

In the seventies I did holiday locum duty in Northern Ireland. The only sign of the Troubles were occasional daytime military roadblocks, and soldiers patrolling the streets in the depths of the night. That was the only price to pay for the quiet time we enjoyed. I was on sabbatical in Jerusalem in the early weeks of the second intifada. The daily news was terrible, violent. Again soldiers were on the street in the occupied arab East of the city where I lived, but it was safe enough to go to a local store in the dark, when the busy streets of day were empty, without fear of being attacked or arrested. In both places, I benefited from a confident and strict security regime. Up to the moment of Jesus' arrest, those Galilean visitors, guests of friends in the holy city would have felt just safe as I could in land under military occupation, safe enough to enjoy a peaceful Passover night outdoors. But at Jesus' arrest, as Scripture says, tersely *"All the disciples forsook him and fled."*

Most of us haven't had to cope with the experience of being invaded, or occupied, or even mugged, burgled, or unexpectedly awakened by police wanting to search our home, and take us for questioning. To have one's private world burst into without warning is a brutal shock, prompting flight or fight, two most basic human reactions. His most loyal friends fled in fear for their lives. Peter, a few hours earlier vowed that everyone else could let Jesus down but he was ready to die for him if needs be, ready to fight, but thrown into confusion by Jesus rebuking his honourable intention. Like the rest he fled, though not for long. He tracked the arresting party to the High Priest's house, where Jesus was taken for questioning. Although one of his closest associates, Peter doesn't have the confidence to insist on pushing his way into the court where Jesus is questioned, demanding to know what's going on, or speak on his behalf. He just assaulted someone and run off, not wanting to draw attention to himself. So he gets himself in among the servants at the gate. Chilled with shock in the cool of the night, he tries to get warm by the fire where a servant identifies him as a companion of Jesus. She questions him, just as Jesus is being questioned within. "You're one of his disciples, aren't you?" He answers "No", but his rural Galilean accent attracts attention. Again and again he denies association with Jesus. He's still running inside

himself, fearing he knows not what, traumatised by the violent invasion of his world of faith his hope his trust in the inevitable success of his master. He hears the crowing of the cockerel, and remembers what Jesus said. "*Before the cock crows twice you will deny me thrice.*" Jesus isn't clairvoyant. He knows so well his friend's impulsive character. He understands that Peter must plumb the depths of his fear and weakness, before he can truly become 'the Rock' as he is nicknamed.

Also at the scene is John the beloved disciple. It seems he's known to the High Priest and able to enter with Jesus. Nobody thinks him a threat. He's just a lad. Peter hides away, broken in tears of shame, realising he's failed Jesus. John quietly stays in touch with what's happening. While each evangelist tells the story of Jesus' trial their own way, all rely on John's eyewitness. He is so self effacing that he tells everything about Peter, but nothing about himself, as if he's hardly there. Could it be that later on he could hardly bear to recall his feelings and keeps quiet about himself?

Different accounts say the religious authorities question Jesus about his teaching. He asserts that he has taught openly in public, that anyone can be asked about what he really said. There are no secrets. Witnesses are brought in to testify. Their allegations are contradictory. Can't they agree on which lies to tell? Or had they not understood his teaching? They were meant to be against him. He represents trouble, change their leaders fear will do them no good. Their fear is reflected in confusion. The Gospels all recount the fact that Jesus is bullied, assaulted by those who had arrested him. If they hope to knock some sense into him, some new respect, they are cruel as well as stupid. More seriously, their leaders, their judges are willing to turn a blind eye to this abuse of a man under accusation but not yet charged with an offence. Can we hear this, and not think of Abu Graib or Guantanamo Bay?

Consider how many confusing accounts we've heard about global recession. So much blame, such desire for punishment, for scapegoating anyone thought to be responsible for bringing on our present fears and insecurities. Crisis is the test of our qualities, values and priorities. It was the same when Jesus was tried. His outspoken criticism and challenging teaching made people nervous. They questioned him and got no clear answers. They found themselves being questioned by him, by his awkward silences,

his refusal to get drawn in by their anxieties and concern. Does he admit to being God's anointed one sent to rescue his captive people or not? He always points beyond himself to God. He speaks of himself as Son of Man on several occasions apart from this, but is anyone sure what he means?

In the end, the authorities decide he claims to be the Messiah, that he is a blasphemer deserving the death for this crime. Death by stoning, except that they have no official power to enforce the penalties of religious Law. They might get away with stoning a poor adulterous woman to death when Roman police and authorities are not looking, as still happens in places where so called 'honour crimes' are still condoned. But with a public figure like Jesus, there was no possibility of bumping him off quietly, since he seemed to have so much support. Their only hope was to persuade the Romans to execute him, or to turn his supporters against him, and isolate him. They succeeded on both counts.

Jesus won't collude those who put him on trial. His answers oblige these, his judges to think for themselves. Here is a generation of leaders with a thousand year old tradition of law and justice behind them. Their ability to think straight, to think fairly deserts them. Their thoughts are clouded with fear. All they can recall is the High Priest's prophetic words: "*It is expedient that one man die for the people.*"

But they have to get the Romans to do their dirty work, so they send him to the residence of Roman governor Pontius Pilate. They place their accusations against Jesus and insist these are worthy of his death. Pilate asks why haven't they dealt with him under their own law. They need to remind him they have no right to exercise the death penalty. Pilate cannot grasp that blasphemy merits such punishment. With so many Gods to choose from for good or ill, the only blasphemy deserving death in his book was denying the emperor's divinity, setting yourself against the state.

Pilate interrogates Jesus. According to which account you read, Jesus is either silent, refusing to answer questions about whether he is Messiah or King. Or he discusses authority, responsibility and truth with Pilate, puzzling him, by seeming unconcerned about his fate. Pilate, responsible for public security and regional stability, needs to be sure Jesus is no political threat to be reckoned with. He probes to establish if

Jesus has ambitions for power, but finds a man wanting constantly to refer upwards to divine authority, wanting to remind the judges they are being judged by the author of justice itself, judged by what they do to him. Pilate can find nothing in his demeanour deserving death, and at first refuses to pass judgement on him.

According to Luke, he sends Jesus to the court of Herod, aware of Herod's interest in him, perhaps hoping for a second opinion. Herod is the local puppet king of Judea, member of a tribe of warlords from the other side of the Jordan, Idumeans. They had converted to Judaism, in order to establish a ruling dynasty. They'd understand the religious politics and have some advice for give Pilate.

The religious leaders go along and repeat the accusations to Herod, but Herod has no opinions, he just lets his soldiers add their abuse of Jesus to that of Pilate's soldiers. There is no justice at work among these enforcers of law. Nothing comes out of this extra interrogation, except more cruelty and humiliation for Jesus. This diplomatic gesture on Pilate's part forges an alliance between him and Herod for as long as either find it expedient to their cause.

The outrage about prisoners from Afghanistan innocent and guilty alike held and tortured secretly, and government ignorance that it was happening tells us how little has changed in terms of the unjust treatment of prisoners over 20 centuries. Fear corrupts the best intentions of people, good and bad alike. They forge unworthy alliances because they are not rooted in proper regard for people, friend or foe alike. Once you start denying someone is as human and needy as you are, you open the door to the kind of wicked abuse that we see in the treatment of Jesus. And if we're honest - it would have been no different if we we'd been in charge.

Jesus returns, and Pilate is pressurised by the religious leaders for a decision. He insists he finds no reason to condemn him, but they won't be satisfied until they get their way. Then Pilate has a face saving idea. As governor he exercises a goodwill gesture every Passover, freeing a condemned Jewish prisoner. Barabbas is perhaps a zealot. John calls him a bandit, awaiting execution for his part in a riot in the city and for murder. If the crowd desires, Jesus and Barabbas will swop places, the killer go free, the healer will die instead.

Pilate parades Jesus before them, beaten, exhausted by sleep deprivation and torture, clothed by mocking soldiers in a purple robe, crowned with a ring made from a thorn bush jammed on his head, in contempt of any idea of sovereignty. With cynicism and contempt for these wretched natives, Pilate declares "*Here is your King*". The crowd replies, "*We have no king but Caesar*", and in one chorus with their leaders they all shout "*Crucify him.*" The same crowd that welcomed him days earlier now want him dead, preferring to see a dangerous man free on the streets. That's how much public opinion can ever be trusted, whenever leaders are consumed by fear of losing power, and need someone other than themselves to blame, and pour out self-hatred upon. Who is this man, standing there condemned without protest? How can he bear such betrayal by all who have known and revered him?