

The Last days of Jesus

“The Arrest”

“Even my trusted friend, who ate my bread, has raised his heel against me’ (Ps. 41:10)

In Robert Bolt’s masterful play “A Man for all Seasons”, which is based on the life and death of the English martyr of the sixteenth century, Saint Thomas More, one of the villains in the stage production is a close friend of More, his teacher and mentor. His name is Master Richard Rich. Hoping for a successful in politics, Rich is dissuaded by his friend, who recommends that he embrace teaching as a career choice. But the allure of wealth and power proved to be too enticing for the young man. He sets out to advance himself politically and socially. To achieve his goal, he must first betray his mentor. In a supreme act of treachery, he lies under oath to get More, now an enemy of the king, convicted in court on trumped up charges. By perjuring himself, he effectively condemns More to death, the sentencing of which would later be carried out in the infamous tower of London.

More was beheaded.

In the Old Testament book of Sirach, the inspired writer offers words of lamentation: “Is it not a sorrow unto death when your companion and friend is turned enemy”

In the four gospels we learn that the one who led the arresting party to Jesus on the Mount of Olives, Judas Iscariot, is a disciple of Jesus. What’s more, he is a member of Christ’s inner circle and his bosom friend. He plays a key role in the seizure of Jesus by those wielding swords and wooden clubs. He alerts them to where Jesus could be found. Jesus was looked upon as an outlaw. The arms employed in arresting him gave the absurd impression that he is a man of violence.

Judas betrays his master with a kiss.

In most instances, a kiss is a sign of affection and love. But in the book of Proverbs, we read, “Trustworthy are the blows of a friend, dangerous the kisses of the enemy”

Consider the civil rights activist and Baptist preacher, Martin Luther King. No fewer than twenty-nine times was he arrested for acts of civil disobedience and ridiculous charges such as driving thirty miles per hour in a twenty five miles per hour zone. Who were the ones responsible for handing him over to the local authorities?

Martin Luther king is not alone. Christians in growing numbers are often subject to arrest for no other reason that they are true to their beliefs and are uncompromising in their dedication to Christ.

Imagine yourself as an innocent person under arrest. No crime worthy of punishment has been committed.. And what if you learn that a close friend was the one responsible for handing you over to law enforcement? Is it not sickening?

Although I have never been arrested for an alleged crime, I have had several encounters with the police and state troopers for exceeding the speed limit. I must confess that the sight of flashing lights in my

rear view mirror often left me unnerved and in a state of panic. I can't even imagine being cuffed by a police officer. That's scary!

Can we even imagine the fear of Jesus on the night he was arrested?

If, in the future, we should ever be arrested for simply witnessing to our Christian faith, then let us remember the example set by our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Sentencing:

The critically acclaimed film, "The Ox-Bow Incident", featuring the American actor Henry Fonda, tells the compelling story of the leaders of a small town who ignore the law and hang three men without a trial. Later they learn the painful truth. The three men were innocent of the charges against them. Before being hanged, one young man asks to write a letter to his young wife. After he is hanged, someone reads it. A portion of it says, "I suppose there's some good men in this crowd. Only they don't realize what they are doing. They are the ones I feel sorry for, 'cause it will be over for me in a little while, while they will have to go on remembering for the rest of their lives".

It is significant to note that all four gospels describe what Pontius Pilate, the supreme political authority in Judea, did to Jesus. Hoping to satisfy an angry mob, the procurator condemns Jesus to an unjust and barbaric death. Clearly, it was a gross miscarriage of justice. Pilate himself had to admit that he did not find Jesus guilty of a crime deserving of crucifixion, one of the most terrible deaths known to antiquity. Actually Pilate wants to spare the life of Christ. He attempts to convince the enemies of Jesus that he is no more than a pathetic figure and certainly no challenge whatsoever to Rome or "the Jews". He declares, "I have found nothing in him worthy of death". Even the wife of Pilate weighed in, seeing Jesus as a "just man". However, the intense pressure on Pilate was too much to bear. He eventually capitulated to the shrill cries to have Jesus executed. In one of the most telling scenes of the Passion Narratives, Pilate washes his hands to demonstrate his unwillingness to bear responsibility for shedding an innocent man's blood.

In his book "The Death of the Messiah", noted biblical scholar, Father Raymond Brown, points out that in Roman trials the sentence would probably be addressed to the accused in such words as "You shall go to the cross" or "On the cross with you"

Following the outrageous sentencing, Pilate may have wondered why Jesus received his sentence with remarkable calm. He offered not a single word of protest. He accepts his sentence of his own free will.

In Luke's gospel, a centurion who had witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus glorified God and said, "This man is innocent beyond doubt".

In her reflections on the first station of the cross, "Jesus is condemned to death, which was written in 1955, the English mystic and Catholic, Caryl Chessell, offers some penetrating insights.

“It is significant that everything contributing to the condemnation is parallel with everything that contributes to the passion of the martyrs of our own time: the intrigue and fear of politicians, the hatred of fanatics, mass hysteria, the unstable crowds swayed by paid agitators, the popular craving for sensation---- and those many Pilates who wash their hands of the responsibility of knowing ‘What is truth’, who shut their eyes, and try to escape from their own uneasiness by evasions: “I am innocent of the blood of this just man”. There is nothing I could do about it”

When the filmmaker Mel Gibson who directed the classic motion picture, “The Passion of the Christ” was by a journalist the sensitive question of who was the one ultimately responsible for condemning Jesus to a horrific death, he replied, “It is I who am responsible. I am the guilty one”

Mel Gibson speaks for all of us!

The Burial:

In her multiple award winning book, “The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War”, Drew Gilpin Faust, historian and former President of Harvard University, writes movingly of the soldier’s great fear of not receiving a humane Christian burial after being mortally wounded in battle. She sites the grave concern of one Confederate soldier, Thomas Key, who, in anguish, wrote, “It is dreadful to contemplate being killed on the field of battle without a kind hand to hide one’s remains from the eye of the world or the gnawing of animals and buzzards”

Many soldiers who tragically lost their lives on the battlefield were left unattended and were exposed to the elements and the predations of wild animals.

In the Jewish tradition, the body is sacred, and must never be seen as a disposable commodity. The traditional roman practice of depriving executed criminals of the rite of burial and exposing the body on the cross horrified the Jews, and rightly so..

There is solid evidence that In Jesus’ day, crucifixion came under Jewish law. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we learn that “If there shall be against someone a crime judged worthy of death, and he be put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain on the tree; but you shall bury him the same day, for cursed of god is the one hanged”.

Two prominent Jewish leaders played an important role in having Christ buried after his death: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

The burial of Jesus is telling for two reasons. First, he wanted to identify with us to the fullest extent. He died as all people die. The fact that Jesus’ body—wrapped in a linen shroud—lay in the tomb for three days, rules out the possibility of an apparent death. His death was not fictitious. He truly “suffered, died and was buried” (creed). Whenever we see the first spade of dirt hit the coffin in which a father, mother, a spouse, a brother, a dear friend is lowered in its place than the truth sinks in at last: life, as we know it, is over..

This truth is on remarkable display in the 1965 film "Doctor Zhivago", which is based on the novel of the Nobel Prize winning author, Boris Pasternak. Early in the film, a young boy Yuri, left orphaned by the death of his mother, sees his mother lowered into the grave, after which shovels full of dirt are tossed onto her coffin. The coffin is then sealed.

The other point Jesus wanted to make by allowing himself to be buried was to dispel any doubt that when he rose, he did indeed rise from the dead.

Christ in the tomb is an impenetrable mystery. Christ has been silence, but only for a short time.

In conclusion, I turn once again to the mystic Caryl Chessman. In her reflections on the burial of Jesus she writes,

"Christ was in the tomb; the whole world was sown with the seed of Christ's life; that which happened thirty years ago in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary was happening now, but now it was happening yet more secretly, yet more mysteriously, in the womb of the whole world. Now the seed of his life was hidden in darkness in order that his life shall quicken in countless hearts, over and over again for all time. His burial which seemed to be the end, was only the beginning. It was the beginning of Christ-life in a multitude of souls".