



Woodcut reproduction by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872).

## The Crucifixion: Why? Why Did Jesus Die?

The execution of Jesus, as we memorialize it on Good Friday, is for the vast majority of Christians an intensely emotional event. It is virtually impossible to hear the words of the narrative read in the starkly subdued atmosphere of the day without being moved at the very deepest part of our being. In many ways, it is about feeling, experiencing and being changed by the brutal way in which our Lord died. It is not a day for theology—it is a day to remember. With that in mind, however, the season that allows us to journey from ashes to Easter does provide the

opportunity, if we choose to take it, to look at this turning point in human history, away from the emotion of the liturgy. It would seem to make sense to include the account of Jesus' death in the Lenten series. As the facilitator, however, you may choose to let the liturgy speak for itself. It is your call.

If you choose to proceed, after welcoming the participants, a word to set the tone for the study would be useful at this point. The event of Jesus' crucifixion is so burned into people's memories that it can be difficult to move from memory

to understanding. That is the challenge in this particular study.

## Opening Prayer

Everlasting God, in your great love you sent your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take our nature, to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility. Have mercy on us we pray, in this life: that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and share in his marvellous resurrection, for your honour and glory. Amen.

The crucifixion narrative is lengthy and is best looked at in small chunks. Have a participant read the following passage and then let the group reflect in silence, for a short time.

## John 18:28—19:16

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### Jesus before Pilate

Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief

priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

### Jesus Sentenced to Death

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore

the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He 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.

Next, in small groups, ask the participants to discuss the following questions (15 minutes):

- 1) As you read John's account of the trial before Pilate, what stands out most vividly for you? Why?
- 2) What do you find most interesting about the words and actions of both Jesus and Pilate?

Record any insights and feelings that emerge from these conversations.

## **From a Political and Theological Perspective**

While Pilate was apparently curious about Jesus, he could find no particular case for guilt in him or in his activities. There was a problem, however. The situation had become toxic and there seemed to be a bloodlust in the air that only an act of cathartic violence would remedy. There was a need to restore public order, and Jesus, for some reason, was the flashpoint of the disturbance. Pilate had Jesus scourged, which is a polite way of talking about a torturous beating with leather whips that had bits

of metal, glass or bone embedded in the strips. Scourging was brutal and potentially life-threatening. This act was not only physically horrific, but would have made Jesus an object of shame and ridicule.

In an interesting and ironic parody of royalty, following the beating, John has the soldiers dress Jesus in a purple robe (the colour of royalty) and place a crown of thorns on his head, mocking him as King of the Jews. Indeed, throughout the account the irony is really quite juicy. The phrases "Here is the man" and later "Here is your King," mockingly used by Pilate, revealed the true nature of the one we call the Christ. Pilate's use of the title "King" provoked an interesting reaction from the chief priests who shouted, "We have no king but the emperor!" This response portrays the religious establishment as servants of the agenda of Rome and consequently at odds with the heritage of Israel.

The whole notion of Jesus as "King" is both explosively political and contextually interesting in this bi-play. To speak of him in this way moves things into the realm of radical change: revolt, alternative government and liberation—from the Romans. Jesus' response points to an interesting shift in understanding of the term. When he responds, "My kingdom is not from this world ...," the point is not so much about something otherworldly as it is about a kingdom rooted in non-violence, built on love and justice. To paraphrase John Dominic Crossan, Caesar's kingdom was based on the theory of victory then peace, while the kingdom of God is one in which peace flows out of justice. In the words of William Loader, "Jesus' ministry interprets his death and his death interprets his ministry."

In small groups, have the participants discuss the following question (10–15 minutes):

- 3) What light does William Loader shed on this horrible event by suggesting that "Jesus' ministry interprets his death and his death interprets his

ministry”? What did he mean? How does that help us understand what happened?

Now ask a participant to read the following passage. Allow time for silent reflection after.

### John 19:16—25

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Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

#### **The Crucifixion of Jesus**

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.” When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.” This was to fulfil what the scripture says, “They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.”

And that is what the soldiers did.

In small groups, ask the participants to discuss the following question (10–15 minutes):

- 4) Knowing that John’s understanding of the crucifixion and resurrection is that they are in effect one continuous act in which he truly

becomes the Messiah and is glorified as such, what details in John’s account of these events stand out? Why? What new insights emerge for you?

As always, record the key points of the discussions.

At this point, it might be helpful to point out that in John’s account we see some unique details:

- a) Jesus is portrayed as “carrying his cross by himself.” It is reasonable to relate this detail to Jesus’ challenge to his disciples that anyone who would be a follower of his need to “take up their cross and follow him,” which meant following him in the risky task of challenging the powers of Rome and Jerusalem.
- b) Jesus is not mocked or derided by anyone here—not the bystanders, not the others who were crucified, not the soldiers.
- c) Pilate makes the statement, “What I have written I have written” with respect to the inscription over Jesus’ head.

Now ask someone to read the following from John’s account. Again, allow some time for silent reflection after the reading.

### John 19:26–42

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When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), “I am thirsty.” A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

In plenary, discuss the following questions for about 10–15 minutes:

- 5) What strikes you most powerfully here?
- 6) Jesus speaks the words, “It is finished.” (It is accomplished.) What does he mean? What is accomplished?

## Teaching Moment

If it is indeed true that a significant part of Jesus’ mission and ministry was leading a movement that challenged the forces that dominated and oppressed the poor and marginalized, which would mark the dawning of the long-awaited kingdom (and it would be difficult to argue that it is not), then there is real significance to Jesus bowing his head and saying, “It is finished”. These are not the pathetic last words of one who has been defeated, but rather the words of the Messiah affirming that the kingdom has been inaugurated in and through all that has just happened. He was not pointing to a kingdom that might come some day, God-willing, if everything worked out. The kingdom was present in and through his actions, and most powerfully so on the cross and in the resurrection. These are not words of defeat but an assurance of victory. If you read John carefully, it becomes clear that throughout, Jesus is controlling the moment. This point is too important to miss in John’s account.

Traditionally the question has been answered in terms of sin and guilt, whereby the individual

sinner finds peace for a troubled conscience, in the present, and the assurance of forgiveness from God, in life and death. This answer is, I believe, perfectly true and valid, biblically rooted and pastorally vital as it ever was. It does not, however, tell the whole story that the New Testament tells about the meaning of Jesus’ death. To explore the fuller story in no way detracts from this individual application, but rather sets it in its proper context.

—N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, HarperOne, p. 105.

## Taking It Home

In plenary or in small groups, discuss the following questions (20–30 minutes):

- 7) What might the impact of the crucifixion be for those who are trying to be faithful followers of Jesus right here, right now?
- 8) What is the gift? What is the challenge?
- 9) What action does this call me/us to in our own particular context?

Record any insights, feelings or comments.

Affirm the group for their participation at such a busy and demanding time of the church year, then close with prayer for the church, for one another and for the world that we are called to serve.

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