



Christ has died

THE NEW SHOFAR

When I survey the wonderous cross

Christ died for us that we may live for others

God sets the people free

The feast of the Passover commemorates the deliverance of the Hebrew people from their slavery in Egypt but from its earliest days it was understood spiritually, a template for our understanding of the nature of divine activity. It developed into a type of the great deliverance wrought by the Messiah for all his people from the doom of death on account of sin, and from the bondage of sin itself, a state worse than Egyptian bondage. What we should not forget about the Passover is how it was **deliverance from** as well as a **deliverance for**. They were saved **from slavery** in order that they may **live for the fulfilling** of God's saving works in the world. Freed **from** sin/slavery, believers are empowered **to** collaborate with what God is doing, through Christ, in the world in which we live today. What is called for is prayerful discernment of what the “**for**” and the “**from**” mean for us and our parishes.

And they bound him and took him to Pilate

Most of us skip over this little verse with hardly a blink of the eye but for Matthew it is of importance. It introduces Matthew's message summed up beautifully by Origen (died 253 A.D.)... *they bound Jesus who looses them that are bound*. One earthly ruler, Pilate, is about to condemn the Eternal Ruler. They *handed him over* to Pilate. This verb is used fourteen times by Matthew and here it helps set the background for what is happening. What we have is a clash between two worlds – the kingdom of this world represented by Rome (supported by the leaders of Judaism) against the Kingdom of God manifested in Jesus.

Neither Mark nor Luke use the name of Jesus when he is brought before Pilate, but Matthew repeats it three times. He wants the focus to remain fixed on the incarnated Son of God. He goes to his death as a fully human man. Also worth noting is the way Matthew uses Pilate's title – the Governor – three times whereas Mark sticks with the name Pilate. It is another way of stressing the reality of what is happening. It is a standoff between the perceived powers of the state and the true power God; Jesus and Pilate; Christ and Caesar. Throughout, it will be Jesus who remains in control and not the Governor.

Are You the king of the Jews?

In this question, the “you” is emphatic. Pilate just cannot believe the presumption behind that title. This scruffy Galilean could never be a king of any significance! He is no threat to the all-powerful Caesar. But the reply of Jesus is just as significant...*these are your words!* These are the final words of Jesus – apart from his prayer on the cross and so they

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are of some importance. In a way it sums up the world's attitude to him. His reply to Pilate is no real answer. It is kind of *yes I am but no I am not!* Yes, Jesus **is** a King but not the kind of king Pilate has in mind. They have misunderstood him, misread him...*the light shines I the darkness but the darkness did not know him...***John 1:5**. This "darkness" is condemning someone to death they know not, a man of whom they are afraid.

And they led him out

Jesus was led outside of the City, another of those short phrases Matthew uses to shape his message. In the biblical tradition this presents Jesus as the sin-sacrifice led out through the city gates in order to sanctify the peoples. The people understood the imagery. It reminded them of Azazel, the scapegoat who was led out of the same city into the wilderness carrying with him the sins of the nation. There he died. Jesus is now the fully rejected Messiah.

There they crucified him

Mark records the way myrrh was mixed with the wine in order to dull the pain. Not so in Matthew. They give him a bitter wine. Nothing is going to diminish the totality of Jesus' obedience to his Father. Then he was nailed to the cross and raised up for all to see and to mock. No great descriptions of the crucifixion itself, just one Greek word. Matthew does not want the focus to be on the details. It is all about the person dying – all eyes on Jesus.

Matthew's version of the charge nailed to the cross reads ***this is Jesus the king of the Jews***. The Greek text highlights those two words. It is no longer the charge against him. It is declaration of the truth. It is a sermon, a confession of faith. For Pilate it was a warning – this is the only king you are going to get. Matthew professes: he is the ***only*** king we need.

Then how wonderful the mocking must have seemed to Christians after 70 when the Temple was destroyed. The physical temple lay in ruins, smashed to pieces by the Romans. The bashed, broken and destroyed New Temple was raised up after three days and ascended to glory. Matthew wants that contrast to stand out in all its starkness.

And darkness covered the earth

Now too Matthew continues his use of symbols. The darkness covering the earth is reminiscent of the darkness covering the earth at creation. It needs an act of God if the world is to be relieved of the darkness crushing it and that relief is nailed here to the cross. It is out of that darkness the final words of Jesus cry out...*Eloi Eloi lema sabachthani*. It was 3pm, the very time of day the lambs were taken to the Temple for slaughter. Much as many want to avoid the reality of this cry, it is a fully human cry of abandonment. He has been abandoned by the world - including his closest disciples and his last words wonder whether even God has abandoned him. That is the very human Jesus speaking and in this cry he joins with so many fellow humans who struggle against the weaknesses, sins, injustices and loneliness that cripple so many of us. These are all borne on the cross by the dying Jesus.

We are there on the cross with Jesus – he takes us there

That first Good Friday is not simply an historic event, something that happened long ago, ancient history. He died there at Golgotha and we are drawn into the saving love shown there. We live in that freedom. We should thus be spending time giving thanks that the love God has for us has been so powerfully revealed to us in the emptying of his Son.

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