

The Last Hour 2020

Reflection

Matthew 27.24-37

The last man to be titled 'King of the Jews' – given that title by the Roman senate - died a year or two after Jesus was born. Herod the Great established the newly named Roman province of Judea as a beacon of economic, military and architectural success. He is not remembered by either Christians or Jews with particular fondness. He is the Herod responsible for the massacre of the first born in Bethlehem in St Matthew's gospel. That story is quite in character with everything else we know about him. He was ruthless, murderous (not least in his own family) and ruled by fear. But in that he was no different from any other king or emperor admired by the Romans – that's what good kings did. What did the Romans do for us – they certainly brutalised, ruled by fear, glorified cruelty in battle and in the amphitheatre, made slaves of hundreds of thousands, millions maybe. Oh, but they but they were great at building roads, drains, heating systems, cities. And Herod was good at that too.

He initiated and completed massive infrastructure projects – where he also built for himself exquisite palaces, such as here on his new fortress and country retreat at Masada.



Or here on the Mediterranean coast where his place overlooked the sea, behind which was a new provincial capital complete with theatre, sports stadium and pagan temples, and next to which was a vital new harbour and port connecting the province for the first time properly by sea to the rest the empire.



Or here in Jerusalem. This is the model in the national museum of the temple which he rebuilt and the enclosed Temple mount which he extended into one vast platform, making the site one of the new wonders of the ancient world. As I have been reminding some of us in my holy week reflections, the Temple faced east – in other words, the other way round from the way churches were traditionally to be oriented – our sanctuaries being at the east end, whereas the temple sanctuary was on its west side and its doors facing out towards the east – where across the valley hundreds of thousands of Jewish graves await the messiah bursting out of the Golden Gate of the

temple to summon the dead to resurrection. And where the living had for generations prayed towards the Temple, towards the Presence where the glory of God dwelt in the holy of holies.



The traditional and likely site of Golgotha and the holy Sepulchre - or tomb, where Jesus was laid – is here west of the Temple, behind it, without a city wall. Jesus probably died with his back to the wall and to the Temple, both to Herod' great feat of royal architectural brilliance but also away from the divine presence. Jewish pray-ers faced the Temple so that they could receive the divine blessing, 'The Lord make his face to shine upon you'.

I received for Christmas a copy of this book – *Dominion*, by the historian Tom Holland. The blurb on the inside cover says this:.....

Christianity is the most enduring and influential legacy of the ancient world, and its emergence the single most transformative development in Western history. Even the increasing number in the West today who have abandoned the faith of their forebears, and dismiss all religion as pointless superstition, remain recognisably its heirs. Seen close-up, the division between a sceptic and a believer may seem unbridgeable. Widen the focus, though, and Christianity's enduring impact upon the West can be seen in the emergence of much that has traditionally been cast as its nemesis: in science, in secularism, and yes, even in atheism.

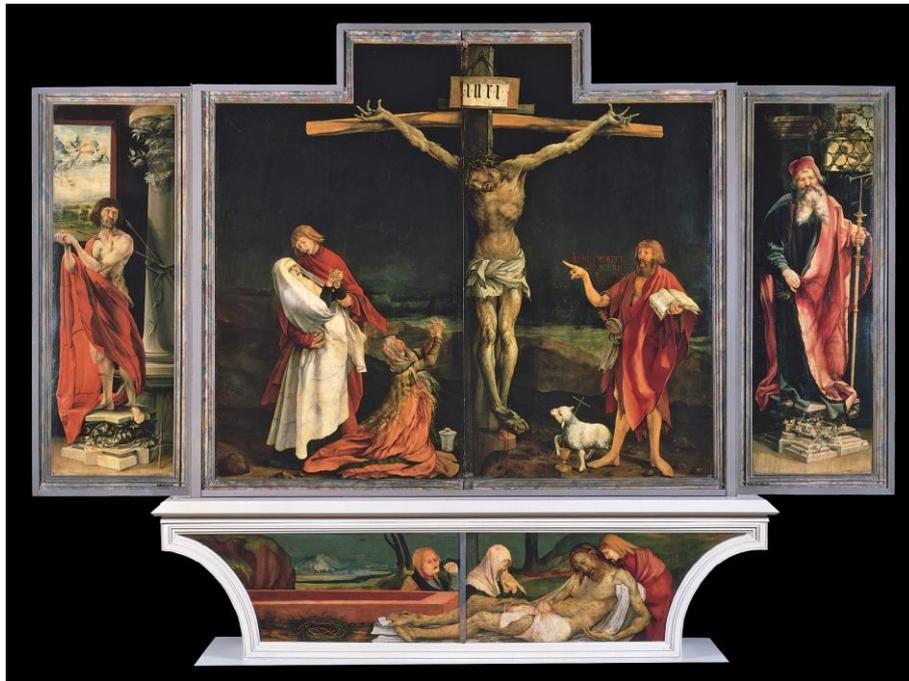
That is why Dominion will place the story of how we came to be what we are, and how we think the way that we do, in the broadest historical context. Ranging in time from the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BC to the on-going migration crisis in Europe today, and from Nebuchadnezzar to the Beatles, it will explore just what it was that made Christianity so revolutionary and disruptive; how completely it came to saturate the mind-set of Latin Christendom; and why, in a West that has become increasingly doubtful of religion's claims, so many of its instincts remain irredeemably Christian.

One of the ways Jesus of Nazareth has turned upside down the way we think about things is how power is exercised – how, for instance, to be a King. Pilate was the inheritor of Herod authority; he ruled Judea from Herod's capital Caesarea. It is his soldiers that mock both Jesus and the memory of Herod (the king title was dropped after his death 30-35 years before) and the Jewish people – hail, King of the Jews. To Roman eyes, to the eyes of every ancient civilisation, and some modern ones, being a king and suffering/looking humble/being disabled or ill/serving others was a sign of failure, of not being up to the job, of being deserted by your god and the fates. A king who knelt down to wash his subjects' feet was unthinkable, a king who regarded every person in his kingdom as of equal worth was unthinkable.

The Romans were making mockery of this – you can't be serious. A king?

One of the things that has struck me forcibly in this national and international health emergency that has engulfed us is how much our generation may seem to have lost contact with the faith that has formed us, it has not unlearned much of the revolutionary teaching and understanding that is revealed on the first Good Friday. Suffering was then deemed shameful and accursed; now we can see its nobility. We admire a Queen who exercises little power but seeks to live a life of service; we unite behind a Prime Minister in the week of his personal Passion; we do not view him as accursed, a lame duck, a spent force. And we have armies of doctors, scientists, engineers, industrialists and other leading figures and authorities all seeking to work for the common good. We are prepared to make vast economic sacrifices in order to protect the most vulnerable in our society. On Good Friday I often have a rather gloomy view of human ignorance, negligence and downright wickedness, but today it strikes me that however vulnerable the church and its life is, even if we are reduced to nought in our Western civilisation something of our job has been done; the world has got it and all around us are heart-warming signs that at its best our world has learned a new way of being in charge, of leadership, power – of what it means to be a king.

So we keep a couple of/few minutes of silence and I leave with an image that I'll be speaking about later on.



Silence

Reflection

Matthew 27.38-44

When on Ash Wednesday we were signed with a cross in dust and journeyed into the wilderness for 40 days of testing we hadn't quite banked on this, had we? Fasting from many of our normal routines, fasting from wider human contact, fasting from school and work, fasting from being in our church building – we never imagined that. For many of us this has been and is an anxious time, fasting from the comforts of assured health and wealth, fasting too from some of the easy comforts of faith. In the wilderness the first temptation is for the quick, fix, the easy quick-fix answer to prayer – 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' That's a

kind of religion attractive to many people including ourselves. Prayer is the 'Beam me up, Scotty' desire for a bit of magic, a secret passageway that takes us away from the hard realities of life that everybody else has to face up to.

Then the devil took Jesus in his mind's eye 'to the holy city and the pinnacle of the Temple. Saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down: for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'



The Last Temptation comes at the end of Lent, on Good Friday. 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' Cut it short, show yourself to be a real king, click your fingers, by-pass all this shameful and degrading suffering.

It's tempting. Why can't he do that? Come to that, why can't he click his fingers and sort out all the other body and soul destroying agonies of this world? Why has he allowed this Covid 19 virus to prosper and plant its deadly presence in bodies around the planet? Why did he allow Herod the Great to prosper with all his cruelty? Why earthquakes and tsunamis and genocides? Or, closer to home, why the suffering or death of someone I love?

Like you, I suspect, I have wrestled with those sorts of questions down the years – and many of you have heard me seek to give some faltering answers from time to time. They help – at least I find they do – but only a bit. And maybe trying to give an easy answer is a bit too like yielding to one of the temptations. It's just too quick a fix. What we are given, what I believe we are called to is not easy answers but to be here today. To be with Jesus listening to the taunts and the questions (from ourselves as well as others) and to be for a few minutes, silent.

Silence

Interlude

I couldn't resist sharing with you this story I read last year in the Birmingham section of the BBC website. It might provide a little relief in our devotions today.

A dog named Jesus was rescued from a lake by firefighters on Good Friday.

The four-year-old Staffordshire bull terrier-mix was saved from the water in Sutton Park at about 14:30 BST, West Midlands Fire Service said.

Crews used a ladder and flotation device to retrieve him.

He was named Jesus by his owners three years ago to the day, when he was rehomed on Good Friday 2016. Watch commander Nigel Cox said the rescue was more "unusual" than crews were used to.

"There were about 100 members of the public on the bank when we get there, some threatening to jump in to get the dog", he said.

"The dog had been in the lake for about 30 minutes and was going underneath the water and reappearing, so a decision was made to get a fire fighter into the water to retrieve him.

"The rescue only took five minutes but the owners were overjoyed to have him back."

Reflection

Matthew 27.45-54

The image of the crucifixion that I have been showing is a distinctively Lutheran one and so it matches the music of Bach and the hymn we have just sung in tone and temper. It leaves little to the imagination in its realism. This is not the victorious Christ you see on some depictions, nor the beautifully suffering one you see in others. This is the Full Monty – an emaciated figure, stretched to the limit, muscles tearing, bones protruding. The thorns are not just on his head; they are in his arms and his side.

It hangs now in a museum in Alsace, but it was painted as an altarpiece for the monastery of St Anthony in Isenheim. A main ministry of the monks was to provide care for sufferers of skin-diseases and the plague. The sores on the body of Christ are unique in Western art in being a medically accurate and realistic depiction of those of the plague victims being cared for in the adjacent hospital.

What this picture was saying to those victims was that the God we worship is not remote from your pains and wounds and sores – he has shared and does share in them. Martin Luther's theology of the cross – that this is a very early artistic representation of – was altogether more warm with sympathy and compassion than the rather cold legal understanding of John Calvin.

John the Baptist points – behold the Lamb of God – this is your God. Luther spoke of the cross as being the death of God – this is where the god of easy answers and the god of remote and absolute power, the god of Herod the Great and the Romans – this is where that god dies and our eyes our opened to another God, the God whose likeness in ancient Israel could never be seen but whose image now hangs the wrong side of the Temple, facing the wrong direction. This is your god.

Silence

Reflection

Matthew 27.55-61

At the foot of the cross are the women who loved Jesus, among whom were Mary whom Matthew describes as the mother of James and Joseph – earlier in the gospel he tells us that these were brothers of Jesus, so this is Jesus' mother, depicted by Grunewald almost fainting with grief and sorrow. How hard it is for mothers to bear the loss of their children.

And also there, Matthew tells us, was Mary Magdalene – one of the Marys who were close friends of Jesus. Her pleading hands are an echo of the outspread fingers of Jesus – her body too is stretched out and taut with grief and desperation.

They were there that day, near but they could only watch. They could not touch or hold one they loved – they had to spend that day at a distance and could do nothing but pray, cry and bewail their powerlessness.

They were there too when Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus, wrapped it in linen cloth, laid it in his own new tomb and then rolled a stone in front of the tomb. 'Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there' it says, 'sitting opposite the tomb.' They were there.

In our final few minutes of silence will you please remember those who are not able to touch or hold their loved ones who are going through their calvaries – they have to be at a distance, and those who must be at a distance even after death, sitting opposite, as it were watching as their loved ones are buried. At the end of our silence we will hear the question of whether we were there with the women when they crucified him, nailed him to the tree and laid him in the tomb. I guess that's an invitation to join those women, to sit alongside them, pray with them, both the Mary's of 2000 years ago and the mothers and loved ones of today who are watching and waiting.

Silence