

## MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR GOOD FRIDAY, 2 APRIL 2021

This material was prepared for Narromine Uniting Church, where Lauris and I are now serving for most of April. I hope it helps with your commemoration of Good Friday, the hardest day of the Christian calendar.

### 1 **Call to worship**

We huddle together today,  
followers of Jesus, gathered in his name;  
the same Jesus who cried out,  
*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*  
*Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*  
Today is a hard day, a tragic day.  
Let us invoke the same God on whom Jesus called in his hour of despair  
to be with us now.

### 2 **Prayer of Invocation**

Let us pray.  
God, our Father,  
we come today in all our shame,  
in all our brokenness,  
in all our faithlessness.  
We come, for where else would we go?  
Our Lord has been taken from us.  
Be with us now, we pray, as we mourn together,  
as we tell again the story of his passion,  
and as we begin the wailing and waiting  
that yearn desperately for the dawn to come.

### 3 **Bible Readings**

John 19:13-30  
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

### 4 **Sermon** – see below

### 5 **Prayer of Confession**

Lord our God,  
On this day, it seems so incongruous that we can come to your mercy seat,  
that we can dare to seek your forgiveness.  
For we confess that we are sinners,  
indeed that we are mired in our sinfulness.  
We could just as easily stand with Pilate,  
for we condone, or walk past, injustices  
and turn our backs on those who suffer them.  
We might very easily be among the crowd,  
crying for Jesus' blood,  
for we too fear to stand in the way of the mob,  
and to be a dissonant voice in the name of what is right.  
We could well be among the soldiers,  
perpetrating an injustice because it's easier to follow orders;  
or among the crowd of onlookers,  
because we also have a macabre fascination with tragedy,

and are happy to gloat over the one who suffers it.  
Despite the face we show to the world,  
and the face we show to ourselves,  
we know that we are vicariously complicit in our Saviour's death,  
for we are as enmeshed in sin as were those who drove in the nails.  
And yet, the One whom we persecuted has become our great High Priest,  
able to understand and sympathise with our battle with sin.  
So we "approach the throne of grace with boldness,  
so that we may receive mercy  
and find grace to help in time of need."  
Forgive us, we pray, for who and what we are.  
Amen

**6 Dismissal and charge**

Go from here now in solemnity,  
to contemplate the cross and the newly occupied grave.  
The world is a dark place.  
Go in fear and trepidation to await the dawn that our saviour has promised.  
Amen.

## SERMON

*Pilate said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.*

Was Pilate mocking Jesus when he said, "Here is your King"? "Shall I crucify your king?" The gospel accounts don't often include details like that. We only have the words, not the gestures or the emotions or the motives. We can only guess at what was in Pilate's mind as he sat there on the judgment seat, the supreme magistrate who represented the great power of Rome and the emperor, presiding over his court. Had he been impressed by Jesus? Perhaps even frightened by Jesus? Or did he regard him with contempt, a broken and defeated man brought before him by his own people, who were baying for his blood?

Whatever may have been in Pilate's mind, the gospel writer John certainly paints a clearer picture of the chief priests. "We have no king but the emperor," they retorted to Pilate. What they said was true enough, at least in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was under direct Roman rule; none of Herod's son ruled there. There *was* no king except the Roman emperor, Tiberius Caesar, who ruled over most of the known world. The chief priests were Sadducees, who co-operated with the Romans. Their reply to Pilate, then, was both technically accurate, politically expedient, and politically safe.

But it was also a complete sell-out of their people's aspirations. To a great many Jews, the Romans were the hated overlords. Those Jews longed for an end to the Roman occupation. They yearned for the restoration of their nation. They looked for a king of the House of David who had been promised to them by the prophets. The king that they longed for would be God's agent, for the land was, in reality, always intended to be ruled by God himself, working through his appointed agents. The true allegiance of the Jewish people was to God and God alone; yet to Pilate, the chief priests proclaim, "We have no king but the emperor." Another king, here, now, was an embarrassment and an inconvenience.

And Pilate, whatever it was that he may have thought, used his power and authority to order the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It was what was demanded. It was the easiest thing to do. He handed Jesus over to them to be crucified.

So the tragic scene at the place of judgment was complete. The life of Jesus of Nazareth was to be sacrificed for expedience. He was an inconvenience to the Jews and a nuisance to the Romans. He was eminently expendable. Human life was cheap; nobodies simply didn't count. Jesus was sent off to crucifixion simply because it was the easiest solution. Now the priests could prepare for Passover; and the Romans could assume that the foment among the crowds would die down. Best not to have trouble when so many pilgrims were gathered in Jerusalem for the great festival.

We usually speak of the hatred that nailed Jesus to the cross. And certainly there was hatred. The crowds had mocked him, crying out for his execution. They gathered around his cross to mock him anew, gloating over the fall of the one who had promised so much, yet appeared to have come to nothing. Why not kick the man when he was down? And be secretly grateful that it's him, and not you, up there on that cross. There was hatred aplenty.

But the scene that John describes in Pilate's tribunal was as much about expedience, as much about convenience, as it was about hatred. The tragedy of Jesus' execution was that it just seemed to suit everyone to get him conveniently out of the way.

And yet. And yet, there are those words which Pilate had attached to the cross: "Jesus of Nazareth,

the King of the Jews.” Once again, we might wonder – was this a mocking inscription? Or was it Pilate’s ironic rejoinder to the Jews who had done for Jesus? This time we have an insight. The inscription was written in three languages, Latin, Hebrew and Greek. The common language of the Jewish people in Judaea was none of these; they spoke Aramaic. Hebrew was the formal language of scripture. Greek was the language of most of the eastern Mediterranean world. It was spoken by many Jews, and was the language of administration. And Latin was the native tongue of the Romans, the language of Roman law and Roman proclamations. So the words, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”, were written by Pilate very deliberately, and very formally. They were not merely for local consumption. They were a formal declaration by the Roman governor.

Of course the chief priests objected to the words. This was not the king of the Jews, they protested; he merely claimed to be the king of the Jews. You can’t put up a sign like that, they told Pilate. You have to change it.

In the inflected languages of Hebrew, Greek and Latin, the change would have involved changing a letter or two, no more. But Pilate refused. “What I have written, I have written,” he told them. Pilate’s formal declaration was to stand as it was. It is a supreme irony of the story of the passion as it is told by John, that Jesus died beneath a proclamation of the Roman governor that he was indeed the King of the Jews.

But die he did.

*When Jesus had received the wine, John writes, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

It is right and proper that on *this* day, we leave the story there. On *this* day, we should go quietly to our homes to think on the horror of the events we solemnly recall on every Good Friday. The rest of the story belongs to another day, mercifully not too long away.

But even *were* we unaware of what happens next – as those who mourned Jesus’ death certainly were – we might be given to wonder. In our sombre contemplations, we might remember things that Jesus had said. We might, for example, recall those mysterious words Jesus spoke, as he looked ahead to this moment,

*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

Every farmer knows the truth of the statement. The grain of wheat is buried in the soil. It ceases to exist – it dies. But from its remains arises a new plant, new life, the source of many new grains of wheat. From death comes life. But what had Jesus meant by making that remark?

In later years, the writer to the Hebrews reflected on this phenomenon.

*In the days of his flesh, he wrote, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ...*

Life from death, by the grace of God. Not a grain of wheat, but the Son of God.

If not for the grace of God, the tragedy of this day would be without limit. We are right to know our shame and our brokenness and our bankruptcy on this day. That is who we are. But that is not who God is. From the worst of disasters, God can wring the greatest of good. That is our hope on this

day. For miraculously, it is through the horrors of this day that we can come to God in confidence.

*... we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, proclaimed the writer to the Hebrews, Jesus, the Son of God,"*

Here is the promise. Here is the new life that grows from the worst of deaths.

So with that same writer, on this worst of days,

*Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

Let us now bring our confession before the God of grace.

Let us pray.