

## Prayer

We love You, Jesus Christ. We love You with a passion beyond all earthly meaning, because in You we find life, freedom from death, victory over evil, healing from pain and suffering, and the liberty to be true to ourselves and to You. Because of this, the only way we can sum up our feelings is to say 'we love you'. May we never take Your love for granted, Lord Jesus, and may we always rejoice in what it means. ALLELUIA

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*This is Easter Week, or 'Holy Week'. Read the scripture for the day (below) and keep a copy with you, to read again during the day*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the higher education** *Pray for the many students who are seeking places at universities, for the next academic year*
- *Pray for Moscow residents after the bombing of their metro*
- *Give thanks for electricity and all it does to enhance life today*

## Meditation

We long to be Your disciples, Lord Jesus: may our lives be

Full of praise to You, our Lord and our God;  
Full of love and compassion for people we meet;  
Full of peace for our fears have been taken away;  
Full of truth and justice within a troubled world;  
Full of integrity and free from deceit and lies;  
Full of contentedness with all we have been given;  
Full of hope for the future for we feel safe with You;

We long to be made perfect and complete in You, Lord Jesus:

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## Bible passage – Mathew 27:20-26

<sup>20</sup> Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus put to death. <sup>21</sup> The governor said to them again, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' They said, 'Barabbas!' <sup>22</sup> 'Then what should I do with Jesus called the Messiah?' Pilate asked. They all answered, 'Crucify Him!' <sup>23</sup> Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted even louder, 'Crucify Him!'

<sup>24</sup> When Pilate saw that he could not achieve anything, and there was a danger of a riot, he took some water and washed his hands in the sight of the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; this is your responsibility.' <sup>25</sup> Then everyone replied, 'Let His blood be on us and on our children!'

<sup>26</sup> Then he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

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## Bible Study

### Review

In our last study we read about the beginning of Jesus' trial before Pilate. Jesus cautiously accepted the charge of being the 'King of the Jews' and remained passive in the face of everything else the authorities tried to bring against him. All this seems to have intrigued Pilate, whose wife was deeply troubled by Jesus and had warned about Him (27:19). Scandalously, Pilate handed over responsibility for the death sentence to the crowd (27:15-17), by asking them to choose between Jesus Barabbas, and Jesus Christ.

Today, our passage describes the consequences of that awful decision, which were the death sentence passed on Jesus, and Pilate's infamous action of 'washing his hands' of the whole matter. Through all this, Jesus remained obedient to God's purpose for Him in all He was doing, an extraordinary example of the power of God present with Him in even His darkest hour.

The scene that unfolds in today's reading is dark indeed, by any standards. The first paragraph describes Pilate's struggle to control the situation as it quickly ran away from him, with the added pressure of his wife's concern. Vying against him and yet seeking to manipulate him were the religious authorities, the chief priests and elders, all determined to ensure that Jesus was killed. Then, watching every move were the crowds, a large number of people come to see what would transpire, yet a relatively small proportion of the half a million or so people crammed into Jerusalem at Passover time.

The religious authorities were consistent. They had always sought Jesus' death and so took immediate advantage of Pilate's attempt to exercise his magnanimity and avoid responsibility. Matthew's report has them activating the chant for Jesus' death (27:20), so that by the time Pilate finally put his options to the crowd, the call came for the release of Barabbas, and without hesitation, the call for Jesus' death; 'Crucify Him!' (27:23). Unfortunately, we are so used to the religious use of the word 'crucifixion' today, we do not react to it with the same instinctive horror and shock that would have accompanied the word in those days. This was no simple death sentence; it was a sentence to death by prolonged and institutionalised torture.

Pilate, however, was used to dealing in death, and was only interested in his own authority and survival in the torrid work of governing Judea. He had 'eyes and ears' in the countryside and it was his business to know what was going on. We cannot suggest that he knew much about Jesus, but it would not be surprising if Pilate had at least been told that Jesus had raised a strange benevolent form of nationalistic fervour in recent times, and there were many outside Jerusalem who expected much of him. This, like most of our attempts to understand events in those days, is only an assumption, but it is realistic. Perhaps this is why Pilate washed his hands of any involvement in Jesus' death; he did not want others outside Jerusalem to view Jesus as a martyr for their cause. He knew the chief priests wanted Jesus dead, and made sure that this was clearly understood, by washing his hands (27:24). He knew that the crowd understood him when they shouted, '*let His blood be on us and on our children!*' (27:25).

The dynamic of this incident has been analysed in a thousand different ways, yet what happened was no more or less than the collective logic evil. In Jesus' death sentence we see the evils of power, corruption, manipulation and self interest all rolled together with much more, as the outward evidence of Satan's drive to have Jesus killed. Over the centuries people have attempted continuously to work out 'the blame' for this notorious incident, but there can be no conclusions. Ultimately, while people ensnared by evil played out their insecurities, religious manias and bloodlust, God was in control and Jesus had submitted Himself to the Father. He knew He would die before the crowd shouted 'Crucify', and it broke His heart to hear His people fall so low.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The authorities and the crowds (27:20)
- The interrogation (27:21-23)
- Pilate washes his hands (27:24)
- Jesus is handed over to death – and who is responsible?

## Going Deeper

### ***The authorities and the crowds (27:20)***

From the opening verse of our passage it is evident that some kind of subversion was at work. Knowing that Pilate would soon ask the formal question about who should be released by special pardon, the chief priests and the elders were working on the crowd to ensure that Barabbas was called for, not Jesus (27:20).

Most people who read this passage complain that these were the same Jerusalem crowds, who days earlier, had greeted Jesus into Jerusalem as God's Messiah. We must be careful not to stray too far from the text when we try to find out what was going on, but it is more than possible that one crowd was quite different from another. It is quite unreasonable to suggest that in a city whose population had grown to nearly half a

million at the feast of the Passover would have a crowd at one place on one day made up of the same people who gathered the previous day for something else! Too many commentaries I have read seem to assume that there was one crowd following affairs around Jerusalem, with the same people, who kept changing their minds! This is very theatrical, but it is extremely unlikely to have been the case.

Pilate had taken his place on the 'judge's throne' and a crowd had gathered who were interested in the gory details of who would be sentenced to death by their notoriously cruel Roman overlord, Pilate. If we can assume some followers of Jesus were there, then there were doubtless followers of Jesus Barabbas, keen to shout for 'their man'.

It was hardly a difficult matter to persuade a crowd of people that a local person, Barabbas, was worthy of release, rather than the other man who was a stranger. From their point of view, Jesus was a pilgrim who had come to Jerusalem from Galilee a few days earlier. He had previously caused a stir in the Temple but now stood before them speechless and very ordinary. He would not have looked like a 'Messiah!' The biggest point in the authorities' favour as they tried to get Jesus condemned was that it seemed from His cross examination that Pilate was beginning to soften to Jesus! They knew the crowd would not wish to do what their Roman overlord wanted them to do!

### ***The interrogation (27:21-23)***

Enough had happened by now for Pilate to take particular notice of this case of Jesus, the 'King of the Jews'. Pilate suspected from the beginning that the Jewish authorities were trying to get Jesus killed for their own inane purposes, and when he began the interrogation, he found Him strangely reluctant to reply to the charges. Further, his wife had sent a message to him not to do anything to Jesus because of a dream (27:19). It is possible that Pilate would have liked to see Jesus freed, if only to score points against the Jewish authorities, who were clearly trying to manoeuvre him and for whom he had little respect.

Earlier, Pilate had presented the crowd with two options (27:17). Either they could have Jesus Barabbas 'son of the father' (the literal meaning of his name, see yesterday's study), or they could have Jesus 'Son of God' or 'King of the Jews'. Unless Pilate was trying to pull off some manoeuvre of which we are quite unaware, it does seem to have been a mistake for him to offer these options if he really wanted Jesus set free, for when Pilate asked again about who should be freed (27:21f.), the answer came back from the crowd 'Barabbas'!

The next question followed directly; what should be done with Jesus? The answer from the crowd, as influenced by the authorities, was 'Crucify Him!' Some think that this sentence is therefore pronounced by the crowds, but it was undoubtedly true that one was going to live and the other die, for that was the nature of the primitive justice being imposed. The one who was not set free would receive this death penalty, both Pilate and the crowd knew it. Interestingly though, this is first mention of crucifixion in the Gospel, and the first moment we hear of the type of death that Jesus would suffer, apart from the implication of Jesus' prophetic teaching '*take up your cross ...*' (Matt 16:24). It is a stunningly cruel moment.

Both these replies must have caused Pilate some concern, as the immediate question he put back to the crowd was 'why?' (27:23). Why should he order the death of Jesus? Roman justice did at least require some kind of reason.

### ***Pilate washes his hands (27:24)***

The answer came in the vehemence of the crowd who shouted 'Crucify Him!' again, as soon as he began to try and 'discuss' Jesus with them (27:23). The crowd was becoming restless (27:24). From Pilate's point of view, if a man raised such passions that crowds become restless over his fate, then he had to act for the sake of public order. However, he did not wish to be associated with the final judgement.

We do not know Pilate's mind as he called for a bowl of water and 'washed his hands' of Jesus' 'blood' in front of the crowd, declaring the whole matter to be their responsibility not his. Was it Pilate's way of saying that he did not wish to see Jesus die, or was he simply trying to calm down a volatile situation? Whatever the reason, there was plenty of precedent for such an action both in Judaism (Deut. 21:1-9, Ps. 26:6), and also in Greco-Roman culture from Sophocles (Ajax 654) and Virgil (Aenid 2.719). The practice had, and continues to have a popular meaning and logic. However, Pilate's actions continue to raise endless questions; did he do this for the benefit of his wife, so that she did not have to feel responsibility given the dream she had? Did he do this out of fear of taking the wrong decision? Did he do this out of fear of Roman justice itself, which demanded that he really ought to have had a good reason to send a man to death? We shall never know the answers to these questions, and my guess is that several of them combined to compel Pilate to 'wash his hands' of Jesus.

Whatever his purpose, we are left with the clear impression that Jesus has been sentenced to death on an injustice, and that although Pilate wished to be disassociated from his decision, his actions were those of a guilty man who had not handled the matter well.

## ***Jesus is handed over to death – and who is responsible?***

The shout of the crowd that came next is cruelly concise. In reply to Pilate's completely inexcusable plea of innocence (27:24), the crowd called out '*Let His blood be on us and on our children!*' (27:25) These words have become notorious over the centuries because they have been used as an excuse for anti-Jewish beliefs and activity. Some people see them as a declaration on the part of the Jewish people of guilt for the death of Christ, and consequently they charge the Jews, as in Medieval times, of the unique crime of 'deicide' (killing of God).

Several things should be considered by anyone who wishes to pursue this line of thinking. Firstly, the crowd were only one of a triumvirate of direct offenders in the matter of the death of Jesus, and that is not including Judas. Secondly, scripture itself is clear that the sins of the parents are not to be '*visited upon the children*' (2 Kings 14:6 etc), and we should not hold people responsible today for what their forefathers had done. Thirdly, although Matthew was clearly concerned that the Jewish people rejected Jesus, there is no hint in his Gospel that we should take vengeance upon anyone for anything. Fourthly, from the theology of Paul in his letters, Jesus died because of the sins 'of us all', and for our redemption; why therefore, should we seek out blame for anyone else, except in order to evade our own responsibilities before God?

At the end of our passage, Jesus is led out and flogged (27:26). We must now prepare ourselves for what comes next, because it is not pleasant. Flogging took place with leather whips studded with nails and stones, and was intended to inflict mortal wounds. It hardly bears imagining.

## Application

It is hard to say that one passage is more famous than any other when it comes to the story of the Passion of Christ. Yet our passage today is profoundly shocking and disturbing in its outcome. It speaks of the manipulation of religious authorities, the fickle nature of crowds and the impenetrable minds of autocrats such as Pilate; yet if you ask who was responsible for the death sentence on Jesus, then I would have to suggest that all three take their blame.

Yet there are more who were involved. Along with these three who bear responsibility, is Judas who killed himself, and the disciples (including Peter) who fled. The only conclusion we can come to is that all involved in Jesus' life bear some responsibility for his death. There is nothing in this which supports anti-Semitism, or any kind of finger wagging, because Jesus was taken to his death by the injustices of a world that has the same spiritual characteristics as today, and people who have the same spiritual characteristics as ourselves.

Whatever we may learn from our passage about the tragedy of poor leadership, or the nature of crowds and justice, for example, the most important thing we can take from it is that we too may be involvement in the death of our Lord. We must feel not just the same remorse as Peter, but know that we ourselves are condemned, just as we might heap condemnation upon the authorities, or the crowd, or Pilate. For it is only when we begin to see how we fit into this horrendous picture that we can begin to appreciate the nature of what God was doing through Jesus, and the real price paid for our salvation.

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## **Discipleship**

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Imagine yourself to be Barabbas. What questions might you ask the authorities about what was going on? What would you feel?
2. Was Pilate being genuine or devious in washing his hands of Jesus' blood? What other views do you have of what Pilate did?
3. What is your opinion about the charge of 'deicide' against the Jews? Is it justified at all?

### ***Topics covered by this text***

- *The passing of the death sentence on Jesus*
- *The matter of blame for Jesus' death*
- *Pilate's 'washing his hands' of Jesus' blood*

## **Personal comments by author**

*Ever since I heard this story in my youth, I have wondered how my own life connects with this terrible incident in Jesus' life. Surely, I felt, I could never have made such a condemnation? Later in life I began to realise that if I had been part of the crowd I would probably have joined in without thinking, because I know that too often I have done just this when I should not. I remember thinking that I needed to confess to the Lord that I might have shouted 'crucify Him!' if I was present, and I felt a strange sense of release when I finally admitted this and placed the matter in God's hands. Now I know that whatever I might or might not have done, Jesus has forgiven me on the Cross, and it means a great deal to me.*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

4. Imagine yourself to be Barabbas. What questions might you ask the authorities about what was going on? What would you feel?
5. Was Pilate being genuine or devious in washing his hands of Jesus' blood? What other views do you have of what Pilate did?
6. What is your opinion about the charge of 'deicide' against the Jews? Is it justified at all?

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## **Final Prayer**

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