

Lent group 2023 session 5 – The Great Three Days

We all know the outline of the Great Three Days – Maundy/Holy Thursday- Easter morning, and have probably heard countless sermons on the Last Supper, the Trial, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, after telling his disciples ‘this is my body/blood’ at the Last Supper; Judas betrays Jesus and then, in the agony or remorse, hangs himself; there’s a good thief and a bad thief; Pilate washes his hands - literally – of the whole business, and when the whole, unpleasant spectacle is over, with only John, the beloved disciple, having the courage to stand near the cross, the corpse is taken away, buried, and guarded by troops to ensure no jiggery-pokery takes place.

In the (convenient) box below, write down (without undue reflection or biblical exploration) Jesus’ last words:

Share what you have written with your neighbour. Any observations? Share your thoughts with the group.

Rather like the conventional handling of the Christmas story (stars *and* shepherds, Wise Men *and* stables), we can elide the Holy Week accounts of the four evangelists (*plus* Paul’s bit on the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians) into an almost seamless whole. An attempt to do this for the four Gospels was made by a chap called Tatian round about the middle-end of the second century. In his harmony of the four Gospels (‘*Diatessaron*’), which incidentally testifies to the pre-eminence of our traditional foursome quite early on, he welds together a single, continuous narrative, and in the Syrian Church this was the usual form of the Gospel text used in worship.

Most of the time that’s fine and won’t lead us unduly astray, but it comes at the cost of veiling where each writer wants to direct our gaze. To break open the treasure-chest, we’ll start by looking at the Last Words From The Cross:

Gospel reference	Text of Jesus’ last words
Matthew 27.46:	And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘ <i>Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?</i> ’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ [<i>Matthew records also ‘Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last’</i>]
Mark 15.34:	At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘ <i>Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?</i> ’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ [<i>Mark also records a final ‘loud cry’</i>]
Luke 23.46:	Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last.
John 19.30:	When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

In pairs, study the above (and any surrounding verse which take your fancy). Try to come up with ideas to explain the different accounts of the final words of Jesus.

If these differences *do* suggest the four evangelists have their own ‘takes’ on the story of Jesus’ Passion and resurrection, it’s probably worth our while looking at some of the unique features of Matthew to try and see what he’s trying to say to us.

It probably seems a trivial point, but we could do worse than start with Matthew’s and Mark’s cry from the cross. Only the letter ‘o’ separates one quote from the other, but it *could* be a significant difference. Mark *looks* to be Aramaic, Jesus’ native language; Matthew is closer to Hebrew, but since both Mark and Matthew translate the words anyway, what difference does it make? Two answers have been offered:

- Matthew is explaining the confusion with Elijah (Heb. ‘*Eliyah*’); ‘*Eli*’ sounds closer to ‘*Eliyah*’ than ‘*Eloi*’.
- Matthew wants to draw our attention to Ps 22 (‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’ [Heb. ‘*Eli, Eli, lama ‘azabtani*’]) to expound the meaning of the crucifixion: Ps 22 starts darkly, but ends with a statement of trust and redemption. (Confusingly, the late Aramaic Ps 22 starts ‘*Elohi, ‘Elohi, l’manah sh’vaqtany*, ܐܠܘܗܝ ܐܠܘܗܝ ܠܡܢܗ ܫܘܩܬܢܝ, a sort of halfway house between Matthew and Mark)

Read Ps 22. With your neighbour, discuss which is more convincing an answer.

Another strange passage in Matthew is 27.51-53:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many

This incident takes place immediately after Jesus' death. Both Mk and Lk record the rending of the temple curtain (in John, the death of Jesus coincides with the slaughtering of the Passover lambs), but the earthquake and the opening of the tombs of the saints are unique to Matthew. *So, in pairs consider the following:*

- Mark's take on Holy Week is one long sequence of self-emptying on Jesus part, with the final cry of abandonment by God marking the depths of despair. Is Matthew saying something different? Is this foretaste of the Resurrection connected with the trusting/hopeful interpretation of 'Eli, Eli... '?
- 'That which is not taken up (or assumed) is not healed' (Gregory of Nazianzus, c 380). In other words, if Christ doesn't participate fully in our human existence, he doesn't fully embrace us.

If Jesus 'knows' that the crucifixion isn't really the end, does he really understand what it is to be a human being facing death? Does he really share our nature? Does he have anything to say to us?

- How do you think Matthew wants us to understand the death of Jesus?

The Blood Curse.

Notoriously, Matthew contains the 'his blood be upon us and our children' verse in his trial account. It doesn't appear in Mark or Luke, but has been the foundation for much anti-Jewish polemic ever since.

- Why do you think Matthew includes it?
- Something like a generation elapses between the events of Good Friday and the destruction of Jerusalem. Does this alter your understanding of what Matthew was on about?
- What does this have to say about our use of Scripture?

Matthew has two further subtle tricks up his sleeve – the hand-washing of Pilate is actually a Jewish ritual to dissociate oneself from guilty behaviour, eg Ps 26, 5-6

*I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.
I wash my hands in innocence, and go around your altar, O LORD,*

and Ps 73.13

All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

Matthew is hinting at something here, is he not – though Pilate's attempt to distance himself from events is hardly successful.

There's another little twist: Matthew alone records Barabbas' first name – Jesus. So the crowd is offered a choice between Jesus Barabbas – and *Bar-abbas* can be translated 'Son of the Father' – and Jesus 'who is called the Messiah' – the *authentic* 'Son of the Father'. The crowd makes the wrong choice, and thus, Matthew hints, seals Jerusalem's fate in warfare and destruction.

Judas

Matthew and Luke have very different takes on Judas' fate: Acts 1.16ff reads:

Judas... was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.' (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

Mt 27.3-10 is the story most people remember, however: countless essays have been written on Judas' motives and whether Judas was 'the fall guy' in the story – indeed, whether he should be held blameworthy at all.

For an insight into Matthew's understanding read Mt 24-5. *In pairs*

- Discuss what Jesus' answer might mean.
- What do you make of Judas' 'repentance'?
- Can anyone ever be *entirely* guilty? Where does forgiveness fit in?