was the difference between Peter and Judas?