

APRIL 10 (GOOD FRIDAY)

MATTHEW 27:11-26, 33-54

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' 12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

15 Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. 16 At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. 17 So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' 18 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. 19 While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' 20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. 21 The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' 22 Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' 23 Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

24 So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' 25 Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' 26 So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; 36 then they sat down there and kept watch over him. 37 Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'

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Betrayed by one disciple, and forced into a system of injustice. Denied by another in the wee hours of the morning. Examined by the High Priest, and subject to false accusations from leaders in the religious community, now Jesus stands before the seat of regional power.

Pilate has the power to end this. It is the governor's habit to release a prisoner during the Passover festival. Pilate has seen through the motives of the temple authorities; Pilate's wife has warned him to stay out of this 'Jesus business'. "Have nothing to do with this innocent man," she says. "I have been troubled by dreams because of him."

Pilate can stop this madness, but the madness has infected the crowd, and Pilate knows the danger of unruly crowds. He doesn't want this crowd to turn on him.

So Barabbas goes free and Jesus is flogged and dragged away to his death. Pilate, ever the politician, makes the grand gesture - washing his hands and declaring his (Pilate's) innocence in the whole affair. But no one cares about Pilate any more. The crowds are hungry for what they would call justice.

Matthew offers no 'stations of the cross;' judgement falls swiftly in this gospel account. Off to the killing ground without delay. Wine offered and refused; clothing divided amongst the executioners; the charge and the convicted man nailed to the same piece of wood "This is Jesus, King of the Jews."

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38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁹Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' ⁴¹In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, ⁴²'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. ⁴³He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son." ' ⁴⁴The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

⁴⁵ From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' ⁴⁷When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' ⁴⁸At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' ⁵⁰Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

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Now, the dying - slow, sad, suffering. Two taunting companions, crucified with him, join in the abuse. No 'good thief' in this account - nothing but misery. The mocking of the crowd; the self-righteous priests and religious authorities who imagine they have won the battle; those ordinary folk who may have looked up and thought 'there but for the grace of God go I...'

Oddly, it was his death that does it. The first minds are changed in the moments following Jesus death. The earth shook, rocks were split, tombs were opened and the temple curtain is torn in two. And the soldiers who stood guard - those battle hardened, cynical servants of Caesar

whose job it was to see the thing through to the end - these men watch in fear and awe and declare at the end "Truly this man was God's Son!"

This detail often escapes us. That there is, even in this awful moment, a declaration of faith. Too late, you say; the deed is done. But faith is all that is needed. For at times like these, faith is all we have.

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Let us pray

O God, this is a day of grief - a day of dark moods and darkened skies.

The grief we've nurtured these last several weeks finds a sharp focus in the story of Jesus' torment and death, and yet, in the declaration of a Roman soldier, at the bitter end, we find a glimmer of hope.

Lend us that slight hope as we watch and wait through this day and the next.

Kindle in us the cry of delight that can be ours on the third day,
and help us guard the flame of faith against all our difficult days.

Amen