

The Familiar Characters in the drama of The Passion

a reflection by Geoff Wraight

Palm Sunday 2006 (9 April)

Scripture: Mark 14 and 15 - The Passion Story

Message: In the sad and difficult road to the cross all Jesus friends desert him, the crowds turn against him and yet it is his enemies that seem to recognize him for who he is. The very human responses to the enigma of Jesus give us hope for redemption and call us to struggle on and not lose hope.

What an amazing and confronting drama the story of Jesus arrival into Jerusalem and the events leading up to his trial and execution are. The characters in this drama are fascinating and I think we can see some of ourselves in many of them. Lets have a brief look at some of the main ones. First of all the crowds..

The Crowds

The triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with palms waving and crowds of people shouting Hosanna! Here comes the one who will save us! People who perhaps failed to recognize the irony of Jesus being feted as a hero but riding not in shining armour on a stately horse but on a humble donkey and dressed in simple clothes.

The same crowds who not much later were shouting crucify him – string him up!!

The ‘mob mentality’ is very evident here. Just go with the flow – don’t think for yourself - what ever most people believe is probably right.

Even in the face of Pilate’s clear recognition of the significance of Jesus and that the real reason he is being framed is because the religious authorities feel threatened by him, they still mindlessly go with the prevailing opinion of the moment.

The crowds in this story are reminiscent of how majority popular opinion is manipulated and controlled even to this day. It is still an amazing but true fact that at one stage during the so-called “War on Terror” and invasion of Iraq, 70% of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was directly involved in the attacks on 11th September 2001. Despite the fact that even the Bush Administration was open about finding no evidence whatsoever for this.

You may be thinking that you wouldn’t be so easily duped, that you can think for yourself and wouldn’t be caught up in the Palm waving or the fist waving without careful consideration. In fact you might even Google Jesus and check out the info you can get on the internet first.

Of course, Googling is the latest way to search for information on the Web. How many people here did a Google search in the last week..?

There is only one small but insidious problem with Google. The way it works is by basically ranking sites found by popularity. That is, the more they get visited the higher they rank. Therefore the content the sites listed is not so important as their popularity- or how much they are listed or referred to by other sites. Some have estimated that Google reaches only about 20% of the available knowledge and sites on the internet. Gideon Haigh has suggested that Google is an example of a what Neil Postman called a ‘technopoly’ : a state where, “the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology”. He concludes that “it is hard to conceive of a more succinct description of what might be called the “Google Society”, convinced it is on the verge of a bright, shiny, networked utopia linked by huge virtual libraries to all civilised wisdom even as it reduces its culture to machine-generated lists of what everyone else is looking at, so stupid that it does not realise how stupid it is.”

But let's look at the next set of characters in this drama... The disciples of Jesus.

The Disciples

Now the disciples of Jesus knew better didn't they? They didn't just go along with the crowd - they didn't Google Jesus and get their info from the most popular source of the moment did they? After all, they had spent three years intimately involved with the Messiah, close friends and confidants with Jesus himself – surely they would have stuck by him in his hour of need – surely they would have seen through the apparent defeat and realised that the Kingdom of God that Jesus was talking about was to emerge in more profound ways than a simple political revolution?

But I'm afraid to say this wasn't the case..

We all know about Judas' betrayal and Peter's famous denial that come into this story of the Passion of Christ, and later we read about Thomas' doubting. But these stories are really just the tip of the iceberg. On a closer reading of the Gospels, it isn't hard to see that none of the disciples (or any members of Jesus family either) really understood Jesus, or really comprehended his teaching or recognized his works or acknowledged his authority or believed that Jesus Christ was the Lord of Creation.

In fact the disciples were often profoundly sceptical about Jesus. In their experience of his ministry they often enthralled but also mystified, they were bemused and apprehensive, confounded and disillusioned. During the this part of the story we call Holy Week, their elation on Palm Sunday very quickly turns into consternation, by Good Friday they have become fearful and hysterical; by Easter they are disappointed and bereft...

They struggle to understand, to believe to follow Jesus. They are compelled and drawn to him yet so often just don't get. When he talks about the Kingdom of God – they argue about who is going to be the greatest. When talks about the way of Suffering - they deny that this could ever happen to him. When he teaches in parables – they complain and want better explanations.

Perhaps the most poignant moment comes in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is facing his most agonising moment and his disciples can't even stay awake to watch with him. At the moment of his arrest we read the stark words "All of them deserted him and fled."

I think if we are honest, we can confess that we along with followers of Jesus over the centuries have often struggled and failed, have often been drawn to Jesus but not fully comprehended or lived out very faithfully his message of the Kingdom of God... We too, have been guilty of fighting amongst ourselves, of arguing who is the most important or how we should go about doing Christ's work instead of asking why we do it?

And yet in the story of the New Testament, we see Jesus disciples gradually and stunningly transformed at Pentecost to become bold witnesses to the reality of the risen Christ....

But back to the story.. because there are other characters who play a significant part.. not least the Religious and Political Authorities..

The Religious and Political Authorities.

It could be argued, that unlike the disciples, in this story of Holy Week as they confront Jesus, the Religious and Political authorities do perceive who Jesus is and recognize the dimensions of his authority. In John 7 the writer has the people of Jerusalem wondering aloud, "Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ?"

In their interrogations and testing of Jesus, and again in his so called trial and the aftermath of mocking and torture, Jesus allows them to confess that he is the Christ. "I adjure you by the living god, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God? and Jesus answers, "You have said so".

And so the authorities confess who Jesus truly is, even in the midst of their intent to get rid of him. This is in the same vein as had happened earlier in his ministry when Jesus had been recognized and acknowledged by the demons.

“If the authorities of this world (comments William Stringfellow), - including the whole diverse array of principalities and powers, religious, political, military, commercial – recognize Jesus Christ the Lord, it is because his reign is active now and constantly disrupts and confounds their rule and exposes their power as transient and fraudulent”

And is this not still the case in our age? The Southern white politicians in the United States recognized the a threat to their power in the message of Martin Luther King. The architects of Apartheid in South Africa recognized a threat to their power in the peaceful persistence of Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu. The brutal military regime of Burma lives and operates in total fear of its enemies and yet Aung Sang Sui Kyi has never pointed a gun at anybody...

The Prime Minister of our own country instructs the church leaders to stay out of politics and keep Christianity a private and personal religion...

Perhaps a rule of thumb is that eventually, one way or another, following Jesus is gonna get you into trouble with the authorities – if those authorities are practicing the way of death rather than the way of life.

Finally, who did recognize Jesus but did not want to get rid of him?

Well, in the Passion story and in the Gospels, it is the little people, the hated people, the outcasts and the most unlikely.

At the close of the description of Jesus’ suffering and death, a Roman centurion clearly proclaims Jesus’ identity. Women disciples, who have followed Jesus from Galilee, also seem to understand. They do not desert, rather they stay at the cross; when Jesus’ body is laid in the tomb, women are still there.

Conclusion:

I hope your beginning to recognize something here...

The story of the Passion of Christ is the story of our times.

It is an iconic story that is more than just history – a story that interprets us and our reality today.

This is a story of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God.

It is a story of God entering into the suffering and struggle of humanity in a profound way.

It is a story that contains a compelling and mysterious call to follow Jesus that leaves us struggling and failing at times but always forgives, heals and transforms us to live again.

Most of all it is a story of hope.

One of the most moving experiences of my life was walking into a very crowded and stifflingly hot upstairs room in a run down area of Kuala Lumpur city, where a group of about 60 Mara Chin refugees had gathered to meet me and my friend Andy Sparkes. They had been waiting there for hours, most of them were hungry, many of them were traumatised, all of them had fled their homes and land and were living in fear of being caught by authorities. As we walked to the front they whole group broke into beautiful harmonised singing – they were praising God for his faithfulness and goodness as a gift and blessing to us. I was moved to tears.

These were people who knew that the story of the suffering and resurrection of Christ could be their story. and they live in hope that one day the reign of peace will be a reality in their lives and their land.

Let us pray..

O God let us truly walk with Jesus to the Cross in this Holy Week - and let us not be afraid of death.

Then let us be transformed by the dawning of new life

to find new hope and courage to go on living the story of resurrection, working against the powers of death and fear.

And bring wholeness to our families, communities and our world..

In the name and power of Jesus the Messiah. Amen.