

Preaching the Passion
an extended meditation on Jesus' last 24 hours
in the Four Gospels
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Introduction

The way we hear (and hear about) the last 24 hours of Jesus life – for instance in the way we present Good Friday – means we often find it difficult to appreciate the contrasting voices of the Gospels. The traditional ‘Three Hours at the Cross’, often based on Jesus’ Seven Words from the Cross, itself has bizarre origins. It was created by Peruvian Jesuits in the 17th c. It was a missionary service, a teaching opportunity. It was not specific to Good Friday, and in a world untroubled by television, the internet and PSPs, a three hour preaching service was by no means uncommon.

How a Roman Catholic missionary service in Latin America came to recommend itself to low church 19th century Anglicans as something to do on Good Friday afternoon is for another time (but it is still surprising!)

It does however leave us with two difficult legacies today, in particular the fact our approach to the passion narratives takes an approach that seeks to weave one story, as if all the details were contained in all the Gospels; when of course there is one BIG story, but each of the Gospels tells it in a unique and distinctive way.

Just as at Christmas time memory and imagination fill in the gaps – be it a donkey in the stable or three kings, rather than an unspecified number of wise men; so with Good Friday. It is surprising (I hope) to note that e.g. John fails to mention bread and wine at the Last Supper; and that he talks about foot washing rather than a meal; or that none of the Gospels tell us what shape the cross was; or how Jesus was fixed to us (none of them, for instance, mention nails – though it is a fair assumption given the resurrection appearances!); and there probably are not seven words of Jesus from the cross, at least not in the one story.

Which is why I want us to do some head and heart work today untangling the story and helping us see more clearly how the crucifixion is told in the Gospels, and how the differences between the accounts may help us to a deeper encounter with the crucified and risen Lord.

This is ‘head’ work, because I want us to think seriously about what the Gospels say. It is ‘heart’ work because I want the Christ whom we meet there to change our lives.

And – a note of reassurance before we proceed – do not let this close interrogation of the Gospels imply that they are unreliable. The writers bring their unique theological perspectives; their communities know different bits of history; and where they disagree (and they do!) remember the proverb: “he lies like an eye witness”. Matthew, Mark and Luke say the Last Supper is the Passover Meal; John says that it isn’t – indeed it is crucial to John’s whole understanding of the crucifixion that the Passover starts on the Friday, not the

Thursday. Christians have known this for nearly 2,000 years. But it doesn't undermine faith – rather it challenges to learn to live with rich allusion and ambiguity.

Plan

What I intend to do today, in three addresses of rather varying length, is examine something of the unique perspective of each of the Passion Narratives. Through this I want to invite you to draw very close to the cross and to the one we meet hanging there for the salvation of the world. And in the richness of the different emphases and understandings I invite you to ask yourself in your own heart how you respond; who is this crucified Lord for you?

In this first address I will examine the Passion Narrative in Matthew and Mark – recognising that each of them brings something distinctive but that in this part of their Gospels at least they are very much speaking with one voice and looking from the same perspective. In the second address I will examine the Passion Narrative in Luke. And in the final address I will examine the Passion Narrative in John. This is of course the order in which they appear in the New Testament, and (certainly the Mark – Luke – John sequence) probably the order in which they were written; but this order also serves my particular purpose today.

Before we begin properly, a short word about Passion Narratives. The Passion Narratives – even in written form – are among the earliest parts of the Gospel; and their similarities of shape and content (which are therefore important when we come to look at their differences) relate inevitably to the narrative they represent: the story of the last few hours of Jesus' life.

For what follows I take *Passion Narrative* to indicate the continuous sections in each of the four gospels from the end of the Last Supper to Jesus' death and burial. This therefore includes Jesus in Gethsemane; his arrest; the Jewish trial; the Roman trial; Jesus' handing over to be crucified; his crucifixion and death; his burial.

The Passion Narrative in Mark and Matthew

The Passion Narratives in Mark and Matthew are very close in feel. The picture they paint is very stark indeed. Jesus is abandoned by his followers; he faces his hour alone, and therefore he endures the cross in a particularly agonizing way. In a sense – given the artistic and literary tradition of the western churches – it is the version that is most familiar. Let us look at some of the details.

From the outset – even as the last supper is ending with Jesus' predictions to the disciples – there is a mood of strong foreboding. Gethsemane begins to focus this mood.

Even though in Matthew, Mark and Luke the main reason for coming to Gethsemane is Jesus' prayer the narrative begins to speak of trouble, trial and sorrow. Matthew, in a nice stylistic change to Mark's wording alludes ("in this place" for Mark's "here") alludes to Gen 22.5: "sit in this place with the donkey. I and the little boy shall go on further; and) having worshipped, we shall return to you" (LXX) i.e. he makes the link with the sacrifice of Isaac, which also took place at Jerusalem.

(Mk 14.33b-44; Mt 26.37-38) on arrival at Gethsemane the mood suddenly changes: Jesus has been predicting the future and speaking of the disciples' failure. Now he needs their support. Jesus suddenly *begins* to be distressed. The details about J's movements in the garden – three times back and forth - are meant to convey his increasing isolation and despair. And Mark's vocabulary indicate Jesus' physical terror before shuddering horror, etc. Later will see that Luke omits the whole of Mark's description - he never shows J in psychological disarray. And even Matthew softens Mark's wording.

J goes forward, prostrates himself/kneels. He goes a stone's throw - his movement is physical but it's also about alienation; his prostration is because he is distraught, despairing – not because he is being presented as a pattern of devotion. This is messy – he is in disarray, and his turmoil is made very stark, especially in Mark.

It is also worth noting that while this version of Gethsemane has an important place in piety and art, many 1st c pagans would be horrified at this picture of a distraught, prone J begging God to deliver him. Anti-Christian writers are still saying this up to 200 years later – what kind of God worth believing in can this be?

Jesus is arrested, handed over; and true to form (and prediction) the disciples flee. From now on in Mark Jesus essentially ceases to act – from now on he is being done to (the real meaning of the word *passio*). He stops responding; stops doing; stops speaking (or when he does his words are not effective). There is art and theology here, the depiction of Jesus on the lonely journey to a terrible death.

This is picked up even there in the details of the Jewish trial – for instance, why does Mark end the scene of the Jewish abuse of Jesus with the attendant slapping Jesus? Well, cf LXX of Is 50.6-7: "I gave...my cheeks to *slaps*; I did not turn my *face* from the shame of *spitting*. And the Lord God became my helper, and so I was not ashamed". It is a bit like the stilling of the storm: Mark is telling us – in full accordance with his theological presentation of the Passion - that with this abuse the great Is prophecy is being fulfilled; that by self-giving a victim can

turn the signs of human rejection into victory through God's help. History, theology, spirituality and discipleship are woven together in the narrative, demanding a response.

Through two beatings and the Roman trial before Pilate, the Passion Narrative in Matthew and Mark develops the motif of the silence and inactivity of Jesus, his 'being done to'. Simon of Cyrene is roughly compelled to carry Jesus' cross, and the cross is the scene of further mockery and abuse. The darkness comes and is pierced by Jesus' extraordinary cry of despair, quoting from the Psalms: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani" – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." All is darkness, and this pathetic death of a broken Christ evokes the centurion's remarkable response: "truly this was a / the Son of God."

We are deeply familiar with this way of telling the Passion Narrative. Western art since the 13th century has focussed on the figure of the crucified (though as we shall see, this depiction was virtually unknown in the first millennium of Christianity). The tradition particularly developed by St Francis has placed this broken body at the heart of much western Christianity, and many of our assumptions.

From Ben Hur to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* this is territory we know (though Ben Hur is better theology than Mel Gibson's offering, and crucially Gibson, along with many others makes the mistake of making the sufferings of Christ extraordinary and the person of Christ ordinary, when the Gospels do quite the opposite; indeed a close reading even of Matthew and Mark demonstrates that they do not dwell on the suffering of crucifixion at all; they simply say that it happened; after all, as they knew all too well, it happened to thousands of people; the unique bit about Jesus was not the manner of his death, but that this is God doing the dying.

In the words of Bill Vanstone (*Love's Endeavour, love's expense*):

Drained is love in making full,
bound in setting others free,
poor in making many rich,
weak in giving power to be.

Therefore he who thee reveals
hangs, O Father, on that tree;
helpless; and the nails and thorns
tell of what thy love must be.

Thou art God: no monarch thou,
throned in easy state to reign;
thou art God, whose arms of love
aching, spent, the world sustain.

The Passion Narrative in Luke

Luke is not telling a different story from Matthew and Mark. It is more or less the same structure, tidied up a bit and made more elegant – remember what Luke claims at the beginning: he is seeking to write an *orderly* narrative, and sometimes the rough stuff that he has read in Mark does not match his sense of order or his theological purpose.

So Luke is telling the same story in his Passion Narrative (and frankly how could it be otherwise!?) But he diverges in emphasis, arrangement and detail. This is all of a piece with Luke's Gospel and his deep, deep understanding of who Jesus is. Remember how it begins in Luke: with the remarkable picture of God choosing an unmarried teenage girl to be the mother of the Lord; with signs – from virginal conception to smelly shepherds, to a birth on the road in a lean-to behind a pub – that speak of this God's love for our brokenness, need and frailty. Not so much 'friend of sinners' as one who knows our need for forgiveness and freedom from within – because he has shared our life in all its messy detail.

The theology of Luke's unique stories rams his point home. It is only in Luke that Jesus' tells the story of the Prodigal Son and of the Good Samaritan: both stories deeply unexpected in their outcome and impact, speaking of lost people being found and despised foreigners doing the right thing.

Mary in her song at the beginning of Luke's Gospel spoke of Jesus' birth turning on their head the values of the world as we know it, and again and again in Luke we find Jesus acting this out. Even in his first 'sermon', reading from the prophetic Isaiah, he sets out a radical agenda: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

So what do we see when we come to the Passion Narrative in Luke? The most striking thing is that in Luke there is no great sense of abandonment. There is a big sense of Jesus in communion with the Father throughout (e.g. no cry of abandonment from the cross); there is no mention of the disciples fleeing. For Luke, in the Passion Narrative as in his whole Gospel, the healing and forgiving power of God is heavily emphasised: Jesus heals the servant's ear, heals the relationship between Herod and Pilate, forgives those who crucify him, and gives the promise of paradise to the penitent thief.

Let's examine this in greater detail.

From the last supper, Jesus does not (in string contrast to Mark) prophecy doom and abandonment. Rather, he actually speaks of disciples' fidelity. And on arrival in Gethsemane the scene is very different. Luke omits all of Mark's description of Jesus' despair. Luke never shows Jesus in psychological disarray, and this is all part of his theology: Jesus shows us how to live; his is an example to follow; here in the garden he exemplifies the Christian response to suffering and pain (and presumably reflects something of the experience and need, perhaps even martyrdom, in Luke's own community). When Luke does give us a portrait of Jesus in distress (22.40b) it is part of Jesus' instructions to the disciples to pray. It is – in the proper sense – exemplary. Luke can certainly acknowledge the suffering of Son of Man (9.22, 44), but he refuses to describe Jesus' inner reaction to suffering.

In part throughout the Passion Narrative Luke is seeking to show J as a model to Christian sufferers and martyrs. So e.g. Luke has Jesus kneeling in Gethsemane rather than flinging himself on the ground in despair. Jesus is controlled, persevering, a model of prayer for Christians. “Not my will but yours be done”.

Even though there are textual issues about the ‘strengthening angel’ passage, stylistically and theologically it probably belongs in Luke’s Gospel, as it is part of this strong theme of martyrdom. To make a fine – but crucial – distinction (and remember that Luke is an educated Greek speaker) Jesus’ *agon* rather than ‘agony’ is the central point in Luke. It is combat rather than Mark’s vision of despair and extreme pain. And – all of piece with this – while in Matthew and Mark Jesus returns to the disciples again and again, in Luke he comes back only once.

This distinctive understanding of Jesus throughout Luke’s Gospel – as Jesus friend of our frailty teaching us how to live – is there in the details. So for instance the incident of the cutting off of the ear during the arrest. It is found in all four gospels. But in Luke, Jesus heals the ear! Jesus acts as saviour during the passion itself. And notably Luke does not mention the flight of the disciples. He does not want to emphasise their failure.

Instead of the physical humiliation at the hands of the soldiers recorded by Matthew and Mark, mockery dominates Luke’s account of the events after the arrest. He uses the same verb for mockery again and again, and he even omits the Suffering Servant material that is key to Matthew and Mark. Again, Luke is presenting Jesus as a model for Christians, not as a man in despair. So: Simon of Cyrene, although still not a willing helper, is in Luke a positive figure, carrying the cross *behind* Jesus, which in Luke is what disciples do!

And when we arrive at Golgotha, it is the same figure of healing and forgiveness, dying for love of our love. His words from the cross here are unique to Luke very distinctive:

- “Father, forgive them...” at the very moment of crucifixion
- “Today you will be with me in paradise” to the penitent thief
- “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” a quotation from Psalm 31 in place of a cry of despair.

"The Coming" by R S Thomas

And God held in his hand
a small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked.
Far off,
as though through water, he saw
a scorched land of fierce
colour. The light burned
there; crusted buildings
cast their shadows; a bright
serpent, a river
uncoiled itself, radiant
with slime.

On a bare
hill a bare tree saddened
the sky. Many people
held out their thin arms
to it, as though waiting
for a vanished April
to return to its crossed
boughs. The son watched
them. Let me go there, he said.

The Passion Narrative in John

John's narrative has always dominated Holy Week and Easter. His Gospel of the Foot Washing has taken centre stage even when much of the church thought that he had got his dating wrong (and therefore ended up using different kinds of bread at the Eucharist).

But whatever else, this Gospel is distinctive in shape and content. The only core miracle John has in common with the other three is the feeding of the 5,000, and he lacks the Transfiguration completely when this forms the lynch pin in the structure of the other Gospels. Nearly half of John's Gospel deals with events in the last week of Jesus' life. So it is unsurprising that his Passion Narrative differs in all sorts of ways from the other three - only 50% is the same as in Mark (though there is much parallel material earlier in the Gospel).

In fact, John's account is not so much a passion narrative as a "narrative of the lifting up of the Son of Man in victorious return to the Father." In John Jesus is entirely in control of the action. Jesus is triumphant on the cross; he is not mocked or desolate. His death is triumph, and he is even active after his death - the water and the blood.

Fate of disciples: nothing in John. From the last supper we are heading somewhere different. There is no prophecy about the fate of the disciples, and in a neat bit of text, John makes a direct link between Jesus leaving Jerusalem and King David going on the same journey 1,000 years earlier (cf 2 Sam 15).

When they arrive, the garden in John is absolutely not the place for doubt about future destiny - J has already worked out the issue of the hour and refuses to be saved from it (12.27b); and now he is clear, almost indignant: "Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" This reflects his theology at the most profound level. For John the hour is not primarily about horrendous suffering and death, but the moment of the lifting up of the Son of Man who will draw all to himself (12.32).

Jesus' arrest is very different in John not just from that in the other Gospels but from what I suspect the picture most of us have in our heads. It is not an armed group who turn up to arrest him, as in Matthew and Mark; nor is it an orderly arresting party as in Luke. Here in John - astonishingly - it is a Roman cohort, a tenth of a legion; 600 troops (*speira*).

And what happens next may sound like detail but is a fundamental point to who Jesus is and the destiny that he is fulfilling. In the first place, John does not mention Judas' kiss. Human initiative must not be the instrument of Jesus' destiny (just as later John does not mention Simon of Cyrene. John's Christology has no place for Jesus needing or accepting help. He is sovereign and in control). Jesus has sovereignty, so Judas is very inactive figure in John, simply an instrument (whatever Geoffrey Archer has to say on the subject).

And then a remarkable dialogue unfolds: *tina zitate* (whom do you seek) echoes the calling of the first disciples (1.38) (seeking language is very strong in John; cf Mary Magdala at 20.15). The answer - Jesus of Nazareth - is both for identification and Christological: it will after all appear triumphantly on the cross not so much as charge but glory. And then *ego eimi* (I am), the force almost untranslatable because here (as again and again in this Gospel) Jesus speaks the divine name. He could not be more explicit: he is God. It is an awesome moment, which

is why the hundreds of soldiers respond by falling to the ground. Others are powerless over him.

In the trial that follows John develops the common historical core in a very contrasting way. Lots of symbolism around. Jesus speaks, rather than be silent, in the encounter with the high priest and with Pilate, and the focus with Pilate is a big conversation about the kingdom, in which Jesus explicitly identifies himself as a king (“my kingdom is not of this world”). Again, this is astonishingly different from what we find in the other three Gospels. Even his flogging becomes Messianic: the crown of thorns and the mocking “hail” may be common to other Gospels, but Jesus’ presentation by Pilate dressed in a purple robe and the “Behold the man!” are unique and point to John’s amazingly different Christology: this is the Lord of the universe, the King of the world, and he goes to his death not bruised and battered but precisely as a king to his coronation.

Even John’s timing – which clearly conflicts with the other three Gospels – is highly significant. It is 12 on Friday, the eve of Sabbath and Passover. In the other three Gospels this is darkness comes; in John it is the sentencing of Jesus. Passover observances are beginning; the priests in the Temple are beginning to slaughter the passover lambs in preparation for the passover meal that evening. This happens precisely when Jesus sets out for the cross – this is the new Passover lamb.

And the cross – as we might expect by now – is coronation. Pilate affirms Christ’s kingship, the authenticity of the claims, and Jesus remains active throughout. His words are purposeful and demand response: “I thirst”; and then, triumphant, “it is finished.” He even remains active in death, bringing forth sacraments from his pierced side.

It is a whole theological picture which we need to appreciate in its entirety. And because we tend to fuse the accounts together, conflating them in one narrative, we not only miss the distinctive voices, but the gore – because so visible – gets everywhere.

John presents us with a different kind of passion. It stands at the heart of the next part of Friday afternoon. And – while there is a death – this Passion is charged with hope and majesty; in some sense – as we have already noted – not a Passion Narrative at all.

Jesus stands triumphant, drawing all to himself as he is raised from the cross. It is why in the Orthodox Church *Alleluias* are sung today as well as Easter Day. There is triumph here, the harrowing of the hell of our human experience by the instrument of glory.

It is, perhaps, surprising, that this version of John – though read or sung every Good Friday – has largely come second place in the western churches to the paradigm given by Mark. Perhaps with out strange history of power and over confidence we need to beat ourselves up by the cross.

But it reassures me that one of the earliest English poems we have – *The Dream of the Rood* – commonly attributed to Hilda’s monk Caedmon at Whitby – speaks precisely of John’s vision in the passion: the cross (the rood) is filled with awe and wonder at the privilege of carrying Christ: “Rood waes ic araered, ahof ic ricne cyning” (Rood was I reared now, rich

King heaving); the Christ he bears is 'heaven's chieftan' (heofona hlaford), and the rood is so full of awe that he dare not move!

Anglo Saxon is not my strong point, but the same point is made, more formally perhaps, in the great office hymn for this season of the Passion:

**The royal banners forward go,
the cross shines forth in mystic glow,
where he in flesh, our flesh who made,
our sentence bore, our ransom paid.**

**Where deep for us the spear was dyed,
life's torrent rushing from his side,
to wash us in that precious flood,
where mingled water flowed, and blood.**

**Fulfilled is all that David told
in true prophetic song of old,
the universal Lord is he,
who reigns and triumphs from the tree.**

**O tree of beauty, tree of light,
O tree with royal purple dight,
elect on whose triumphal breast
those holy limbs should find their rest!**

**On whose dear arms, so widely flung,
the weight of this world's ransom hung,
the price of humankind to pay
and spoil the spoiler of his prey.**

**O cross, our one reliance, hail!
so may thy power with us prevail
to give new virtue to the saint,
and pardon to the penitent.**

Venantius Fortunatus (530 – 609)