

Washing your hands

Matthew 27:11-54

Growing up as a young boy I was always fascinated by TV series that featured court room scenes. Some of you may remember the ITV series Crown Court where real cases were acted out by lawyers but the jury was made up of members of the public. I found it fascinating to follow the evidence, work out how grumpy the judge was going to be, and see whether or not the jury would be swayed by the eloquence of the defence or prosecution lawyers.

Another favourite was a Friday night court-room series called Justice, with the incomparable Margaret Lockwood acting as the intuitive, tenacious, and highly principled barrister, Harriet Peterson.

Where the fascination lay, I think, was in that eternal quest in humanity to find truth, alongside the search for justice and fairness. Serving truth, which should be on the surface, and self-evident, is often buried because of a fear of what it involves. In the Committee on Privileges interview of Boris Johnson, MPs attempted, openly, to get to the truth not only of what happened in Downing Street during lockdown, but how it happened and why it happened when everyone else followed strict isolation procedures. In the camouflaging of Scottish National Party membership figures, the fall-out from when the truth was revealed, alongside other financial questions still under review and the ferries fiasco, has been far-reaching. What was the truth behind the Labour Government's decision to invade Iraq?

Truth is not only to be sought after in those areas of high politics and international morality. The shining light of truth plays a part in the way we live our every-day lives. Can our word be trusted? Not that we, or anyone, gets living and behaving right all of the time, but is our aim and motivation

in life to be truthful and honest, not only in our dealings with others, but with ourselves? In the relationships that we have, formal and informal? In what we want to do with our lives, with our time? We all appreciate, I suspect, that too much truth can be difficult too. "Does this dress make me look fat? Do you think we ought to tell him what people are saying about him? Who is going to break the news about this, or that?" Truth brings light, but it can sometimes bring hurt before it brings healing.

In the last days of Jesus, often called the Passion of Christ, feelings were at a very high pitch. A revolutionary rabbi preaching and teaching in the northern hills and shorelands of the Galilee is one thing. But here He is on the doorsteps of Jerusalem, in that powder-keg time of religious and political intensity around the Jewish Passover, commemorating the escape of the ancient Hebrews from a despotic slavery.

The issue of truth is also to be found in that mix. In John's Gospel account of the court room trial of Jesus with Pontius Pilate, Pilate asked the arrested Christ, "What is truth?" and did not stay for an answer, but washed his hands of responsibility.

Today's reading gives us the opportunity to put Palm Sunday, and Holy Week, and indeed the whole of the mission of Jesus into perspective. Our Christian belief insists that the death of Jesus is *integral* to God's good news in Jesus Christ. It is a theological decision, that "God so loved the world that He gave us His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."ⁱ This is what that looks like. Raw, unpalatable, but real. This decision accepts as facts that the historical Jesus died and that His death was by crucifixion, one type of capital punishment that imperial Rome meted out to non-compliant subjects, insurgents particularly.

Jesus has to be got rid of; He's too difficult, too awkward, too unsettling. He made the religious establishment, the local political leadership, and the imperial authorities collude inadvertently in His unjust death. They all, one way or another, washed their hand of Him.

The Chief Priests and Elders – defenders of religious orthodoxy were terrified someone teaching and questioning as Jesus did would undermine the religious freedoms guaranteed by Rome so long as there was no trouble. How quickly they washed their hands of the troublesome rabbi. Herod the King was terrified that even his constrained monarchy would be taken away from him if a fellow countryman was deemed to be preaching disobedience towards the Roman Empire. How quickly he washed his hands of the unlikely regal threat from Galilee. Let us not forget the crowds, cheering one day with their palm branches, baying for Jesus' blood days later. Was a living terrorist like Barabbas of more use to them than a dead carpenter from Nazareth? How quickly they washed their hands of a revolutionary leader whose kingdom was from heaven, not earth; whose rule was demanded servanthood, not violence.

And Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. What of him? Immortalised by being named in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. This hard-boiled army man was the inept fifth Roman Procurator of the province of Judea. He was a bad selection for such an explosive area and immediately showed an insensitivity that brought the province to the brink of revolt. Moving his army headquarters to Jerusalem, Pilate offended everyone needlessly insisting upon bringing the hated and blasphemous Roman eagles and standards into the area overlooking the Jerusalem Temple.ⁱⁱ

Knowing of the volatile nature of the Jewish crowds at Passover, he applied first *realpolitik* by sending Jesus to Herod for judgement. Then tried again with the Chief Priest to discover exactly what the problem was with Jesus, and failed. Then remembered the prisoner amnesty granted at that time, only to find the crowd choosing the insurrectionist Barabbas, and not the innocent

carpenter Jesus, in whom Pilate could find little if any fault. Warned by his nameless wife, who tradition years later called Procula, to have nothing to do with the innocent man Jesus, Pilate condemned Jesus to death. Interesting to note Matthew reverting to the means of divine messaging through dreams: remember at the beginning of his gospel the dream of Joseph, and the dream of the Magi.

Intent on avoiding trouble rather than administering justice, Pilate provides a classic example of the powerlessness of power. Sensing the start of a riot at the incendiary time of Passover when keeping the peace was paramount, Pilate felt trapped. He called for a bowl of water and symbolically washed his hands before the people seeking to deny all complicity in the death of Jesus. "I am innocent of this man's blood."ⁱⁱⁱ

A few hours before, in an upper room, before the sharing of the Last Supper, Jesus had taken another bowl of water, knelt down, and washed the reluctant feet of His closest disciples. In the Middle East of Jesus, washing feet was the servants' job. It would have been uncomfortable for the disciples to see Jesus performing this socially degrading action. But He did it, and then commanded His friends to do as He has done. The command Jesus gives is as strong and as absolute as His command to take bread and wine and remember Him by sharing it.

"In the Gospels there are two bowls of water in the story of the Passion. One is Pilate's, used to wash his hands of others, scrubbing himself of all responsibility, (and justice, and facing the truth). The other is the one with which Jesus bathes the feet of His friends in love. They are always before us in life, these two bowls, and Jesus shows us that when you place yourself to the side, your soul grows a little bit more. When your self-obsession is reduced, your life enlarges...People look different from down on the floor by their feet. You look different too. But to pick up the towel is not to become a doormat..."^{iv}

Two bowls of water on this Passion Sunday. Which might you choose? To wash your hands of Jesus because He is too difficult, too complicated, too much like hard work? Or to kneel down, metaphorically, or literally, and serve others by washing their feet, their hurts, their fears, their isolation, their emptiness, their grief, their pain, their need for the touch of gentleness and kindness.

As we approach Holy Week, and Easter, this invitation and challenge comes to you once again.

What kind of Christian will you be?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ John 3:16

ⁱⁱ William P Barker, *Everyone in the Bible* p272

ⁱⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, *But I say to you*, pps349-50

^{iv} Mark Oakley, *By way of the heart*, pps52-53