

The Passion in Four Episodes

Reflections for use in Holy Week

What follows are four reflections based on the passion narrative from Matthew's gospel. As well as the story – with words and pictures, each one has things to reflect and act on, and some prayer suggestions. They can be used at any time in Holy Week but particularly on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Episode One: The Meal (based on Matthew 26:17-35)

It was the beginning of Passover and Jesus told us to get the meal ready. We all met in a room upstairs. At first it was like any other Passover meal but then the first unusual thing happened.

We were all waiting for the slave to wash our feet, when Jesus took the towel from her, gently nudged her to one side, knelt down and began to wash our feet. We were so shocked that we couldn't find words to say. But when he got to Peter, Peter spoke, 'You can't do this for me, Jesus. You just can't.'



But Jesus insisted. He insisted that what he was doing was special. So he washed Peter's feet, and then finished washing all our feet. He sat back and looked at us, and said, 'if I, your teacher and your Lord, wash your feet, then you must do this for other people.'

Then, he suggested that one of us would betray him..... and Judas slipped out of the room.

But that wasn't the only odd thing to happen.

Jesus took the bread, broke it and thanked God.



He gave it to us and said,

‘this is my body.....’

Then he took the Cup with wine in it, thanked God, and asked us to drink it. He said,

‘this is my blood,
which is given for many people.

In the future,
every time you do this,
remember me.’

The mood had definitely shifted.

Jesus began to talk about dying and, as usual, Peter jumped in. He announced that he would stick with Jesus, whatever happened..... but Jesus said that before the night was over, Peter would let him down, not once, but three times.

It was a very strange meal.

Reflection and Actions:

Think for a moment about what makes an occasion memorable. It might be what we eat, or do, or who we are with, but often it is when the unexpected happens – when it pours with rain at a picnic or when someone makes a surprising speech.

Jesus was celebrating the Passover, a meal that God’s people had celebrated for centuries, but he did some surprising, shocking, things.

He washed feet.....

As he broke and shared bread and wine, he told his friends that this would always remind them of his death.....

As you eat your meal today, alone or with those you live with, imagine Jesus at that meal. Imagine him taking the bread, breaking it and sharing it with his friends, but also with those who would deny and betray and abandon him. 'This is my body, given for you, do this in remembrance of me.'

As you pour yourself a drink, remember Jesus taking a cup of wine, passing it between his companions. 'This is my blood, shed for you, do this in remembrance of me.'

After your meal, run a bowl of water and take a towel. Picture Jesus - friend, master, teacher, Lord – kneeling at the feet of others and washing their feet. It is almost impossible to imagine a modern day equivalent to Jesus washing the feet of those who were with him.

It was the action of a servant, a slave.

Wash your hands in the bowl of water, slowly and thoroughly as we have been taught to in recent weeks. As you wash, remember that in doing this washing you are serving others, protecting others.



Praying:

- Pray for those who are giving of themselves for the well-being of others in the fight of this pandemic.
- Pray for those who feel the pain and reality of denial and betrayal and abandonment.
- Pray for those who, even today, cannot choose to serve, but are enslaved by others.

Episode Two: The Arrest (based on Matthew 26:36-56, 69-75)

The disciples left the room and went to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. Most of them stayed in the background, but Peter, James and John were close to Jesus. As Jesus kept on praying, they kept on falling asleep, until Jesus was left alone, praying intensely, asking God to help him to do what God wanted.



Eventually, Jesus came and woke them up. 'It's time', he said.



Even as he was speaking Judas came up. There was a mob of armed men with him. He walked over and kissed Jesus.... and the armed men came and arrested Jesus. One of Jesus' followers was so angry, he cut off the ear of one of the men. But Jesus said, 'this is the way things have to be. And they led him away to be questioned.

Some disciples followed. But some ran away. Peter went right into the courtyard to find out what was happening. He was trying not to be noticed, as he warmed himself at the fire, but a serving woman saw him. 'Hey you', she cried. 'Aren't you with the man from Nazareth?'

'No!', growled Peter.

She saw him again a bit later and said, 'you are one of them.'

'No, I am not!' said Peter, very firmly. He slipped further into the shadows.

A little while later some people noticed him and said, 'you are definitely one of them. We can tell by your accent.'

'I am not!' yelled Peter. 'I have told you once, and I tell you now I don't know him!'



Then a cockerel crowed three times and Peter remembered all that Jesus had said. He simply began to cry.

Reflection and Actions:

It was all going wrong. Remember back to Palm Sunday when Jesus had entered into Jerusalem to shouts of praise, there was hope.

As things start to unravel, Jesus' closest friends begin to behave badly – they let him down, they fell asleep when he needed them, they ran away. There was the kiss of betrayal and the sounds of denial.

Were they bad, were they frightened, were they confused.....?

What had happened?

Imagine sitting eating a meal, knowing it would be your last. Who would be there, who would you want to spend those precious moments with?

What if you knew that one of those close friends was later going to deny knowing you, what if you knew that others would simply run away, what if you knew that one of them would act in a way that put your very life in danger?

Think of some of the symbols mentioned in the story

- A garden – of prayer but also of anguish
- A kiss – of a friend but also a betrayer
- Silver coins – symbols of wealth but also the price of betrayal
- A fire – to warm but also to light up a face
- The cockerel – the sound of a new morning but also the reminder of denial

How can we ensure that we use things for good, to show love and to bring life, rather than using them to hurt or damage?

Praying:

Meditate on the words of this song:

From heav'n You came, helpless Babe,
Entered our world, Your glory veiled;
Not to be served but to serve,
And give Your life that we might live.

Chorus

This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King.

Come see His hands and His feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice;
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered.

So let us learn how to serve,
And in our lives enthrone Him;
Each other's needs to prefer,
For it is Christ we're serving.

There in the garden of tears,
My heavy load He chose to bear;
His heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not my will but Yours,' He said.

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Episode Three: The Trials (based on Matthew 26:57-68, 27:11-31)

The night became very confusing. People were rushing all over the city, waking up the priest, waking up Herod, waking up the Roman ruler. Jesus was pushed about as well.

First the Jewish council and the high priest questioned him. But Jesus said nothing. They repeated the words that Jesus had said, accusing him of all kinds of things. But Jesus said nothing.

Finally they said, 'are you the Messiah, the son of the living God?'

'I am,' said Jesus.

'That's enough!' they cried. 'He has claimed to be God! Put him to death!'

And the soldiers mocked him and beat him. And they took him to Pilate, the Roman ruler.

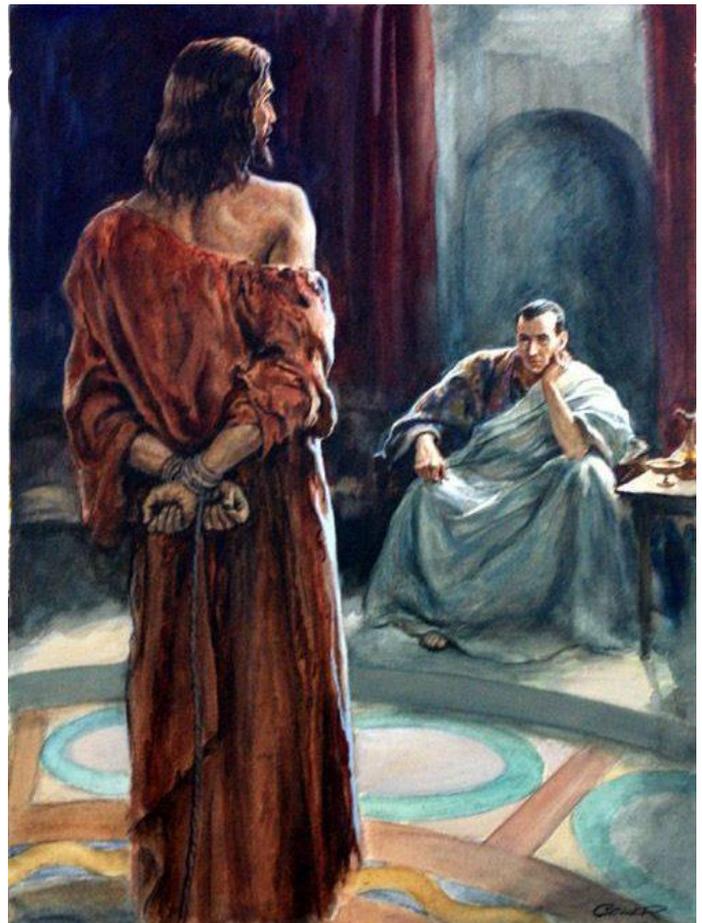
Pilate questioned him. Again Jesus said nothing.

At Passover, Pilate always freed one prisoner, chosen by the crowds. He offered them a choice between Barabbas, the violent murderer, or Jesus.

'Shall I free Jesus, the king of the Jews?' asked Pilate.

'No!' roared the crowd. 'We have no King but Caesar. We want Barabbas! Barabbas! Barabbas!'

'But what should I do with Jesus?' Pilate asked. 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' yelled the crowd, louder than ever.



So Pilate handed Jesus over to be nailed to a cross.

Reflection and Actions:

Think about a time when you have been part of a large crowd – hard to imagine at this time of isolation and physical distancing.

What was the mood like? Was it exciting? Or scary? Imagine the noise, the press of people, the sights and smells and sounds.....

Think back to the crowd of Palm Sunday, grabbing what was close to them to wave in praise, to call out to God to save them, to turn out to see Jesus riding into Jerusalem.

Think about the crowd of Good Friday, maybe some of the same people were there, the mood is different, they are shouting for blood.



Praying:

- Pray for the places of the world where there is injustice and oppression.
- Pray for places where people gather in crowds to demonstrate and places where these kinds of actions result in arrest, or violence or death.
- Pray for those awaiting trial and for those in prison.

Episode Four: The Death (based on Matthew 27:32-61)

The soldiers led Jesus away from Pilate into the courtyard. They began to mock him, bully him and beat him. They put a purple robe around him and a crown of thorns on his head. They spat on him and pretended to worship him.



Jesus was forced to pick up his cross and carry it. When he fell, the soldiers grabbed a man from the crowd, a visitor to the city called Simon of Cyrene. He took Jesus' place, carrying the cross out to the area called Golgotha.



And the nails were banged in – one, two, three, four. Jesus was raised high on the cross. The soldiers sat around and played dice to see if they could win his clothes, sometimes stopping to laugh at Jesus. People walked by. They stopped and said terrible things about Jesus.

'He saved others, get on with it, and save yourself!' said the chief priests and teachers.

Hours go by. And the sky begins to go dark, very dark. At about three o'clock Jesus cries out in a loud voice, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

The people think he is calling Elijah. They try to give him wine on a sponge. Jesus gives a loud cry and dies. At that very moment the curtain the temple rips from top to bottom. One of the soldiers stares round in the gloom and says, 'for sure, this man is the son of God.'

Then the women and some other friends come and take his body away. They lay him in a tomb, and a huge stone is rolled over.



It is finished. Jesus is dead.

Reflection and Actions:

See if you can find something in your garden, if you have one, that has thorns. Hold a nail, or some wood. Think about the bitter taste of wine vinegar. Imagine the sound of laughter that is mocking. Acknowledge pain.

Praying:

- Take a moment to pray for God's forgiveness for the ways you have failed him and others.
- Pray for all who feel there is no hope.
- Pray for those who are in pain, those who are sick and those who are dying.
- Keep silence and focus on this gold thread, a glimmer of hope as we wait for Sunday.

