

GOOD FRIDAY

2ND APRIL 2021

Isaiah 52. 13 – 53. 12

Hebrews 10. 16-25

Mark. 14. 43 – 15. 47

This week in Minneapolis in the USA a court case has been under way where three police officers are on trial for the murder of George Floyd in May of last year. A police officer knelt on the neck of Floyd for nine minutes, eventually extinguishing his life. Two other police officers supported the action and kept bystanders at bay. All over what a shop attendant thought might be a counterfeit \$20 note.

Nine minutes is a long time when such a trauma is underway. There were multiple bystanders; one young woman had the presence of mind to video the scene. Others who tried to approach the police officers to intervene in the crime were warned-off with the threat of mace spray. The calculated and determined action by law-enforcement officers triggered the world-wide *Black Lives Matter* movement.

There is something of a resonance in these events to the crucifixion of Jesus: officers of the state, rightly or wrongly, empowered to execute an innocent man, supporters frightened away by threats of violence against them in order that the crime can be carried through, while others, maybe not a threat to the protagonists, are able to be witnesses, and later tell the story.

The tactic of the Roman empire in the use of crucifixion was to 'scatter the sheep', terrify and silence: friends, family and supporters. The cultural practice around crucifixion was to never speak of the victim again. They had been erased. But there were witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion. The witnesses to the passion of Jesus are the women; they see the whole thing, in spite of its calculated and determined cruelty. And it is they who will go to the tomb on the first day of the week to find it empty.

Our Gospels bear the names of men: Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. But the witnesses – right though are the women. They watch, they stand a safe distance, they tend to Jesus and the disciples; right to the very end; and after.

Crucifixion was designed to erase a person,, to erase both their physical presence and their reputation and memory. To speak of them again was to invite the same rubbing-out. But there is a group of people around Jesus who will not be cowed by this threat – such is their devotion. As things would normally go, Jesus' body was destined for the rubbish dump, or maybe for slow putrefaction, still on the cross, picked at by scavenging birds, bloated and putrid as it decomposed.

One of you will betray me and all of you will desert me. But do this in remembrance of me. Eat this bread. My body broken for you. Remember me.

And, then, there is Joseph of Arimathea – a member of the religious council that falsely tried Jesus – he is not cowed. He risks his reputation and life and he provides a tomb, a new tomb that

the body of this holy one should not be degraded any further, nor forgotten. Caravaggio images it in the painting reproduced on the cover – tenderness and devotion coupled with anguish.

There is a moment of profound conversion in Mark's passion which we easily gloss over. At the moment Jesus dies the Roman centurion is standing before the cross. It was his role to verify that the victims of crucifixion were actually dead, hence Pilate calls for him to confirm that Jesus has died before releasing the body.

As Jesus dies, the centurion exclaims: 'Truly this man was God's Son!' This is no insignificant or passing remark. This is the man – leader of 100 men – a collective killing machine men – he oversees the execution. He is servant of the Emperor; does the violent bidding of the empire. He is servant of Caesar Tiberius, the one proclaimed as The Son of God; the Divine Caesar. So, for the centurion to proclaim in this moment of death and dereliction that Jesus is the Son of God is to declare that Caesar is not. *This man is the Son of God.* This declaration is an act of treason and at some level a denial of the brutality and oppression which were the empire's tools of control. He is in many ways the first convert.

In the last weeks, many women have begun to speak out about sexual violence which has been committed against them. They are emerging from the self-isolation and shame forced upon them in both word and violent action and have said: enough! There is something about violence which isolates and silences; erases part of a woman's soul. Take the women from both sides of politics in the Federal parliament who have been subjected to verbal and reputational abuse and sexual violence. Women from the Liberals were unaware of the violence against woman from Labor; and vice versa. Young secondary students who have been subjected to this, isolated in their shame have begun to stand up. Women are subjected to a culture which suggests that somehow they are the cause of the violence – or at least responsible for preventing it. They and their friends and families are saying: we are no longer prepared to be silent bystanders; we will no longer tolerate the silence that a culture of violent misogyny tries to repeatedly force upon us. This is truth-telling. And we so urgently need it. By God's grace it may be a catalyst for healing and a more compassionate society.

As we have moved through Lent toward the truth-telling which is the Passion, we have also participated in a truth-telling in relation to indigenous Australians. All these are hard stories to hear and to sit with; to take them into ourselves and know that they are part of our story, part of the human story. We need God's mercy and compassion for each other to be able to hear them.

As the church tells the story of the passion, and continues to tell it, year in and year out, it is a story of 'God with us' – suffering with us - which resonates within us and all the communities we inhabit and tells us that God is with us in our degradation and seeks the way for us which Jesus has shown – a living filled with love and compassion and kindness – that redeems us from all our systems of violence and to be able to say: Surely, this man is the Son of God.

As we wait for Easter Sunday, we await the raising-up which Christ brings and healing and wholeness for all who suffer at the hands of others. As we do this we still ourselves knowing that eyes of mercy rest on us, longing for our redemption.

Andrew Boyle