

Readings and meditations for Good Friday 2016

1 *Jesus prays on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39-46)*

39 He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. 40 When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' 41 Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 42 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' [[43 Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. 44 In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] 45 When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, 46 and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.'

Our journey begins on the Mount of Olives, which is one of three peaks of the mountain ridge just east of the old city of Jerusalem. Hills and mountains are an integral part of the Biblical landscape. It was believed God dwelt in the heavens, and the mountain tops were where God was revealed.

The Mount of Olives is an especially significant place in Jewish tradition. It was where King David fled to when he was fleeing from Absalom. The burial site of Jerusalem's most significant citizens from the period of the kings was located on its southern side. It was where the ceremony to mark the new month was held during the time of the Second

Temple. A prophecy in the Book of Zechariah says YHWH will stand on the Mount of Olives, and the mountain will split in two. Finally, there was a tradition the resurrection of the dead when the Messiah came would begin on the Mount of Olives.

The Mount of Olives is mentioned eleven times in the gospels. It is on the route from Jerusalem to Bethany, and it is understood to be place where Jesus stood when he wept over Jerusalem. It is somewhere Jesus frequently went to pray, as he does tonight. It was where Jesus told some of his disciples about coming troubles and persecutions. And it will also be the site of the ascension of Jesus, which we will observe a little bit later in the year.

Matthew's and Mark's gospels are a little more precise with their geography: they say Jesus goes to a place called Gethsemane, which we know is a garden at the foot of the Mount. And if we consider how the first part of the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis is set in a garden, it is perhaps fitting that the climatic conclusion of the earthly ministry of Jesus, who has been called the Second Adam, should also begin in a garden.

Jesus is not alone. He has some of his friends with him. Luke's gospel doesn't name them, but Matthew's and Mark's gospels tell us they are Peter, James, and John, who also accompanied him at some other crucial moments. And while Jesus is all too aware of his rapidly impending fate, his friends don't quite seem to get it. They sleep, and seem impervious to the anguish Jesus faces.

I have heard first-hand accounts of somewhat comparable torment to what Jesus is going through. My work with death row inmates has resulted in me hearing the stories of

condemned prisoners who were granted last minute stays of execution.

On one occasion last year, Richard Glossip in Oklahoma was wondering why there was a delay, as the scheduled time for his execution had come and gone, and he was still in a holding cell. He only found out he had been given a reprieve when he saw it on the news. (I must add I am convinced beyond any doubt Richard is innocent. But that is another story.)

Even though the manner of Richard's intended death was somewhat less hideous than what Jesus is now facing, I cannot imagine what his psychological torment would have felt like, despite having read his own account. So I cannot even begin to comprehend the anguish Jesus is facing right now. Our text says his sweat was like drops of blood, and modern research has shown it is possible to sweat actual blood during times of extreme stress.

Much could be said about Jesus praying that this cup could be removed from him. To me, it highlights that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine. And it shows that faith is allowed to ask questions, and have doubts. Otherwise it is not faith, but blind acceptance.

It also reminds me that we should pray above all else pray for knowledge of God's will for us, and the power to carry it out.

2 *The betrayal and arrest of Jesus (Luke 22:47-53)*

47 While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; 48 but Jesus said to him, 'Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?' 49 When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, 'Lord, should we strike with the sword?' 50 Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. 51 But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched his ear and healed him. 52 Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? 53 When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!'

Ten years ago, a flurry of excitement and controversy was unleashed when an English translation of a document known as the 'Gospel of Judas' was published. Notwithstanding the fact it was attributed to none other than Judas Iscariot, this document offered a far more positive depiction of Judas than what we usually get. In particular, it suggested that, contrary to what is stated in the canonical gospels, Judas had in fact been following Jesus' instructions.

I was a little surprised by the attention this document attracted. It was hardly new; it had been discovered decades earlier. And it was not the first ancient document to have been found that questioned accepted Christian tradition; a great number of apocryphal documents were excluded from the Newer Testament canon. Needless to say, it was not taken very seriously by the Church, with the then Archbishop

of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, offering a particularly memorable denunciation. Although his condemnation of the validity of the document probably only served to encourage the conspiracy theorists who would have us believe the Church was hiding the real story of Jesus.

But the discovery of this document did get me thinking about Judas. He betrays Jesus, and there can be no doubt about that. Indeed, his very name has come to mean treachery and betrayal. I have been told it is (or at least used to be) customary for freezing works to employ a sheep to lead other sheep to their fates, and that this creature is known as a 'Judas Sheep'.

And betrayal with a kiss has found its way into literature: those of you who have read the *Harry Potter* novels will be familiar with particularly loathsome creatures called dementors, who literally suck the souls out of their victims with a kiss.

But despite his treachery. I cannot bring myself to condemn Judas. I know too well that I am not without fault. And that I cannot therefore cast the first stone. I too have betrayed Jesus. I have betrayed him when I have failed to support him, and failed to be what I claim to be.

Matthew's gospel tells us Judas comes to regret his actions, He returns the 30 pieces of silver he had been paid for his actions, and hangs himself. It would seem he could not bring himself to seek forgiveness, let alone forgive himself.

Although none of this changes the fact Jesus is betrayed by a friend. He characteristically responds to violence with peace, healing the ear of the servant of the high priest. But he is now in the hands of his enemies.

3 *Peter denies Jesus (Luke 22:54-62)*

54 Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. 55 When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. 56 Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, 'This man also was with him.' 57 But he denied it, saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.' 58 A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not!' 59 Then about an hour later yet another kept insisting, 'Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.' 60 But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about!' At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. 61 The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' 62 And he went out and wept bitterly.

One of the most memorable scenes of the 1960 historical epic film *Spartacus* occurs near the end. Spartacus, the leader of a slave uprising, and his followers, have just been defeated and captured by the Romans. But the Romans don't know which one is Spartacus, so Crassus, the Roman commander, offers the captured slaves are offered a deal: identify Spartacus, and the rest of them will live, although they will go back to lives of slavery. But as soon as Crassus makes his offer, one of the slaves stands up and says, "I'm Spartacus". And another one does. And another one. And another one. Until there is a resounding chorus of "I'm Spartacus... I'm Spartacus... I'm Spartacus". They have all come to believe that to die while free is better than to live as

a slave. And they are subsequently all crucified along the Via Appia, or Appian Way.

While Spartacus was an actual historical figure, the film, and the novel it was based on, took considerable liberties. The incident I have just described probably did not actually happen. Although the slave uprising led by Spartacus did. It occurred around 100 years before the crucifixion of Jesus, so Jesus and his friends almost certainly know about it.

Today, Peter does not show the fearlessness of the followers of Spartacus. He denies knowing Jesus. Three times. One the first occasion, it is to a slave girl. You can't get any lower in the social pecking order than that in First Century Judea. But he goes onto deny Jesus twice more over a period of just over an hour. Then the cock crows, and he remembers Jesus' prophecy about him.

But unless we are without fault ourselves, we are in no position to criticise Peter. He had showed considerable bravery, albeit foolishly; just a few hours earlier, John's gospel tells us it was Peter who cut off the High Priest's slave's ear when Jesus was arrested. Peter will go on to become one of the key figures in the early Church; in Roman Catholic tradition, he becomes the first Pope. And he will ultimately be martyred. But not before he has an emotional reconciliation with the resurrected Jesus on the shores of Lake Galilee.

I would like to make one final reflection about Peter. Like Judas, he has let Jesus down, albeit out of understandable momentary weakness as opposed to premeditated treachery. But unlike Judas, he is able to humble himself and accept the grace of forgiveness.

4 *The mocking and beating of Jesus & Jesus before the Council (Luke 22:63-71)*

63 Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; 64 they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, 'Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?' 65 They kept heaping many other insults on him.

66 When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. 67 They said, 'If you are the Messiah, tell us.' He replied, 'If I tell you, you will not believe; 68 and if I question you, you will not answer. 69 But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.' 70 All of them asked, 'Are you, then, the Son of God?' He said to them, 'You say that I am.' 71 Then they said, 'What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!'

All of the death penalty cases I have had any involvement with have been tragic. Regardless of whether a condemned inmate is guilty or innocent; or repentant or indifferent. For when someone is sentenced to death in the USA, someone else has already died. Which is tragic. And the person judged to be responsible is sentenced to die as well. Which is doubly tragic.

But some cases are more memorable than others, for any number of reasons. Just over two weeks ago, Coy Westbrook was executed in Texas. Now there was no doubt was guilty. He had killed four people.

His estranged wife had invited him around. Coy, who was intellectually disabled, had genuinely thought she wanted to reconcile with him. Instead, he found himself at a party. At some point, he noticed she had left the room. He went looking for her, and found her having an intimate encounter with two others. And to top it all off, people began taunting him about it. Coy went out to his truck, got a hunting rifle, came back, and shot all five present, killing all but one of them. He then went back outside and calmly waited for the police to arrive.

Now before I go any further, I am not judging anyone's morals, I am not suggesting anybody deserved to die, and I am not saying Coy's humiliation in any way excused his actions. I am telling you this story because my background reading on the case strongly indicates that it was not his disappointment at not being reconciled with his estranged wife that set off his murderous rampage, and nor was it catching her *in flagrante delicto* with two others. It was being taunted and mocked that did it.

Jesus is also taunted and mocked. And physically abused, before being taken before a kangaroo court. Unlike Coy, he does not snap. But his enemies had made up their minds long ago about what they want to do with him. Like Coy's prosecutors, they will also be seeking a sentence of death. But Jesus is completely innocent of any wrong.

5 Jesus before Pilate and Herod (Luke 23:1-12)

23 Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. 2 They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' 3 Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' 4 Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' 5 But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

6 When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. 7 And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. 8 When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. 9 He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. 10 The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. 11 Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. 12 That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

A novel I really enjoyed reading was Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, which tells the story of Josef K, who is unexpectedly arrested on his 30th birthday, and prosecuted for a crime. Except Josef is not told what his crime is.

His searches for answers reveal he is being prosecuted and tried by an impossibly impenetrable and inaccessible bureaucracy. And we never do get to find out exactly what Josef is supposed to have done.

The Trial reminded me of the appearances of Jesus before Pontius Pilate and Herod. None of his accusers can present any hard evidence regarding what is supposed to have done, and he is shunted around from pillar to post. It really is like something out of a Kafka novel.

Pilate is the prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, which at this time is administered as a satellite province of Syria. But Pilate does not really know what to do with Jesus, and fobs him off to Herod. Pilate and Herod had previously been enemies, but on this day they become friends.

Now just to clarify, there is more than one Herod in the gospels. The Herod who is recorded in the infancy narratives and who ordered, the Massacre of the Innocents was Herod the Great, a Roman client king of Judea. This Herod is Herod Antipas, who is Herod the Great's son, and he has authority over Galilee. Jesus is a Galilean, so he comes under his jurisdiction. This Herod was responsible for the death of John the Baptist, and some Pharisees had earlier warned Jesus that he wanted to kill him. Now, we are told, he has wanted to meet Jesus for a long time, and he is finally getting his wish.

There have been quite a few times in my life when I have got to meet people who would be considered famous, or at least well known. The first times were in my teens, and I was somewhat surprised to find they were ordinary down to earth people. I am originally from Taranaki, and an All Black, especially one who played for Taranaki, was almost viewed

as a demi god. So it took the wind out of my sails a bit to find the first one I met was not that different to most other people.

But Herod clearly has other expectations. He is probably expecting to be entertained by a magician or a showman, not someone who just stands silently while a barrage of accusations is hurled at him. This must be very disappointing, a bit like buying tickets for a show that has had great reviews, and then turning up to a dud performance.

In Shakespeare's day, theatre audiences would throw rotten food at poor performers. But Herod and his soldiers cast contempt upon Jesus. Then they send him back to Pilate.

6 *Jesus is sentenced to death (Luke 23:13-25)*

13 Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, 14 and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. 15 Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. 16 I will therefore have him flogged and release him.'

18 Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!' 19 (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) 20 Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; 21 but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' 22 A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.' 23 But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. 24 So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. 25 He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

One of the most fascinating topics I studied in history at school was the origins of the First World War. Although these could be traced back to the rise of European nationalism in the 19th Century, it took the assassination Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria to set the conflict in motion. What triggered Britain's, and therefore New

Zealand's, involvement though was the German violation of Belgian neutrality while invading France.

One minor detail I found especially fascinating was the crucial role of German train timetables. In what some would call stereotypical German fashion, there was a precisely coordinated plan of troop movements by train that was so complicated that once the process was started, it couldn't be stopped. In any process or project, there is a point of no return, when it is too late to stop. In Germany's plans for the invasion of France, it was when the trains began running. In the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus, it is when he is sentenced to death.

When somebody gets sentenced to death today in a country that has not yet abolished capital punishment, there is usually some sort of rudimentary system of checks and balances or appeals. They may be flawed or cosmetic. But in Jesus' day, once you are sentenced, that is it. There is no turning back.

Pilate will not be happy to see Jesus has been sent back for him to deal with. He would be hoping he has seen the last of Jesus, and that he is now Herod's problem. But Jesus is back.

The gospel narratives present Pilate as being weak and easily led by Jesus' enemies. This is not the behaviour you would expect from a Roman governor, especially one with a military background. What makes this even more puzzling is that other records indicate he has a reputation for being excessively cruel, even by Roman standards, and that he would later be recalled from this very post because of this. Did his character darken after he condemned Jesus? We really don't know.

And whatever happens later, today Pilate is trying to find a way to avoid killing Jesus. Matthew's gospel records Pilate's wife warning him to not have anything to do with Jesus, because of a disturbing dream she has had. So perhaps that has left him a little rattled.

The gospels tell us it was a custom that a prisoner would be released at Passover. Pilate tries to release Jesus, but the crowd won't hear of it. They are baying for blood. He senses a riot is brewing, and he gives in to their demands, releasing a notorious criminal called Barabbas. We don't know much about Barabbas, but we are told he was been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.

Jesus' enemies have succeeded in getting him condemned on the basis of vague accusations that included inciting insurrection, even though he is innocent. And they have also secured the release of one who actually is guilty of such charges.

The train to Calvary has now left the station, and there is no turning back.

7 *The crucifixion of Jesus (Luke 23:26-43)*

26 As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. 27 A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. 28 But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed." 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." 31 For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?'

32 Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[34 Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.']] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35 And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37 and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' 38 There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed have been condemned

justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ 42 Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ 43 He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

Jesus is now on the final stage of his journey, and it is approaching its terrible climax. Betrayed, abandoned, reviled, condemned, beaten and mocked, Jesus does not even have the strength to carry his own cross. But that does not stop him from enduring the indignity of being stripped naked and suffering the agony of nails driven through His hands, hands that had had brought healing to so many; and his feet, feet that carried his message throughout the land.

If you look at most portrayals of the crucifixion they are somewhat sanitised. I have seen many stained glass windows depicting the crucifixion that show no blood and no hideous suffering; perhaps just the kind of discomfort one would get from standing in the same place for too long. More realistic portrayals upset people. In 2005, Christchurch’s Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament installed a new set of the Stations of the Cross, which caused an outrage, because two of the Stations portrayed Jesus as being naked when he was being stripped of his garments, and when he died. But these were also the most poignant and most moving Stations of the Cross I have ever seen, and I would make a point of visiting them whenever I was in pre-earthquake Christchurch. Although the outrage resulted in a loincloth being later plastered over the dying Jesus, which quite frankly looked ridiculous.

However, there is also a danger we can go to the opposite extreme. It is possible to be so focussed on the truly horrific details of Jesus' suffering and death that we forget all about God's grace, because we can't see the love for the nails.

And this brings me to the most touching aspect of Luke's gospel's account of the crucifixion, which expands an incident that Matthew's and Mark's gospels only gloss over: the conversation with the other two criminals who are crucified on either side of Jesus.

The Bible does not name them, but the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* names the thief who taunts Jesus as Gestas, and the one who asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his Kingdom as Dismas. A completely unsubstantiated myth from the Arabic *Gospel of the Infancy*, which was popular during the Middle Ages, says the two thieves held up the Holy Family while they were fleeing to Egypt. Dismas bought off Gestas with forty drachmas to leave them unmolested, and the Infant Jesus prophesied they would be crucified with him in Jerusalem, and Dismas would accompany him to Paradise. It's a very nice story, but it's almost certainly untrue. Dismas is said to have been canonised by the Christ himself, and we remember him as St Dismas. His feast day is today: 25 March, which, of course, this year coincides with Good Friday. St Dismas is the patron saint of prisoners, especially those under sentence of death, as well as reformed thieves, prison chaplains, funeral directors, and those who are dying.

But enough about St Dismas. Our focus today is neither him nor Gestas, but another condemned prisoner: Jesus, who is now dying on the cross. His crucifixion is an act of unspeakable violence and horror, when God, having become human, suffers the most humiliating execution imaginable.

8 *The death of Jesus (Luke 23:44-49)*

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45 while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last. 47 When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent.' 48 And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. 49 But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Jesus dies. But why does he have to die? Christians have developed a number of views over the last 2,000 years to explain what exactly why Jesus died. The evolution of Christian theories of atonement makes for fascinating reading. You may have heard of the Ransom, Satisfaction, Penal Substitutionary, and Christus Victor Theories of Atonement. But today is a day for solemn contemplation, not vexing theological engagement, so I will avoid getting into complex comparisons and I will make just a few points.

Humankind was estranged from God, so God sends us his son. But we reject him and his message of love, hope, and mercy. And we kill him. The cross is our response to Jesus. But it is also a place of forgiveness. We may kill the innocent son of God, but Jesus says, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'

Jesus could have carried on what he was doing for decades, wandering around Galilee, teaching about his kingdom, and healing the sick. But instead he submits to a violent and unjust death he could have easily avoided if he had not provoked the powers that be in Jerusalem.

In a blog published earlier this Holy Week, American pastor Brian Zahnd wrote, “Jesus’ entire life was a demonstration of the true nature of God. As Jesus heals the sick, forgives the sinner, receives the outcast, restores the fallen, and supremely as he dies on a cross forgiving his killers, he reveals what God is like. To see Jesus is to see the Father. At last we know that God is not like the thunderbolt-hurling Zeus or any of the other angry gods in the pantheon of terrorized religious imagination. God is like Jesus, nailed to a tree, offering forgiveness.”

Humankind was estranged from God, but we were given a way to be reconciled. And that was for God to become fully human in Jesus the Christ, experiencing the joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, and high hopes and broken dreams that are part of human life. Including death.

Jesus goes to the cross with self-sacrificing love, and he will triumph over death and sin with his resurrection, which will bring hope for us all. But he has to die first.

9 *The burial of Jesus (Luke 23:50-56)*

50 Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, 51 had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. 52 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 53 Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. 54 It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. 55 The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. 56 Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

Our story ends, as it begun, in a garden. This time in a tomb in a garden belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus may have died the most humiliating kind of death we can imagine, yet he is given a respectful burial. And one thing we can be certain of is that Jesus is definitely dead. I have heard it suggested that he will spend a couple of days unconscious, and then miraculously recover. But nobody could have survived what he has been through today. Nobody.

But why is Jesus buried? If he is going to rise again on the third day, why not leave him lying in state somewhere, like we would do at a tangihanga? Jesus had said numerous times he was going die but he would rise again, but nobody seemed to understand him. And I very much doubt if anybody seriously was expected him to come back to life.

Healing the sick and feeding large crowds is one thing. But coming back from the dead after one has been mutilated by Roman scourging and crucifixion is something else. So Jesus is buried.

But as he had said just a few days previously, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

What happens to Jesus in the tomb is also the greatest mystery of Easter. His suffering and death are publicly witnessed, but his resurrection will take place in the dark, and we must wait until the third day for that to happen.

The stone is rolled into place. It is now time for us to wait.

Darryl Ward

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