

Good Friday

With media preoccupied with the spread of COVID-19 and hourly reports of the death and disruption it has caused, little else is attracting much attention. But life goes on. There is more to living than the pandemic although it has cast a long shadow over our world. For the Christian on Good Friday, we are called to reflect on the life and the death of Jesus of Nazareth and what it means for the life we are living and the death we will one day face. How was the death of Jesus reported in ancient times? What were contemporary reactions to what he said and did?

Of course, there were no newspapers to carry the story of his death or manner of dying nor public proclamations on bill boards. The sentence was enough – crucifixion – and a crowd was on hand to hear it pronounced. They knew how the day would end; this Jesus of Nazareth would be no more. The sentence was carried out immediately and there was no appeal and no reprieve. A mere word of the Roman governor, the tyrannical Pontius Pilate, was enough – Jesus was a dead man walking since early that day – probably 3 April in the year 30.

From 9am, Jesus was nailed to a cross with either criminals (or rebels if you think the reference is a kind of code) alongside him. The Romans tended to do their sentence penalties in a batch – much more efficient to crucify three than just one. They also made a point of leaving the dying naked men to hang in public places, usually crossroads or town squares. The message from the Cross was clear – don't mess with us – while the sign placed above Jesus' head, 'The King of the Jews' was intended to be ironic. He dies quicker than the two executed with him, possibly because they had not first endured some hours of torture.

Crucifixion was a political, military and religious statement: civil authority is absolute; military muscle will prevail and nothing will stand in the way of the projection of temporal power.

But who were the witnesses? What did they see? What did they think? What did they say?

There were three categories of witness.

The first were the soldiers; those who were only doing their duty – and a disagreeable one it was. They were annoyed that it dragged on and wearied by the death of just three more troublesome Jews. This was just another day at the office for them. It had no special meaning and no particular significance. It was

simply the need to make a public spectacle of three worthless Jews ... and they had no interest in the politics that lay behind Jesus' sentence of death.

The second group were the bystanders - those who enjoyed watching renegades and upstarts die, those who wanted to ensure they were dead, those who believed they should be punished, those who gained macabre pleasure from hurling accusations and insults without any concern of there being a reply. Jesus' critics were there to mock and to savour revenge. There were representatives of the Temple authorities as well - anxious to report that the itinerant preacher from the north was no more.

The third group were the followers of Jesus, a bare handful, among whom were Mary his mother and John the youngest of the band of disciples. They could not assert their presence lest they receive the same fate as alleged enemies of the Empire.

These were the witnesses.

What did they see that day?

Appalling physical brutality and mental cruelty, human depravity and unmitigated evil. They saw pain and suffering to body, mind and spirit. The method of death was itself a form of torture although no confessions were needed - it was too late for evidence. This was state-sponsored spite.

But they also saw grace and compassion, non-violence and forgiveness. Despite the injustice that led Jesus to this fate, he was neither brutalised nor demoralised by this treatment. He rose above the vicious spectacle and exuded nobility and divinity, love and concern, when he was entitled, we would insist, to think only of himself and his place in history. He did not try to self-justify or to promise revenge. He felt compassionate pity for those who could not see where their conduct had led them: to inhumanity and heartlessness. He was dying but they were already dead; he was suffering but they were beyond its reach; they tried to take his life but he relinquished his spirit to God.

What did they feel?

Among the soldiers, some were challenged by Jesus' behaviour - this is not what they expected and their views of him and his message were transformed. He had exuded such grace and power. They were startled by his demeanour and dignity.

Among the bystanders, some were stunned at his charity whereas others were stunned by his conceit: that he thought only of others that he continued to believe he was God's son.

And among the followers: there was grief and horror ... and even a belated blessing. They were swept into anguish when he appeared powerless to stop the execution; distraught when he accepted his fate but blessed when he spoke a word of kindness to Mary and John binding them together in a relationship that he had known himself.

And what did they say?

The soldiers certainly reported the death of Jesus to their masters, who would have relayed the news to Pilate of the completion of the sentences.

The bystanders would have gone to their homes and the word would have spread that the one many had hailed their Messiah the previous Sabbath was now dead and likely buried. The Temple representatives would have reported Jesus' death and their suspicion that his followers could not be trusted. His martyrdom would lead to mayhem; sympathy might re-assert itself as support. They stressed the need to guard his body so that any stories about him returning from the dead could be refuted.

The only disciple to witness the execution, John, reported to the disciples what he had seen and heard. Their master and friend had died and the manner of his death was as tragic as they might expect. And yet, John explained, Jesus lived his teaching to the last ... and he probably reminded them that he had said it would come to this - yet, he was not afraid, despairing or troubled. He had committed his cause and his spirit to God - and had died. This news apparently spread to the 10 of them who gathered together in secret for consolation and, presumably, for safety. Judas was dead and Thomas was nowhere to be found.

We need to be clear: this was devastating news and a terrible realisation. It was not just that Jesus whom they had loved had died but that Rome had prevailed, evil had succeeded, mercy had been spurned and the looming embrace of death and the darkness of the grave remained. The world had not changed; the kingdom had not come. It was the baddest of Fridays imaginable. But in many respects, what has changed?

Despite the advances that humankind has made, a pandemic has upturned our social customs and economic systems, terrorism blights our world, religious organisations harbour evil predators, domestic violence is rife, betrayal is commonplace and depression leads many young people to end their lives. We could easily despair ... we clearly lack the means of our own redemption. On this day in the Church's calendar we note that God sent the Son to redeem a fallen humanity and the Son has been mistreated and killed. There is reason to refuse hope and to laugh in the face of optimism. If the death of Jesus represents the demise of God and the end of grace, there is no future for us.

Our lives will end and we might say 'so what' while a heartless world continues to crush dreams of peace and we take refuge in more violence.

On this Good Friday, as we are unable to gather in one of our churches to reflect collectively on what this day signifies, we could decide to abandon our faith and be done with anything religious. But, and here we need to pause, the rumours of Jesus' death were greatly exaggerated! We need to wait until Easter Sunday before deciding that death is the final conqueror and the grave the ultimate victor. Despite the suffering and horror that make this day one of mourning, it is called 'good' for several reasons - something we will be reminded of again on Sunday.