

Good Friday Sermon 2023:
Isaiah 52-53 & John 18-19
Handed Over

As you read and meditate on the solemn passion accounts, particularly John's version, as we have this morning, it becomes quite clear, it seems to me, that the story of Jesus ministry was only going to end in one way. Jesus is going to his death.

Others agree with this. Back in the 1980s the famous British investigative journalist, Gordon Thomas, wrote a book in which he analysed the four gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, passion, trial and death together with other historical sources, in order to investigate Jesus death, not from a spiritual point of view, but *as a crime*. You might have heard of this book or even read. It was entitled *The Trial*. He looked at the political, legal, historical and religious aspects of it all, and he also came to the conclusion that from the moment he began his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing Jesus was on a collision course with destiny and there was only one possible outcome.

Jesus' words and actions set him up for fatal conflict with the corrupt Jewish and Roman authorities. His whole ministry provoked and threatened them and their fragile grasp on power, and left them with no real choice but to plot and carry out his murder, under the guise of a legal execution. We have just read it again this morning.

Moreover, in his book, Gordon Thomas also spends a lot of time on analysing who it was exactly in this situation that was finally legally and morally responsible for this crime. Who actually has the most blood on their hands?

We read again this morning about how Jesus was 'handed over'. Do you remember that expression from John's passion history? It is used all through the Bible, with different shades of meaning. In the Gospels, especially in John, however, it is the term used to describe

what happened to Jesus in these last 24 hours of his earthly ministry. Judas *hands Jesus over* to the Jewish authorities, the high priest and his colleagues. They *hand him over to Pilate* (the Romans Governor), who *hands him over* to be crucified. It describes how Jesus is betrayed, treated as a criminal, condemned, tortured and killed, as we have been hearing again this morning.

There is no shortage suspects here, and the evidence is damning, I am sure you would agree.

And yet we ought to be very careful about righteously setting *ourselves* up as judge and jury here.

Because there is a different answer this investigation, a deeper and more complete one. In today's OT reading from Isaiah 52-53, the responsibility for Jesus' death seems to rest not just with the conspirators who planned and carried out Jesus' unjust killing, but with a much wider group. Prophecying about Jesus, Isaiah says: *he was wounded for our transgression and crushed for our iniquities*. In Isaiah's immediate context 'we' of course means Israel, but as we know only too well, it ultimately also includes all people, all sinners. Jesus is not just the victim of a political or religious plot, but of the whole fallen human race. In Isaiah 52-53, he prophecies about how Jesus would have laid on him the punishment of all humanity. St Paul, himself a Jewish OT scholar, confirms this in 1 Cor 15:3: *For I handed over to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures...* Note how he uses that same expression for *handing over* this teaching that is used to talk about Jesus being *handed over* to death in John's passion history. So there is no escaping it, I am afraid. It is *our* sin and evil too that nailed Jesus to the cross. It was *our punishment* that was laid on him. That is not just some kind of theological deduction or theory. It is the awful truth; here it is in Scripture. That is one of the deepest and rawest realities we all must face on Good Friday.

But you know, we are not yet at the heart of it. Our sin is the reason for Jesus' death, but it was in fact *not we* who instigated it, even though we benefit from it. It is Isaiah again who gives us the even deeper and more profound truth here, in his prophecy about Jesus in verses 6 and 10 of today's OT reading:

It was the Lord who laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all.

It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.

To be sure, Judas and Pilate and Caiaphas and the crowds, and we together with all sinful people played our part in Jesus' death. But who was it that *finally handed Jesus over* to suffer and die for the sins of the world? The Lord, God the Father, he 'who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son....'.

He sent Jesus, His crown, His dearest, His most precious as a substitutionary atoning sacrifice, to carry our punishment for us, and die under our sentence of death, innocent though he was.

In 1534 as Luther translating the OT, and meditating on this, he wrote:

The greatest miracle that has ever occurred on earth is that the Son of God died such a shameful death on the cross. It seems a miracle to us that the Father should say to his only begotten son, who is truly, in nature, God, "Go down, let yourself be slain and executed on the gallows of the cross".

Jesus performed many miracles, but here is the greatest miracle of all, a miracle performed for the salvation of every human soul. The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all and by his stripes we are healed. This *deepest* truth that is placed before us on Good Friday: The Son of God was handed over to death, so that through him, God may hand over to us eternal life.