

## Lent 6: Passion Sunday, 2020

### Matthew 27:11-54

#### Rev'd Michael Wood

Today is the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent. Usually the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent tries to do two things at once. The day is called "*Palm Sunday*" because there is a reading of the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey with people throwing Palm Branches and crying out, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'. And it's also called "*Passion Sunday*" because we hear the passion reading from one of the Synoptic Gospels. Today we just listened to part of that passion story from Matthew's gospel.

In certain parts of the world, particularly in Jerusalem, Europe and in Latin America Palm Sunday normally includes spectacular processions of thousands of people, walking through the streets waving Palm Branches....celebrating the victory of the servant God – whose procession on a Donkey surrounded by the poor stands in prophetic contrast to more familiar image in Roman times of a military general returning from victorious battle riding on a war horse, surrounded by cheering crowds.



Today there are none of these large processions. The streets are quiet. We have been found ourselves indoors for a while, and the whole mood is sombre – heavily laden with uncertain. Perhaps this Holy Week feels, more than every before, certainly in my life experience, more filled with the kind of anxiety that the disciples must have felt like as Jesus was dragged before Pilate and an uneasy lynch mob.

After all, this murder of Jesus has all the features of a lynching. The French American Rene Girard helped us to understand very clear the features of a crowd trying to restore its cohesion by finding a common enemy. And one of the features of a crowd deciding on a scapegoat is that there is absolutely no logic to it. It typically arbitrary. In this story, there was a choice between bar-Abbas (which means 'Son of the Father') and Jesus the Christ, who it turns out, was the son of a heavenly Father. Perhaps this is why the crowd instinctively chose Jesus to murder – because they sensed something distinctive about him. Maybe some subterranean jealousy was evoked. But it certainly wasn't a conscious rationale. The text makes it clear that there was nothing objective they could PIN on Jesus. This point is made three times in the text:

In Verse 18: 'Pilate new that the crowd had handed Jesus over through malice'

In Verse 19: where Pilate's wife sends word to Pilate saying, 'let there be nothing between you and that man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of him'

And again in verse 23 where Pilate asks the crowd, 'What evil did he commit' – and, of course, no answer can be given to that question.

And so Pilate, finally recognises, like a million politicians since, that one cannot reason with an angry mob, takes the easy way out and washes his hands of responsibility in the interests of pacifying the crowd (verse 24).

The Passion Story is a mirror to us of the human justice machine and it's underlying irrational mob behaviour. Societies have intricately designed processes like courts to try to tame human mob behaviour, but courts only deal with the presenting symptom – and not the underlying spiritual sickness.

The Easter story is how God deals with the underling spiritual sickness of violence and murder. God needs to enter into it. The light needs to enter the darkness.

I wonder if some of us have seen the Matrix series of films? [if not, I recommend it]. Of all contemporary cinema, the Matrix series is jam packed full of theological insight. If we have seen the films we may remember an encounter between the two main protagonists – Agent Smith (played by Hugo Weaving) and Neo (played by Keanu Reeves). Agent Smith is a personification of the logic of the machine world, which only knows the logic of re-establishing peace through expelling disruptive influences. And Neo, whose previous name was Thomas Anderson, a Computer Hacker, has certainly become a disruptive influence to the machine world.

In one scene in The Matrix, Agent Smith appears to have got the upper hand and things are looking extremely grim for Neo. Pinning Neo to the ground in front of an oncoming train, Agent Smith says to Neo:

*"You hear that, Mr Anderson? That is the sound of inevitability...it is the sound of your death....Goodbye Mr Anderson".*

This very dark scene is very reminiscent of the human logic of Holy Week. The whole trial and public lynching of Jesus has the feel of an awful inevitability to it. Death is coming...it is like a freight train bearing down on Jesus, and it will in fact kill him.

And yet, we are already being given hints that a divine logic (what John's gospel calls LOGOS) is hidden at a deeper level within this catastrophic mess.

In the Matrix film, Neo refuses his old identity as a computer hacker.

*You hear that, Mr Anderson? That is the sound of inevitability...it is the sound of your death....Goodbye Mr Anderson".*

To which Neo responds – '**my Name is Neo**' (which means, NEW).

From a Christian perspective this remaking of our identity is the heart of the gospel. In Christ, there is a NEW creation. Thomas Anderson, who had previously been caught up in the machine logic of the world has been given a new identity. He is entirely NEW.

In his very act of Jesus suffering extreme violence at the hands of the human justice machine – at the moment that Jesus is nailed to a tree – at the moment that Jesus cries out with a loud voice and gives up his Spirit, *“The Veil of the Sanctuary was rent in two, from top to bottom, and the earth was shaken, and rocks were split, and the Tombs were opened and many bodies of those holy ones who had fallen asleep were raised”* (v.50-52). The darkness of violence and death is flooded by light. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

