

Sunday 31st March 2024

Reflecting on the Easter Story

Welcome

- Which part of the Easter story affected you the most this year?
Was there any part that had new meaning for you and why?

Word

Read Mark 14:66-15: 5

For sheer drama there's little in the New Testament to beat the story of Peter's denial. We know it will happen. Mark has woven pointers towards it all through the gospel (8.31-38; 14.27-31). Yet still we hope that Peter will come to his senses, and the tension is not broken until he breaks down and cries (verse 72). Most writers agree that Mark is interested in the story mainly as a fulfilment of the sayings of Jesus, but our interest is drawn along other lines, too. It is a classic account of the disciple under pressure and, linked with the opening verses of Chapter 15, creates a bold contrast with the example of his teacher. This story must bring us very close to the original testimony of the apostles. It is hard to credit that an incident which reflects so badly on Peter could have been treasured by the young Church if it had not first received the sanction of Peter's own preaching. It makes plain the harder realities of discipleship; the story is designed, not to flatter Peter, but to make the integrity of Jesus stand out all the more. Some phrases call for special note. When Jesus answers, "So you say" (verse 2) it means rather more than a simple "Yes". Certainly, Jesus does not deny Pilate's suggestion, but he stimulates all these present (and us who read this story so much later) to keep asking the question: "Who is Jesus?" Pilate calls Jesus "the King of the Jews". Jesus replies, in effect, "That is your name for me, but is it the best? Who do you really think I am?" Then we read that Pilate was "amazed" (verse 5). That's another of Mark's favourite words, often the response of the crowd when Jesus says or does something striking. It clearly denotes a moment of spiritual importance. Strange that the silence of Jesus should awaken

stirrings in a Roman governor. Or is it? All through these verses, the message is clear: precisely when rejection, not only by the Council but by his most intimate personal follower too, reaches a climax, the truth about Jesus becomes clearer than ever before. For us, both the experience of Peter and the example of Jesus provide a fresh challenge to re-think what it means to be a disciple.

1. What would you have done if you had been in Peter's shoes? Try to be as honest and as realistic as you can.
2. When have you found it important to keep silent rather than speak out? What happened? Are there guidelines which can help us decide what we should do? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
3. In what ways do you think modern Christians should make their protest when they feel they are unjustly treated? Should they protest at all? Explain your answer.
4. Does Peter's story teach you anything important about being a disciple? If it does, how is it going to affect you?
5. The Church often gets a very distorted report in the media. Should we be concerned about that? Should we do anything about it? What?
6. Can you see in the modern world any people or groups of people outside the Church who, unbeknown to themselves, have become the agents of God? Are there such people in your locality? How should your church respond to them? Explain your answer.

Worship

- **Thank God for** the marvellous stories which belong at the heart of our faith and his readiness to use ordinary human beings to do his will.
- **Confess** our fear of being identified with Jesus
- **Pray for** Christians who are put on trial for the sake of their faith and for those who are filled with guilt about the past.
- **Pray that** we may always find strength to match the test.

Word

Read Mark 15: 6-20

Everyone is now taking their positions for the final scenes of Jesus' life. The chief priests are jealous and are doing all they can to stir up the crowd. The crowd is being swept along by a tide of opinion, hardly able to listen to reason anymore. The soldiers are lessening the boredom with a few sub-human games, easier to play from the inside of a uniform. Jesus remains silent. But what about Pilate? Pilate appears tangled in a web of conflicting motives. We sense that he personally would prefer to wash his hands of the whole business; Matthew tells us he tried to do it with a bowl of water (Matthew 27.24). Politically, however, it can't be done. Customs have to be followed, crowds have to be pleased; in politics, you have to be seen to get it right. To us today, it all shows just how impotent officialdom can be in dealing with matters of real spiritual importance. There is no way in which Pilate can do justice to Jesus even if, as we suspect, he would like to. Mark extracts every gram of gospel value from the traditions which surround these dreadful events. On he plugs at the theme of fulfilment; we are never far from the Servant Songs of Isaiah 50 and 53. Dramatic contrasts serve to highlight the real messiahship of Jesus. On the one hand, Pilate exercises his right of mercy and releases the evidently guilty Barabbas. On the other hand, Pilate exercises his skill at political manoeuvres by abandoning for crucifixion the evidently innocent Jesus.

Yet Mark is very restrained. He does not labour the utter horror of the Roman treatment with the whip, nor the merciless mockery of the soldiers. For these would detract from the real heart of the tragedy, the suffering created by the rejection of the Son of Man. This story of suffering and pain stands out amid all the history of human atrocity only because Jesus is the Messiah. The reason for telling it is not to evoke sympathy, but to make it clear what the truth about the Messiah really is. And once that truth is understood, it is up to us to decide what to do about it.

1. Put yourself in the position of Pilate. What would you have done about Jesus? Why? What would be the consequences?
2. Have you ever found yourself on the wrong side of officialdom? What was it about “the system” which made it aggravate your need? Do you know others who have had similar experiences? Can anything be done about it?
3. Can you think of governments of any persuasion which find it hard to cope with Christianity. What is it about Christians which they find so irritating?
4. Have you or anyone you know been caught up in the emotions and attitude of a crowd? What happened? Can people be held responsible for being caught up in the crowd? Why? Why not?
5. Are our churches ever in danger of treating people simply as objects in an organisation? Have any of the group experienced such treatment? What happened? What can be done about it?
6. If you were going to be a politician, what lessons from Jesus would you want to take with you? How would you put them into practice? Would it be an easy thing to do?

Worship

- **Thank God for** the personal ministry of Jesus in our lives. warm-hearted officials who never lose the human touch.
- **Confess** the times when “pleasing others” has been more important to us than the truth.
- **Pray for** refugees and all victims of “the system”, those to whom much power is entrusted
- **Pray that** we may never lose sight of the real needs of people and that we are given the strength to meet those needs