

## THE SILENCE OF THE PASSION

### Sermon at the Liturgy of Good Friday

Readings: Isaiah 52.13 – 53 end; Hebrews 4.14-16, 5. 7-9; St John 18.1 – 19 end.

IF the gospel is to be preached today (and the gospel should be preached on Good Friday, of all days) it must happen at this moment in the liturgy, immediately after the solemn singing of the Passion, when I, and probably you, are feeling we would rather be in silence.

I will resolve this dilemma, as best I can, first, by speaking, if speak I must, about the *silence* of Jesus, a silence which is at the heart of the passion story. Matthew tells us that when the high priest accused him, Jesus was silent. Mark tells us that when the priests took him to Pilate, and accused him, Jesus made no further answer, and Pilate was astonished. Luke tells us that when Jesus was taken before Herod, Jesus gave him no answer. Luke also tells us that when Peter denied him for the third time, ‘the Lord turned and looked at Peter’. No words needed; only a look. In John’s passion story, there is quite an exchange of words between Jesus and Pilate, but at the very end, when Pilate gives him a last chance to defend himself or face death, Jesus gives no answer. Jesus committed himself to a course of action, and actions, as we know, speak louder than words. Jesus lived out the prayer he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, that not his will, but the will of the Father, be done; a prayer which St Paul describes in his Letter to the Romans as ‘praying with groans too deep for words’. Jesus reached the limits of language, and allowed his silences to speak for him.

And the silence of Jesus before his accusers does indeed speak louder than any words, for it takes us straight to the prophecy of Isaiah:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is  
silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

Just as his riding on a donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday acted out the prophecy of Zechariah that this was how the Messiah would come to his people, so too his silence before his accusers acted out the prophecy of Isaiah that this was how the Messiah would behave when brought to trial.

BEING wrongfully accused, having false allegations made about one, even being unfairly complained about, is a regular experience for many people; and the more someone is in the public eye, the more that will be a burden they have to bear. Now in the ordinary business of life, it is usually a good thing to stick up for oneself, give one's side of the story, put the record straight. But this is not the ordinary business of life for Jesus; this is the extraordinary business of life and death, the utterly unique business of being the Messiah of God, and embodying God's love for the world. The task which Jesus took upon himself was to embody that love to the uttermost degree of self-giving and self-forgetfulness. So standing up for himself, or setting the record straight, or giving his side of the story, was not the task of first importance; the task of first importance was to embody the love of God in the face of the worst the world could do to him. Silence, not self-defence, was his response to all that was said about him. In the First Letter of St Peter, we read these words:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

'He entrusted himself to the one who judges justly'. There *is* such a thing as justice, despite the evidence to the contrary. There *is* one who judges justly, even though human courts of law, let alone the court of public opinion, may at times be horribly unjust. Jesus entrusted himself to the court of final appeal, his Father's throne, and went there bearing the weight of all the abuse and sin and

injustice that had been heaped upon him. Like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

But he *was* wounded for *our* transgressions, he was crushed for *our* iniquities. Why, and how, *for us*? Because Jesus embodies the love of God in the face of the worst the world could do to him. He demonstrates the victory of love, the invincibility of divine forgiveness, God's last word on human sin. 'Father, forgive them'. And that last word of God's forgiveness falls upon each one of us, now, in this moment, on this Good Friday. Upon him was the punishment that has made us whole, and by his bruises we have been healed.

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