

April: The Hour of Jesus



On Palm Sunday of the separate years the narrative of the Passion and Death of Jesus is read according to the evangelist of the year, this year's being Matthew. Matthew takes over most of the story from Mark, the earliest of the Gospels; however, as he is writing for Christians sprung from Judaism, he goes out of his way to lay two special emphases. Firstly, he stresses even more than Mark that this was all done to fulfil the scriptures. He introduces many quotations and allusions to scripture which are fulfilled in the course of the story; for instance Jesus is offered not wine to drink but wine mixed with gall (27.34), which fulfils Psalm 69.21. Secondly Matthew stresses that the authorities of the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus, and Pilate tries to shuffle off his own responsibility. So, not only does Pilate three times declare that there is no case against Jesus, but Matthew inserts two little details, the warning dream of Pilate's wife, and Pilate himself washing his hands as a futile gesture of non-responsibility.

However, every Good Friday the Passion Narrative read is that of John, and on this we wish to reflect. Principally, it is less a story of the Death of Jesus than of the Triumph of Jesus, the one moment which includes both death and resurrection. Since the marriage-feast at Cana we have heard about a mysterious 'hour' which then had not yet arrived. From time to time throughout the story the Jews attempt to arrest Jesus, but they cannot, for 'his hour had not yet come'. It is only at the beginning and the end of the Last Supper (John 13.1; 17.1) that he acknowledges that the hour has come, and proceeds to his death in full knowledge of that.

It is the hour of the triumph of Jesus, for there is no Agony in the Garden where his full human terror of death had come to expression. When they come to arrest him and he claims the divine name, 'I am', they fall back and involuntarily bow to the ground in worship. There is no rough interrogation by the High Priest followed by mockery and spitting. Instead Jesus stands before the revered Annas and repeats his message: Jesus is calling the shots. The appearance before Pilate has been transformed: there is no riotous crowd baying for Jesus' death. Instead, the Jewish leaders stay outside the Praetorium while Pilate interrogates Jesus inside, and eventually demeans himself with the inane remark 'What is truth?'. Then he brings out Jesus, robed and crowned as king and seats him on the judgment-seat. At that moment and in that presence the Jewish leaders deny their own religion by declaring, 'We have no king but Caesar'. At which Pilate immediately goes on to emphatically declare Jesus as King of the Jews. [truth] On Golgotha the same emphasis stands out. They do not kill Jesus: he dies only when he is ready, and has declared that his mission and his life are complete, 'It is completed'.

Before then an especially significant incident has occurred: Mary and the Beloved Disciple, now both standing at the Cross, have been recommended to each other's care. The Beloved Disciple is never named – quite deliberately, for, whoever he is personally, symbolically he stands for the disciple whom Jesus loves. It is only when the Mother of Jesus and the disciple whom Jesus loves have been united to form the first Christian community that Jesus hands over his spirit. 'Hands over?' 'Spirit?' One can never be sure of the double or triple sense of the words of John, but is he suggesting that at his death Jesus already hands over his Spirit to this new community?