

Sermon Archive 383

Friday 15 April, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lesson: John 18 & 19

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Sorry to intrude. There you were, maybe hoping to be distracted from any tragedy in the world. Sorry to intrude on your quiet. I've got a story . . . Maybe you'd prefer it wasn't told. You might say it's nothing to you. You might toss dice, play games, wash your hands, hoping that I might give up telling it. But it's as old as time - and its telling's required by truth. Indeed, someone in whose name previously we've dared to gather insists it be told. So whether you like it or not, here it is. Open your ears.

The Reading of the Passion: John 18 & 19

The soldiers gamble: Someone passed through our work space, like they do every day. When we were new in our role, some of us saw the people on their way to execution, and vomited. Then suppressed the vomit, so we could survive to the next pay slip. Others of us saw and felt slightly elated - elated at the power we had, kind of turned on by the death. Odd feelings in the perverse part of ourselves that enjoyed the thought of the power of death. God, it's sick - can't believe it's been named. So, as a body of officers, some sick and some strange, we witnessed this thing. We witnessed the man from Nazareth on his way through our care (care?) to his fate. Word on the street was something about innocence. No one's innocent - the Lamb is killed. And innocent or guilty, it's been much the same for our part of the process. Draft the sheep, brand the sentence, show the man to Calvary. Can you cope with that?

The story will say that once we'd done with him, we took to gambling for his clothes. They call it "casting lots". No need for a perfectly good tunic to go to waste, and he wouldn't need it where he was going. So we roll the dice, and draw the straws. We pick the ticket from the hat - for the tunic.

You might say we're making profit from our position - first in line to pick up deceased estate. And many human beings do just that; we work our proximity to pick up the spoils. Maybe we're greedy.

Or maybe, as we roll our dice, we are humanity trying to bury itself in a game, a dice-rolling distraction, to hide from ourselves the horror. Something evil passes through our domain, and we roll our dice. Something too awful to see goes through our responsibility, and we roll

our dice. We form our playful circle, to be distracted by that something else, some playful something else, as the tragedy moves on by. We needed to create a distance.

What is it to you? Maybe it's our shared capacity to avoid the horror by rolling a dice and playing a game. Nothing to do with me! Creating a distance. What is it to you?

The religious people find other things to focus on: I'm a member of the Sanhedrin, no one famous, no one to whom history has given a name. History named our officers: Ciaphas and Annas, and a couple of our illustrious: Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea. I've not been separated for naming. You might call me "insert your own name" - providing, of course, that you are a person of moderate influence. You're not a nobody, no, you count for something. If you're on the Sanhedrin, you count for something - - even if you don't.

The administrative politics of the situation were complicated. In the olden days we'd just have killed him ourselves. Judge, jury, executioner - we'd had all those rights. But now we'd been occupied by foreigners, we had to work through foreign courts - more complicated, but maybe easier to create a distance. We needed to kōrero with the enemy. We had to deal with the Roman Satan. So that's what we did.

Perceptive analysts of the situation will be clear that **we** drove the process, and **we** wanted the outcome. Analysts will find that **we** were willing to come close to Rome - close to the people with the power, judicially, to kill.

Analysts also will find, however, that there were a couple of moments when we wanted to present the appearance of distance from what was happening. The first was in our meeting with Pilate. We didn't want to go into his house - into the house of the one in whose name the killing would occur. Why would you wish not to be seen there? Guilt? Implication? **We** framed our reluctance to go there in terms of not wanting to be religiously defiled. His house was Pagan. His house was impure. To keep ourselves distanced from that part of the tragedy, we invoked a concept of purity.

And the second time we created an appearance of distance was once the Galilean was dead. His body was hanging there (under this stupid sign that implicated us - a stupid public accusation of our involvement). So we ordered it taken down - not the sign, but the body - taken down so it didn't make distasteful our Sabbath of great solemnity.

So it was, that we who were driving an execution, sought distances between ourselves and dead body we'd made. First explanation: purity. Second explanation: the solemnity of the Sabbath.

What is it to you? Our shared capacity to avoid the horror by invoking a solemn religion of purity. Some create distance by rolling the dice and having distracting fun. Some do it by speaking of purity and solemnity. Creating a distance. What is it to you?

Pontius Pilate fails to use his power well: Pontius Pilate! In vain, he tries to create a distance between himself and the sad unfolding tragedy. He's the responsible one - not responsible for the charges brought; but totally responsible for what to do with them. He's tried dismissing them. It hasn't worked. The Sanhedrin's Plan B kicked in, and now he's got a mob at his gate. (Is that something like having Russian tanks at the border? What ever becomes of that?) He tries to invoke a tradition - releasing a prisoner on the eve of a festival. He tries stating the truth (even though he famously said "what is truth"). The truth here is that he's found no crime in the Galilean. He tries questioning the motives of those who're baying for death.

When none of it works, he (like the soliders who distance themselves by distracting themselves through gambling), (like the Sanhedrin who choose to stay away from the house that turns the man into the dead body), he seeks his own form of distance.

He declares to the whole wide world that this death is not his fault. Nothing to do with him! He washes his hands - a bold demonstration of not being responsible - and gives the innocent man over to be crucified.

We toss a dice to distract ourselves from the tragedy. We invoke principles of purity and soemnity to form a distance. We wash our hands, and say it's all done by someone else. We needed to create a distance. What is that to you?

Peter provides, in some ways, the hardest blow: Peter! Oh, Peter. You expect the opposition to oppose. You expect the killers to kill. That's simply nature being true to nature. You expect, though, in similar truth to nature, for your friends to love you - to keep you and stand up for whatever it was that you thought you were building. Don't you?

Acid falls on Peter as tables turn. His own freedom and survival are drawn into the whirlpool of what's happening to Jesus. If he's not to drown, he needs some distance. Seeking that distance, he says that he never knew him. Three times, he says that he never knew him.

The distance, though, is not refreshing; it's full of tears. And it forms the whole way that we, who follow Peter in following Jesus, frame our regret. A three-fold "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy". Three denials, three cries of confession.

The passion of our Lord is read, and so many scuttle away in response - to put a distance between themselves and Jesus. Distance through the distraction of silly games - the throwing of dice and the occupying of ourselves with passtimes that are simple. Distance through retreating into a religion of purity, solemnity and anything other than being honest about our motives. Distance through a washing of hands that never will work. But worst of all, the sharpest stab - the distance of his own people - through pretending

that we are not really the people of Jesus - who have sailed with him through the storm, have who eaten the miraculous loaves and fish with him, who have said "Lord, you know that I love you". It's called "betrayal"!

Create the distance. What is this to you?

At the start I said to you "Sorry to intrude on your quiet. I've got a story for you. Maybe you'd prefer it wasn't told. You might toss dice, play games, run a mile, hoping that I might give up telling it. But truth requires it be told; - - - and someone in whose name we've dared to gather insists it be told. So, whether you like it or not, here it is" . . .

And indeed, there it was. The creating of distance. What is that to us?

Epilogue

The killing could have happened anywhere, and one time it happened in front of some whose stories we've heard. It might well have happened in front of us - and today still it might (maybe it does).

We would have prayed, O God, for him not to have walked into our view -into that zone where our response reveals the character of our heart. Anywhere else but here . . . create a distance - what's it to us?

Some roll dice and make distraction. Some hide in "nobler" things. Some look for loopholes - and either find them, or don't. And others . . . those close, have no excuse for what they do - so they weep.

Such is Good Friday - of responsibility and love - and of all the rest, of avoidance of so many matters, year after year, such is Good Friday.

Do you think, O God, that somewhere on maybe some foolishly-framed "third day", there'll be this realm where no one will need to play dice, and no one will need to use high principles to run into the night, and no one will need to weep over pretending not to have seen what they know they saw?

Might there come a day, a third day, when something else will be seen - in truth and light, and smash the distance of death?

We look to Easter.

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