

Palm Sunday 2011 Rev Nadia Pfaff
Matthew 27:11-54

Dear brothers and sisters

When I first read today's Gospel text, as proposed in the Anglican lectionary, I was sorely tempted to ignore it and choose another. There are many texts in the bible, which are difficult or challenging, but hardly one which is more controversial than this one. Additionally I am not sure, if we can read this text in 2011 without having to expressively acknowledge the awful legacy it brings. I am wondering, how acceptable it is to publicly read out a text, which has fanned so much hatred and persecution of our Jewish brothers and sisters? This is I think a huge dilemma: do we just cut from the bible what is uncomfortable? Do we turn it into a taboo, like a dark, shame filled family secret? Or do we continue to read it, but with penance?

One of my dilemmas is, that I don't know you as a congregation well enough to ascertain, if you have already studied this text before and if I might be preaching to the converted? However the risk to not talk about the awful legacy that this text has left behind, which is partly due to preachers not speaking about the context within which it was written is just too big to take. So, please bear with me, if I first spend some time talking about why we have to approach this reading with caution.

I would first like to summarize the reading, which is actually quite a long text. One way of summarizing the text is to ask: **who is to blame for Jesu death?** This account is then embedded into the wider story of Jesu betrayal and crucifixion. In the preceding chapter we read that Judas has hanged himself, because he cannot live with the guilt of having handed Jesus over to the religious establishment for thirty pieces of silver. That the religious establishment was essentially hostile towards Jesus and was plotting his death, we learn from verse 1: "Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed." Perhaps when some of us hear the word "chief priests" today, we might think of our current religious establishment. But if we think about the time of Jesus, the "chief priests" referred to in the text are the Jewish faith-leaders. This is made very clear in the following sentence, which says that "they bound Jesus and handed him over to Pilate the governor."

I hope that it is now becoming clearer, why I said that this was a dangerous text, when we ask: “who is responsible for Jesu death?” For decades this question was answered by: the Jews are to blame for Jesu death. Regularly during holy week, when this passage was read the Christians would swarm out of church and attack the local synagogue. Obviously the relationship between people of the Christian and Jewish faiths have always been strained, and for various different reasons. But the Christian accusation that the Jews killed the son of God, the Messiah, Jesus the Christ can be traced to this biblical reading and thus has had a long and serious history of anti-Semitism. I wouldn't want to say that there is a direct link between this text, the various pogroms against the Jewish people and the catastrophe of Auschwitz, but I am concerned that these texts are continually propagating anti-Semitic sentiments. Particularly so, if we are not very clear as to why was this written in such a way. For that we need to examine the historical background more closely of both the times when Jesus died, as well as when this text was written.

These texts were written when the Roman Empire dominated the whole of the Mediterranean. Rome had occupied the lands around Jerusalem, including Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. Rome of course had a totally different theology and religious practice to the Jewish traditions, but they largely allowed the Jewish priests to carry on with the day-to-day running of their temple. In certain areas however the occupying forces made their power and dominance utterly clear: they were the upholders of law and order, according to Roman principles and only the Romans were permitted to enforce capital punishments. Crucifixion was one method of punishment. This is why the Jewish religious authorities “had to hand Jesus over to Pilate” – the Roman, because they themselves were not allowed to kill Jesus.

The following narration about Jesu trial I think largely absolves Pontius Pilate of any wrong doing. He is portrayed as trying to be fair and reasonable; perhaps a bit impotent as he gives in to the crowd, which is baying for Jesu blood.

I think that it does help to know something about when this text was written. Most theological scholars believe that the gospel of Matthew was written between 70 – 100 AD. This means that it was written in a time when the Romans still occupied the country. In 70 AD the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, who for several years had been engaged in brutal wars against the Jewish uprising and revolt against the Roman occupying forces. The Romans brutally suppressed this revolt and

tore down the temple, which was the heart of Jewish religious practice. The Christians, which had started to meet were also coming under increasing attack and persecution by the Romans. In this climate St. Matthew's gospel was being written. It reminds me of being in an abusive relationship, where you can't easily talk about your abuser, for fear that they might hear and retaliate. Thinking of an example to illustrate this point made me think of a child with a very intrusive mother. Would this child write down her most intimate thoughts in a diary, if she was concerned that the mother might find it? Or would you write negative things about your boss in one of your work e-mails? The risk is just too great.

The readers of the gospel would all have know that it was the Romans who had ordered the crucifixion, as it was Roman practice and only the Romans were able to condemn a human to death. But perhaps the writers did not have the courage to say this explicitly, for fear of further persecution. What often happens in abusive situations, is that the victim takes on massive responsibility by turning the experienced hostility against him or herself. Thereby the abuser is not accused and made to feel accountable for their actions. Is this why this text was written in such a way? Absolving the Romans and blaming the Jewish community?

If we want to leave the historical context behind and think about, what this text means for us today I think the question I posed at the beginning, as a summary might still be useful: **“Who is to blame for Jesu death!?”** Was it the Jewish community, was it the Romans, does it matter?

Perhaps it does matter very much, because a wealth of Christian theology has been generated because of how Jesus died on the cross. The most orthodox and commonly received understanding is that Jesus died on the cross in redemption for our sins. That with his blood he paid the price to reconcile humankind with God.

If I now ask the same question, it will sound provocatively: “Who is to blame for Jesu death?” In the same vein as somebody, who identifies with the victim and doesn't want to accuse the abuser, I can answer “I am to blame”. I was so bad, so sinful, that Jesus had to die for me. This general response is usually understood as a very humble, pious and worthy position. However it demands a theology of a vengeful God, who needs a blood-sacrifice to be appeased. If I thus ask: Who is to blame for Jesu death? Do we now need to consider, that God is to blame, for he was only willing to reconcile himself with us, by forcing Jesus to suffer and die!?

What if we move away from this kind of theology and simply see that on Good Friday a man was crucified. He was nailed to the cross after enormous suffering and died an agonising death, a death nobody ought to endure. What if we stop blaming others or ourselves for Jesu death and simply consider that an innocent man, who surely did not deserve such suffering was made to go through an appalling ordeal. I think it primarily leaves us speechless.

In that sense Jesus was not the only one, who had to suffer intolerable agonies. There are many in the world today, who experience torture, exploitation, humiliation, unspeakable suffering, terror, physical and mental agony. Who is to blame? Perhaps we cannot answer that question. Perhaps by trying to answer that question we want to bring some sense and order into the world, not for the benefit of the one who is suffering, but to relieve us of our own distress?

Pointing the finger is often a fairly easy response. It is a far greater challenge for us to discern where we stand when faced with intolerable suffering. There is nothing glorious about it. The survivors might turn suffering into something heroic, but at what cost? Suffering challenges us to face up to most uncomfortable questions as to the randomness and potential meaninglessness of suffering and the callousness by which we turn our backs on the most vulnerable in our midst.

Prayer: