

St Brandon's, Sunday 9th April 2017; Palm Sunday
Isaiah 50.4-9; Philippians 2.5-11; Matt. 27. 11-54

He Gave No Answer

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INTRODUCTION: INJUSTICE

I hate injustice.

It's the thing that can most easily make me lose my cool. I rarely lose my temper, but someone not being treated right can sometimes get me there. I manage to get on with most people in my work, but if a colleague is handled unjustly, the normally fairly flexible me gets rather flinty.

Which is all very noble, perhaps ... though ultimately I think I know that I hate injustice most when I believe I am the one suffering it.

1. HAVING YOUR SAY

And when I feel that, like many of us, I want to have my say.

And rightly so. Part of injustice is often the refusal to allow the accused the right of reply, the chance to speak.

Imagine being unjustly accused of a crime, yet – as is the case in too many places today – you are not even allowed to protest your innocence and present your defence. You're just condemned, convicted and punished anyway. Injustice upon injustice.

Perhaps you didn't have to imagine very hard: maybe you have experienced a time when you were wronged, and had no chance to speak.

To be heard can make a difference even if we do not win our argument or our case. Sometimes, in difficult, conflictual situations, even if things don't go entirely our way, if we have a chance to really say what we think and feel, and this seems to be genuinely listened to, it makes a huge difference. We come away saying, "OK – that does not solve everything, but at least I feel I have been *heard*." It makes a difference.

After the end of Apartheid in South Africa, as you'll remember, the decision was made that instead of endless rounds of punishment, they would aim as a nation for reconciliation – but based on giving people the chance to say what had really happened: it was the TRUTH and Reconciliation Commission. The whole deal was that while many who had caused immense suffering would not be punished, those who had suffered at their hands would be HEARD. For many – that made a difference.

2. HE GAVE NO ANSWER

But Jesus passed on the chance to have his say, to be heard. From the jubilation of Palm Sunday, in a few days it will look different.

The crowd will turn.

Today's hero will be Friday's zero.

Triumph will become tragedy.

Acclamation will turn to accusation.

And will Jesus be heard, have his say? No.

Even before today's the section of Matthew where today's gospel reading begins, he has a list of charges thrown at him by the High Priest, but he remained silent.

And then, where we joined the story, the chief priests and elders repeat the accusation; "Jesus gave no answer".

Then Pilate addresses Jesus about all these indictments, “But he gave no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the Governor was amazed.”

He cannot believe Jesus won't defend himself.

The passion story which we have heard, which we will follow throughout this Holy Week, is one of injustice upon injustice.

Jesus is innocent of any crime at all, yet is arrested, beaten up, whipped, stripped, humiliated, tortured, executed.

As events develop, Pilate, not liking the way the crowd are sounding, recognising injustice when he sees it, dramatically washes his hands to demonstrate he is innocent of the emerging crime. He is not, though, as he refuses to use his power to do right. Jesus is innocent, Pilate is guilty. But Pilate gets to wash his hands in water; Jesus will be bathed in blood.

And then comes that incident based on the curious custom of releasing a prisoner: Jesus is innocent, Barabbas is not. But Barabbas walks.

Innocence denied over and over; injustice upon injustice.

Jesus' crime – the only one that sticks, after all the false charges won't – is blasphemy: claiming to be the Son of God. But how's that a crime, when he's just telling the truth?

3. WHY NOT?

Why will he give no answer?

Why won't Jesus speak?

Is it that he knows they want rid of him not because they think he is bad but precisely because they see he is good, and his light shows up their darkness? So what use would words of defence be?

Is it that he knows any defence would be useless because he must tell the truth? They want rid of him not because he is lying about being God with us, but because he really is who he says he is, I am who I am? If he can only speak true words about being the Word made flesh, and for this they will kill him, why speak?

Or am I over-thinking this? Does he just know they have it in for him, and – wearily, wise to the ways of the world – he knows what’s coming here?

I don’t know. But I somehow do know that in his silent submission is a humility that astonishes me, flowing from a love I will never fathom. I don’t fully understand this, but I believe the universe spins on an axis which is somehow depicted in this tale.

It’s described in Philippians:

Christ Jesus, was in the form of God, but did not grasp at this station, this dignity, the rights and privileges you might think would go along with being God; but he took instead the form of a servant. And, in human form, humbled himself, even to the point of death on a cross.

This is meekness. Not needing to take any other form, any other place, than that of his true being, of God, here he is instead, among us. And the thanks and praise he gets is to be told he is not who he says he is – how dare he? Blasphemer. If you were God,. You’d hardly be here, now, would you? Ah ...

But here he is. And when the accusations come – not a word. I don’t fully know why not, but I see his extraordinary humility, such submission, suffering for love. He chooses a goal which means giving up his right to reply, not seeking justice for himself, but something for others instead. For it’s from this choice that love and forgiveness somehow go viral: it’s not only Barabbas who doesn’t deserve to yet can walk free now, but it’s me too, you, all.

He gave no answer, but walked this path so that mercy might become the mightiest power in the universe.

When Pilate tries to wash his hands of it all, the crowd cry out, baying for Jesus' blood, "Let his blood be on us and our children". Thank God, so it shall be, and we remember this in the communion cup in this and every Eucharist: let his blood be upon us.

CONCLUSION

Jesus made no answer. It will be a foreign soldier who will speak the truth instead, who grasps, at the foot of the cross: "Surely, this man **was** the Son of God."

He made no answer; he silently humbled himself here in love. His tongue was still.

But ours can therefore be moved in reply: because of this suffering love, as Philippians 2 says, at his name, every tongue will give an answer, will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.