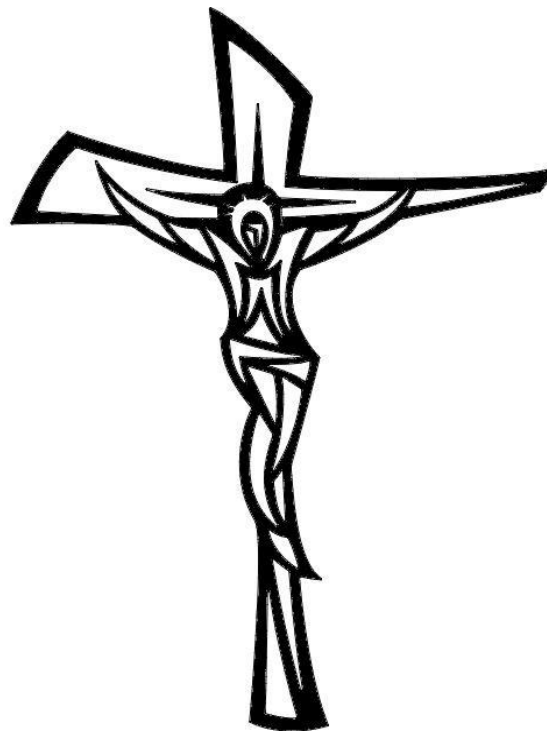


## Benefice

# Good Friday Reflections



*This Good Friday, as part of the three hours of devotion at the Cross, some members of the congregation wrote and shared reflections on some of the characters we encounter in the Passion narrative. These are personal reflections on the story from a variety of perspectives. We wanted to share them with those that could not be at the service, and hope that you will find them aids for reflections of your own.*

## **Peter the Disciple**

Nick Thomas

As Peter witnesses the crucifixion of his friend and master, Jesus, in his head he keeps hearing the cock crow, that bird outside the courtyard that first sensed the dawn of this terrible day, and announced it with the confirmation of Peter's cowardice. He knows he will hear it all day, every day, for the rest of his life.

It was Peter who first realised that this extraordinary man was the Messiah, the holy one of God. If he'd said that in the courtyard a few hours ago, he might now also be on a cross. But to say 'Yes, I am one of them, and I know Jesus has committed no crime in Jewish or Roman law' might just have got him a kicking. He, the one Jesus had called his rock, couldn't even do that. And now he watches the life of Jesus end in the worst way, the Son of God betrayed by the people of God, and through the agency of a defiling, occupying power.

So what happens now? To keep at bay the nagging memory of Jesus preaching from his boat, Jesus healing his mother-in-law, Jesus transfigured and Jesus in the agony of slow execution, Peter will maintain and organise the community of His followers; and to drown out the sound of cock-crow he will preach the truth, the Word of Jesus, to anyone who will listen, and many who will not, until he himself is crucified, and the crowing stops at last.

Meanwhile he looks at Jesus on the Cross, and says 'Lord, in your death is my life, for now I can have no other'.

## Pontius Pilate

### John Day

We know a lot more about Pontius Pilate than the other characters in the Passion narrative (apart from Jesus), as he is mentioned not only in the four Gospels and other parts of the New Testament but also in other ancient writers, including the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish authors Josephus and Philo of Alexandria.

Pontius Pilate was governor of the Roman province of Judea (which included Samaria to the north) from 26-36 AD. The other parts of Palestine at this time were still ruled by members of the Herod family, Herod Antipas in Galilee and Herod Philip in northern Transjordan. Pilate resided most of the time not in Jerusalem (except, for example, during festivals) but in the Roman headquarters at Caesarea, which is a nice seaside resort on the Mediterranean coast. (Incidentally, Caesarea is also where the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, lives today.) A Latin inscription discovered at Caesarea in 1961 reveals that Pilate's official title was Praefectus (i.e. Prefect), not Procurator as the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44) and modern historians subsequently had called him. His rule of ten years actually makes him one of the longest serving Roman governors of Judea, which suggests that the Roman authorities regarded him as a reasonably competent ruler.

However, in 36 AD Pilate was finally sacked by the Roman authorities because of his massacre of some Samaritans on their sacred mountain, Mount Gerizim. Moreover, the Jewish writers Josephus and Philo depict him as a cruel man, not caring about Jewish religious sensitivities. For example, he brought Roman standards bearing images of the Roman emperor into Jerusalem, which led to massive Jewish protests, but in the end Pilate relented. On another occasion Pilate expropriated money from the Jerusalem temple treasury in order to pay for the building of an aqueduct. And Luke's gospel, chapter 13, mentions an occasion when Pilate is said to have mixed the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices.

But of course, Pontius Pilate is most famous for his part in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Most likely this took place on either April 7<sup>th</sup>, 30 AD, or on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 33 AD. The gospels report that the trial before Pilate took place immediately following a trial before the Jewish High Priest (Caiaphas) and the Jewish Sanhedrin or council. There are a few scholars, especially Jewish scholars (emotionally influenced by later terrible Christian anti-Semitism hailing Jews as Christ-killers) who reject the whole notion of a Jewish trial and attribute the death of Jesus to Pilate and the Romans alone. But this seems to me extremely unlikely. Not only does the Jewish Babylonian Talmud accept responsibility for the death of Jesus (*Sanhedrin* 43a), but already long before the gospels were written, Paul – a proud Jew himself – affirms the role of the Jews in the death of Jesus in his very first letter, 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15, written about 49 AD. By this we are to understand not the Jews as a whole, but specifically the Jewish religious leaders, in particular the priestly Sadducees. Jesus had done nothing previously to offend Pilate or the Roman authorities but there were many things about Jesus which had ruffled Jewish feathers. Apart from various arguments over the interpretation of the Jewish Law, Jesus had predicted the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (Mark 13), and only a few

days previously he had caused a commotion in the Temple by overturning the tables of the money changers, which I believe accounts for the timing of Jesus' trial. This is supported by Mark 11:19, where immediately after the incident in the Temple we read that the chief priests and scribes sought a way to destroy him. This they could do by presenting Jesus to Pilate as a political threat because of his claim to be the Messiah.

We read that Pilate had the words "The King of the Jews" inscribed on a notice on the cross in Hebrew (i.e. Aramaic), Greek and Latin, the three languages of the area at that time. This clearly indicates the charge for which Pilate had Jesus crucified. We have every reason to believe their authenticity, since "King of the Jews" is not a term Christians would naturally use of Jesus. But these words are perfectly understandable as the way Pilate would have interpreted Jesus' claim to be the Messiah (or Christ, Greek Christos), something which he had explicitly admitted previously to the High Priest Caiaphas (Mark 14:62). Following Jesus' words to the High Priest affirming his Messiahship Caiaphas is reported to have said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy" (Mark 14:63-64). And so it was that the chief priests handed over Jesus to Pilate as a political trouble-maker and rebel against Roman rule, which his claim to be the Messiah could be distorted to imply. The handing over to Pilate was necessary if Jesus was to be put to death, as the Jews no longer had the right to administer capital punishment themselves.

At Jesus' trial Pilate is repeatedly depicted as saying that he had not found Jesus guilty of any crime deserving of death, but finally giving in to the intense pressure from the chief priests and the crowd to have him crucified. To many this gives an impression of weakness. But Passover was a time when emotions tended to run high, and doubtless Pilate thought that putting Jesus to death was the easiest way to maintain the peace. And though Jesus had done nothing deserving of death, his claim to be the Messiah and hence king of the Jews (indeed king of the world!) could be regarded as offering a potential future threat to Roman rule. And the words reported by John as addressed to Pilate, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend" (John 19:12), could have made Pilate fearful. What if word got back to the Roman emperor Tiberius that he had let a man go free who had claimed to be king?!

Finally, I'm sure that Pontius Pilate would have been completely astonished that his crucifixion of Jesus was still being recalled in the Christian creeds some 2,000 years later. And he would also be absolutely gobsmacked – as you should be too – to learn that in the Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches Pilate is actually regarded as having converted to Christianity and is even held to be a saint and martyr! This, of course, is ridiculous. We have no historical evidence whatsoever for this, and it is clearly the result of later Christian wishful thinking!

## **Simon of Cyrene**

Susie Harris

They grabbed me. I had no choice.

Wrong place, wrong time, they were armed, there was a mob and I was not about to argue.

I didn't know what was happening. But they made me walk behind him.  
Jesus, and carry this enormous heavy cross.

I could barely do 4 steps before stumbling through the narrow streets of via Delarosa. All uphill. Of course. He looked like he could barely stand let alone walk.

I had heard about him of course. Everyone had. A rebel with a heart. A heart as big as Gods they said.

Something about him. Calming and peaceful. Even now. This cross was for him. They shoved me and told me that. I couldn't believe it, and still couldn't help think why me? Why am I baring all this weight and mostly alone?

Was I helping him? Or helping him to die. I think it was both. I couldn't bear it to be both.

I could feel his presence even from here. I wanted to touch his cloak too but all he had was rags.

But if I wasn't carrying this, he'd be carrying it. I knew that. And he could barely stand.

It would crush him, and his humiliation would be complete. I had no choice. But I did not want to help him die.

I'm doing this to spare you carrying it I whispered. That's how I can bear it.

# Barabbas

Thalia Carr

If anyone owed his life to Jesus, it was Barabbas. We don't know how long he'd been in prison or even if he had any prospect of being released, but he was not expecting to come out on that particular Friday and join his friends, his family and maybe his wife and children.

We can glean some information about him from the gospel writers.

John merely calls him 'a bandit' and Matthew refers to him as 'a notorious prisoner'

Mark tells us 'he had been imprisoned with the revolutionaries who had committed murder in the insurrection' and Luke backs that up, saying he was 'flung into jail because of a riot that had taken place in the city and for murder.

So, this was no petty criminal.

Barabbas rebelled against the roman occupation, maybe we could call him a freedom fighter.

Barabbas and Jesus had plenty in common; they were both human, they were at the mercy of the Romans, they had been captured and arrested. Both challenged the authorities. And it appears they were both known in Jerusalem.

Barabbas was charged with murder and for being part of a riot. Who knows, maybe the riot had got out of hand, maybe the murder seemed justified to the rioters given the oppression they were under. But it would appear Barabbas had not yet had a trial and been convicted of murder, otherwise he would have himself been killed by the state.

Barabbas' path included violence; Jesus' path did not. The crowds who followed Jesus did not riot or commit violent acts.

Barabbas and Jesus were human, subject to pain, to fear, to hunger and thirsts. They were both at the mercy of an unjust system.

We have no reason to believe that Barabbas got a fair trial any more than Jesus did.

One was chosen to return to his family, the other went to his death.

What did Barabbas think and feel as he was so unexpectedly released from prison? – confusion? Surprise? Gratitude? Disbelief? Excitement? Relief? – maybe all of these and more.

Did it make him curious about Jesus whose response to being taken to his death did not involve swearing, or cursing or struggling?

Did he see similarities between them? Jesus was also a leader, a rebel, someone who broke the law and challenged the status quo.

We can only guess at what Barabbas may have done with his unexpected freedom.

# Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Helen McShane

Mary. The mother at the foot of the cross. What could she have been thinking. How this had not been how she thought it would end when that angel told her that she, a virgin, was expecting a baby and that the baby was God's son. But even from the start, she must have known that it would be complicated. Giving birth in a stable with the animals really wasn't ideal. And escaping back to Nazareth by the back route to avoid Herod surely had made her very nervous. She had only been a young woman and this really wasn't what she thought would happen in her life when she agreed to marry Joseph –a kind, older man, and one who had stuck with her despite all that had happened.

There had been many times during Jesus's life when she must have wondered what was going on. That scene in the temple. The wedding in Cana. When he made all of that food appear out of nowhere. She must indeed have pondered these things in her heart.

But she can't have seen this coming. At all. Standing at the foot of a wooden cross. These were the crosses where thieves, bandits and worse were hung to die. What had her son done? Only told the world he was the son of God. Was that really a treasonable offence?

The unimaginable grief of a parent whose child dies before they do. Reversing the natural order of things. How would she ever recover from this pain? She seemed to have another son now. That disciple John who had followed Jesus everywhere. Jesus said he was now her son and she was now his mother. This wasn't a time when women went it alone and having a man to take care of her was important. Her son's last act of love for her. Her last act of love for him was to be strong. To know, deep in her heart, that her son, Jesus Christ, was the son of God. And that this cruel torment of death on a cross was God's will. And even though she couldn't have understood it, she accepted God's will. Because that's what she had done all along.

And if Mary, a young and vulnerable woman standing on a hill outside Jerusalem, in the midst of such unimaginable grief, can trust God, and accept his will, then so can we. Mary does not yet know the joy of that first Easter morning, but we do. And this is Mary's gift to us. Her faith. Her trust. And her lesson to us all.

## **The Two Bandits, crucified either side of Jesus**

Helen Fletcher

This reflection is focused on the two bandits as described by Luke, chapter 23 versus 32 to 43.

Banditry was a serious and usually violent crime, and if caught, the punishment for bandits was both public and severe. These two bandits were hung on crosses either side of Jesus.

It is clear they were criminals; they had been caught and they were being punished for their crimes.

The two bandits were positioned one on either side of Jesus on his cross, and in my reflections, I see that their presence, their darkness, only contrasts and emphasises his light. As the darkness of a theatre stage enables the spotlight to shine on the lead actor, or like the passing of a cold shadow on a spring day makes us more conscious of the warmth of the sun. These bandits either side of Jesus only emphasise his goodness, the injustice, and the cruelty of his fate.

“And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, if thou be Messiah, save thyself and us.”

And I can understand these very human, these angry, bitter and despairing words. They are men in great pain. Who would not be bitter and lash out in their suffering?

But here again we see another contrast,

“for the other bandit rebuked him, answering, dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord; remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”

And it is extraordinary that despite his own pain and suffering he could see the truth, the grace, in Jesus and felt compelled to defend him, despite the jeering of the crowd. And so, the bitter words of one bandit, the jeering of the crowd only emphasise the fairness, the truth of words of the other bandit.

“And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

And in that dark moment, the light of forgiveness shines out.

Jesus was crucified with two bandits with the intention to humiliate him and frame him as a criminal, but the darkness of the bandits only further emphasised the truth and light of Jesus, both to the people who witnessed the events and to those of us who reflect on them today.

# Peter the Disciple

Tyler Brown

If we could return to Simon Peter for another brief moment, I'd like to propose we fuse together in our own minds Peter's denial of his Lord with an earlier episode in Matthew's Gospel. There is one other time when Peter's singular courage puts him at risk of a spectacular failure. Remember that it is Peter's determination to follow to the bitter end that places him even within the vicinity of the trial of Jesus. The other disciples flee the scene immediately upon Jesus's arrest. Peter, however, presses on, albeit at a distance. Still, he is there. Even if he fails his trial, at least he faces it. We've already heard insightfully about how that failure prepares him for an even greater future responsibility in leadership.

But let us consider now that earlier episode in this light. Jesus has sent the disciples ahead of him by boat on the Sea of Galilee. They row by night, and in the early breaking of dawn Jesus comes to them walking on the water. They are at first struck with horror and think to have seen a ghost. But once Jesus announces himself (with the suggestive "I AM"), Peter then *proposes* that Jesus command him to join him upon the waves. And Jesus obliges. And Peter alone discovers what it feels like for the rolling waters to form the ground beneath his feet. But once there, Peter faces a new, singular test of endurance in faith, and he fails and falls. The same courage which takes him up out of the boat and onto the waves, the faith which makes him the leader of the apostles and the first to confess Jesus as Son of God and Christ, is the very quality which exposes him to the possibility of a more profound failure. As upon the Sea of Galilee, so, it seems to me, in the Jerusalem courtyard of the high priest.

Now, the synoptic Gospels are famously taciturn about Peter's restoration after his threefold denial of Jesus. Luke for his part mentions a private appearance to Peter which happens offstage. Mark's Jesus refers to "my disciples and Peter". The closing scenes of John's Gospel fill this curious gap with an extended conversation between Peter and Jesus, with the Beloved Disciple trailing behind. Three denials, three times Peter is asked "Simon son of John do you love me" and three times commanded to shepherd God's flock.

As for Matthew, his Peter is of course among the Eleven disciples who meet the resurrected Jesus on the mountaintop back in Galilee. But perhaps Matthew has also given us an image of Peter's restoration earlier in his Gospel. For like the resurrection accounts, the walking on water takes place at dawn. In the light of Easter morning, we might imaginatively say, Peter would find the hand of Jesus grasping his own once more. After that rescue, as the history of the early church shows, Peter found his footing.

Let us perhaps then be slow to judge those who have followed more boldly, whose actions in service to God have been more decisive than our own. And let us also be aware that our obedient intentions may yet lead us into the time of trial, as did Peter's and indeed Jesus's. Even, however, when we are unable to keep our own footing, we shall find the hand of God reaching beneath the waves.