

# The Final Week



A five part Lent Bible Study

by John Birch

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## Introduction

These five studies cover the very busy last few days of Jesus' life through the Cross to the Resurrection, mainly using the texts from Matthew, Mark and Luke. We look at the people, places and decisions made that culminated in the Easter that we celebrate each year. There are lots of discussion questions along the journey to enable users to think a little deeper about the story, and suggestions for prayer in the lead up to Easter.

This is a story about injustice, doubt, fear, pain and, ultimately, degrading death. It tells how God experienced these things in the same way as ordinary human beings. But the final theme is victory - the victory of Christ over death - and this is why the story cannot end at the Cross and be separated from the story of the Resurrection.

The studies can either be distributed by email around the group for those that have tablets to read them on, or printed off for the ones who prefer a hard copy!

## Study One:

# The journey to Jerusalem

## Opening prayer

Be with us as we join Jesus and his disciples as they head toward Jerusalem. Be in our discussion and prayer, and in our own journeys of faith in this season of Lent. Amen

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## Opening discussion

Are there any positives to be found in the commercialisation of Easter and its popular chocolate eggs, hot cross buns and suchlike?

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## The scene is set, plans are made

(Read Luke 19:28-34)

This is no rash move by Jesus as he makes his way toward Jerusalem. He was now a wanted man, an outlaw, and the natural inclination of most of us would be to keep a very low profile. But not Jesus!

It was Passover, with Jerusalem and its inns and houses crowded with thousands of pilgrims, many who had travelled vast distances to be there for the celebrations.

Jesus had friends in Bethany and there was a pre-existing arrangement with the owner of a colt, a young donkey (Zechariah 9:9) that it should be made available for him, with a password 'The Lord needs it' agreed as a means of identity. Luke tells us the animal had not previously been ridden, making it suitable

for sacred purposes (just as the tomb which Jesus would be laid in had never been used).

There was perhaps another reason for Jesus choosing this way of entering Jerusalem, as God was not averse to a little drama to emphasise a message (as in 1 Kings 11:29-31 or Ezekiel 4:1-3). Here we have Jesus planning a donkey ride into Jerusalem, which recalls the prophet's words about God's Anointed King;

*'See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and victorious,  
lowly and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*  
(Zechariah 9:9)

This dramatic entry emphasised the kind of kingship being claimed, which was not as a military hero as might have been expected. In times of war a king would ride on a horse but when he came in peace, as this one

would do, then he entered the city on a donkey, considered a noble creature in those days. It was a very courageous plan!

## Discussion

- Q: How far ahead can you comfortably plan, and what tends to get in the way?
- Q: In the Garden of Gethsemane later in the week, Jesus seems to have moments of doubt. What does the passage tell us about his story so far?
- Q: If Jesus was wanting to make a favourable impression with the crowds and gain maximum support from those who would see him, would a horse have been a better choice than a donkey if that was what they were really expecting?



## Approaching Jerusalem

(Read Luke 19:35-40)

Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem from Jericho, a wealthy and important town where a forest of palms and balsam groves added fragrance to the atmosphere of the area. It was known as The City of Palms.

The journey to Jerusalem was seventeen miles, and not an easy one, being mainly uphill from a town 250m below sea level to one a thousand metres higher. It would be hot, dry and dusty. This was the route of the pilgrims and towards the end of the journey beyond Bethany, Bethphage and the Mount of Olives, the glistening and holy city of Jerusalem would come into view.

So Jesus, mounted on a donkey and accompanied by his close disciples and others from the wider group of followers made their way toward Jerusalem, and as they passed the Mount of Olives the whole crowd got into the mood, picking up the royal theme by spreading their cloaks along the road for Jesus, and singing the psalm traditionally sung by pilgrims

*'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.*

*From the house of the LORD we bless you.'*  
(Psalm 118:26)

*'Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;*

*his love endures for ever.'*  
(Psalm 118:29)

*'When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen'*  
(Luke 19:37)

making their way to Jerusalem (Psalm 118), a hymn of praise to a God who defeats the enemy and establishes his kingdom.

*'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.  
From the house of the LORD we bless you.  
The LORD is God,  
and he has made his light shine on us.  
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession  
up to the horns of the altar.'* (Psalm 118:26,27)

It's a psalm that Jesus would later quote from in his teaching and discussions in the temple.

Jesus approached Jerusalem as the fulfilment of the nation's hopes, the answer to the prayers of generations for a king who would finally bring heaven's peace upon earth. Yet among the crowds welcoming Jesus there were doubters and potential enemies, Pharisees grumbling about the carnival atmosphere, concerned the authorities would consider it an unwanted messianic demonstration.

## Discussion

- Q: Bearing in mind the problems that Jesus would face with the religious authorities in Jerusalem, would a more clandestine entry and a little bit of guerrilla mission work have been more appropriate and keep everyone safe?
- Q: What was Jesus telling the people through his actions?
- Q: What must have been going through Jesus' mind as he watched the crowd lay their cloaks on the ground before him?



## Jesus weeps for Jerusalem

(Read Luke 19:41-44)

Soon the beauty that was Jerusalem would be gone. Even as Jesus and his disciples were approaching the city political manoeuvrings by the Jewish authorities would turn into tragedy in AD 70 when, following a rebellion against the Romans the city walls were breached, the Temple ransacked, and both set on fire. Thousands were slaughtered, sent to work in Egyptian mines or used for the amusement of the crowds in the Roman arenas. The rebellion was finally ended in AD 73.

Jesus looked at the city in all its splendour and wept. We read in the gospels of others in tears as they

*'Let Israel say:  
"His love endures for ever."  
Let the house of Aaron say:  
"His love endures for ever."  
Let those who fear the LORD  
say:  
"His love endures for ever."  
(Psalm 118:2-4)*

*'As he approached Jerusalem  
and saw the city, he wept over  
it and said, "If you, even you,  
had only known on this day  
what would bring you peace –  
but now it is hidden from your  
eyes."  
(Luke 19:41,42)*

came to him for healing, but even Jesus was not immune. We read of him weeping at the tomb of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35) and now it is over the city that stood before him.

They had resisted his teaching and could not accept the message of God's grace reaching out beyond their small world to the Gentiles beyond. Jesus had warned of the judgement that would come upon them for resisting his

call and, full of emotion, he warns them again - not out of resentment or anger but with a heavy heart and love, for a people who had chosen to follow their own agendas rather than that of God.

## Discussion

- Q: What does this passage reveal to us about Jesus?
- Q: We sometimes label weeping in a man as a sign of weakness, how would you describe it here?
- Q: The Jews were architects of their own disaster in AD 70. Christians are sometimes asked, 'Why does God allow disasters?' What are the problems in trying to give a satisfactory response?
- Q: Where would you consider yourself to be on your own journey of faith?
- 

## Prayers for the week

Through the coming week remember all those who on their own journeys have difficult decisions to make, praying that they might hear God's prompting and feel his guiding hand in their lives.

Pray for refugees making their way from conflict and hardship, hoping to find freedom and somewhere to call home.

### Quotes

*'I imagine Lent for you and for me as a great departure from the greedy, anxious antineighborliness of our economy, a great departure from our exclusionary politics that fears the other, a great departure from self-indulgent consumerism that devours creation. And then an arrival in a new neighborhood, because it is a gift to be simple, it is a gift to be free; it is a gift to come down where we ought to be.'*

*(Walter Brueggemann, A Way Other Than Our Own: Devotions for Lent)*

*'No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great.'*

*(John Chrysostom)*

## Study Two:

# Into the Temple

## Opening prayer

Speak to us, gracious God, through the reading of your word, the discussions we shall have, and the prayers that are on our heart, that our faith might grow and this fellowship be strengthened. Amen

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## Opening discussion

Church buildings are used for a huge variety of events these days, many for raising funds. How do we decide what is, or is not appropriate?

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## A den of robbers

(Read Matthew 21:12-13)

The Temple at Jerusalem was a centre of pilgrimage and tourism, described by Roman writers as one of the world's most amazing buildings. The actual Temple itself was quite a small building within a larger complex, containing as it did the Holy Place and the inner sanctuary (or Holy of Holies) into which only the High Priest could enter. This was then surrounded by a large open space containing various courtyards.

The first to be entered was the Court of the Gentiles into which anyone could come, but no Gentile go beyond. Then, via the Beautiful Gate were the Court of the Women, the Court of the Israelites and lastly the Court of the Priests. It was

from here that the High Priest would have access to the inner sanctuary.

In the outer Courts were money changers converting Greek and Roman coins into temple currency, allowing Jews to pay the annual half-shekel temple tax, along with traders offering animals for sacrifice, and all no doubt making a satisfactory profit.

It was possible to buy sacrificial animals cheaper outside the Temple walls, but these would have to be inspected once inside to ensure they were 'without blemish'.

The system was open to abuse, even though there may have been many honest traders operating in what was essentially a



bustling marketplace filled with the noise of buying, selling and bargaining.

Anyone entering the Court of the Gentiles hoping to find somewhere to worship would find it difficult to find space and quiet.

Jesus' first words are taken from Isaiah 56:7 where the prophet looked forward to a time when the temple would be called a house of prayer. Now with the dawning of the Messianic Age Jesus finds a 'den of robbers', words from Jeremiah 7:11.

The Temple was not fulfilling its God-ordained role as a witness to the nations, instead becoming like the first temple, a symbol of a belief that God would protect his people irrespective of their behaviour or attitude. With echoes of Malachi 3:1 and for those with eyes to see, Jesus inferred a claim to authority over the Holy Place, but the implications of this would not become clear to any but Jesus just yet.

## Discussion

- Q: What do you think was Jesus' real motive for his actions within the Temple, and can that speak into our lives today?
- Q: There was a lot going on within the Temple walls. What is the role of the church among the community it is situated within?
- Q: Are you able to find a quietness within your own worship space, and if not how could that be achieved?



## From the lips of children

(Read Mathew 21:14-17)

The lame, blind, deaf or otherwise handicapped could enter the Court of the Gentiles, but most authorities prohibited them from offering sacrifices. Jesus cleansed the Temple of those who were abusing it, but not those who had need of it, and by inference the healing that they desired. And as he did so, the atmosphere changed with children's voices shouting out in praise, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'

Jesus' response to the criticism directed at the children is to quote Psalm 8:2, which would be familiar to the chief priests and teachers of the law. Matthew is giving his mainly Jewish readers pieces of a jigsaw to enable them to appreciate the bigger picture of who Jesus is, because although the children recognised him, the eyes of the teachers of the law were still clouded.

*"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.' (Malachi 3:1)*

*'Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.' (Jeremiah 7:11)*

## Discussion

- Q: What does this say about Jesus' priorities, and ours?
- Q: In the absence of traders the children's voices can be heard singing. How spiritually perceptive can young children be in your experience?
- Q: Where in your normal place of worship are you most aware of God's presence, and are there any visual aids within that space which help?



## A question of authority

(Read Matthew 21:23-27)

After a night in Bethany Jesus was back into the Temple again, and this passage is part of a much longer question-and-answer session with the authorities, alongside parables addressed to a wider audience, demonstrating that Jesus was determined to get his message across even at this late stage in his earthly life.

It is no surprise that the Pharisees and Sadducees wanted to know by whose authority he was acting in such a way and where this authority came from, yet their concern in asking was probably less about answering the question of who Jesus was, but rather a desire to stifle and entrap him.

Jesus was not ready to tell them that his authority came from being the Son of God

because that would only hasten his journey to the Cross, so he answers one question with another, a common approach to rabbinic debate.

The Jewish authorities were on the back foot. If they agreed that the ministry of John the Baptist was from God then by inference they had also to accept the possibility that Jesus was the Messiah, as John was a witness to that. If they denied John's ministry, then they would face the anger of the ordinary people who were convinced that his authority came from God.

One of the duties of the Sanhedrin was to distinguish between true and false prophets, and here their response indicated failure.

*'I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.'*  
(Matthew 12:6)

*'these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.'*  
(Isaiah 56:7)

## Discussion

- Q: Why didn't the authorities simply ask the question that was probably in their minds, namely 'Are you the Messiah?'
  - Q: How essential to the success of Jesus' mission was the ministry and mission work of John the Baptist?
  - Q: Have you ever had a sense of God's planning in the way your life and faith have developed, and can you share any of these moments with the group?
  - Q: Where are the 'dens of robbers' exploiting people today?
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## Prayers for the week

In the coming days think and pray for the members of your own fellowship, small group or congregation, that they might find space within their daily routine for quiet, contemplation and prayer.

Remember those who are just embarking on a journey of faith, that they might find within this season of Lent and Easter that Jesus is there, hands outstretched to welcome them.

Bring to God your concerns for those who exploit others for financial gain, and for justice to prevail.

### Quotes

*'These special holidays give rise to various liturgical calendars that suggest we should mark our days not only with the cycles of the moon and seasons, but also with occasions to tell our children the stories of our faith community's past so that this past will have a future, and so that our ancient way and its practices will be rediscovered and renewed every year.'*

*(Brian D. McLaren, Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices)*

*'To be sure, it was not Easter Sunday but Holy Saturday, but, the more I reflect on it, the more this seems to be fitting for the nature of our human life: we are still awaiting Easter; we are not yet standing in the full light but walking toward it full of trust.'*

*'Pope Benedict XVI, Milestones: Memoirs)*

*'Christmas and Easter can be subjects for poetry, but Good Friday, like Auschwitz, cannot. The reality is so horrible it is not surprising that people should have found it a stumbling block to faith.'*

*(W.H. Auden)*

## Study Three:

# Preparations

## Opening prayer

Prepare our hearts for Easter, with its tears and celebration, and strengthen our faith through the reading and understanding of Scripture's truth and wisdom. Amen

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## Opening discussion

What things go together to make a memorable meal with friends?

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## Anointed

(Read Mark 14:1-11)

Mark leaves us in no doubt about the threat facing Jesus at this time, left with just a small window of opportunity whilst preparations continued for the Passover, a festival which had huge significance for the people commemorating as it did their freedom from slavery in Egypt and enabling their passage into the promised land (Exodus 12).

God sent plagues upon Egypt, and at each one the Pharaoh promised to let the people go, only to go back on his word as the suffering abated. Finally, there was to be a dreadful night when the angel of death would walk through the land and slay the first-born sons.

The Israelites were told to smear the blood of a lamb on the lintel of their doors



using a bunch of hyssop, and the angel of death would see that mark and pass over the house. Before they began their onward travels, the people ate a meal of roasted lamb and unleavened bread and it was remembrance of that meal, along with the deliverance from slavery, that was being commemorated.

The authorities in Jerusalem, fearful of causing a riot if they arrested Jesus during the celebrations needed to choose the time and place carefully, and the insider Judas provided a comfortable solution to their dilemma.

Jesus chose to stay in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper. It was customary to pour a few drops of perfume on a guest upon arrival or when sitting down for a

meal, but this woman broke the jar when pouring oil on Jesus. This may have been a recognition that here was a very important guest, but to Jesus this meant something much deeper. It was customary to anoint the dead with oil, with the flask subsequently

broken and laid with the body in its tomb. Whatever the gesture meant to the woman, it provoked a harsh judgement from some of those present.

## Discussion

- Q: How easy do you find the story of the plagues to understand, based upon your experiences of God?
- Q: Are there parallels between the exodus from slavery in Egypt and the large-scale migration of thousands of people from poor or war-torn countries looking for a better life?
- Q: What could have been in Judas' mind to make him act in the way he did? Was it simply to betray Jesus or stir him into action against the Roman rulers?



## The Last Supper

(Read Mark 14:12-26)

This passage again shows the preparations that Jesus had made, this time with their eating place in the upper room of one of the city's houses, and he sent two disciples ahead of the rest to make the preparations for the ceremonial meal, each aspect of which spoke of the day of deliverance when God led the people from slavery in Egypt.

The symbolism in this special Passover meal is striking, as now it will be Jesus going ahead of the twelve, the nation and the world, through a greater darkness than slavery in Egypt and into a new kind of freedom.

The disciples were still coming to terms with all that was happening around them, but they would think about this moment in the future as another piece of the jigsaw fitted into the bigger picture of the Jesus they had followed.

Now, Jesus needs his disciples to know that he was aware of what was about to happen to him. Scriptures such as Psalm 41:9 ('Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me') might have been in his mind as he looked in the heart of Judas, and offered both a warning and a way out.

*'Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the door-frames of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast.'*  
(Exodus 12:7)

*'While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.'* (Mark 14:22-24)

What Jesus did not do is identify the one who is to betray him, as the other disciples would have no doubt stepped in and prevented this happening. What he did do was identify two items within the Passover commemoration (the wine and the unleavened bread), make

them his own and gave the disciples an assurance that his Kingdom would come.

The hymn they sang was possibly Psalm 136 which ends the traditional meal.

## Discussion

- Q: What do verses 12-18 tell you about Jesus' frame of mind at this time?
- Q: Jesus knew what was in Judas' heart, the others seemingly hadn't a clue, so does that have a message for us in our relationship with God?
- Q: Should Jesus have stopped Judas from proceeding, or indeed should God prevent any of us from doing what we know, deep inside, is wrong?



## Gethsemene

(Read Mark 14:27-41)

As the time drew near for Jesus' betrayal and arrest, his words took on a more sombre tone as the inevitability of his disciples running away dwelt heavy on his heart.

This is a complex scene. In the centre was Jesus in the garden praying that there might be another way, filled with the horror of what was to come, knowing that all things are possible with God but acknowledging that his path was already marked out. There are the disciples, frightened, weary, but essential for Jesus' message to continue, who must be spared the fate that awaits him. And waiting in the dark for his moment is Judas, well away from the crowds and in the perfect place for what must follow.

Jesus had chosen not to be arrested in the upper room and so they go to a quiet and familiar place, where Jesus could find space to confront his fears in the company of his heavenly Father and his closest friends.

*'This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD – a lasting ordinance.'*  
(Exodus 12:14)

*'As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.'*  
(John 13:30)

*'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'*  
(Mark 14:38)

Peter, that rock upon which Jesus said his church would be built (Matthew 16:18) shows both his normal impetuous behaviour (v 29) and a real love and commitment for Jesus, as do the others.

In this vulnerable and poignant moment some things become clearer. Jesus did not want to die while there was a whole world needing to hear his message. His prayer in verses 35-37 indicates that even Jesus did not fully understand why this had to be and yet he was still able to submit fully to his heavenly Father's will.

We might add that with the disciples still uncertain about the nature and purpose of Jesus, this makes their post-Resurrection transformation so remarkable.



## Discussion

- Q: What does Peter's assertion of loyalty say about the kind of person he was?
- Q: How does Jesus' declaration to his heavenly Father speak into our own faith journeys?
- Q: Many would admit to falling asleep (even if only briefly) during a sermon and hoping the preacher didn't notice, but what was the matter with the disciples?
- Q: What does sharing in the act of Holy Communion mean to you?

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## Prayers for the week

Pray for those who are struggling on their faith journey and beset by doubts, that at this season of Lent they might be drawn back to the Cross and the embrace of their Saviour.

Pray for relationships that have been damaged by harsh or harmful words, that there might be a spirit of humility and forgiveness leading to healing and restoration.

### Quotes

*'O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, faintheartedness, lust of power, and idle talk. But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to your servant. Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sin and not to judge my brother, for You are blessed from all ages to all ages. Amen'*  
(St. Ephraim the Syrian)

*'Lent is a time for discipline, for confession, for honesty, not because God is mean or fault-finding or finger-pointing but because he wants us to know the joy of being cleaned out, ready for all the good things he now has in store.'*  
( N.T. Wright )

## Study Four:

# Arrest and trial

## Opening prayer

Speak to us anew through familiar words of Scripture and enable us to understand more fully the Easter story and what it means, both to our faith and lives. Amen

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## Opening discussion

What would it take to get you involved in a street protest, maybe even carry a placard?

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## Jesus is arrested

(Read Mark 14:43-51)

There's much drama in this scene, but it is worth looking briefly at the main players involved. We start with Judas who John tells us left the meal before the others, possibly heading straight to the authorities (John 13:30).

It was evening, and he needed a sign to alert those wanting to arrest Jesus as to who was their target within the group they would encounter in the darkness of the garden. He chose a kiss, a sign of respect when greeting a Rabbi, and yet the Greek word Mark uses of the kiss he gave to Jesus is that of a lover.

Then there are those who have come with Judas from the Sanhedrin, which had limited policing duties within Jerusalem. From Mark's description of the scene it



may be that others, hostile to Jesus and armed with swords and clubs also joined the hunt. That they came armed suggests fear that Jesus was the leader of an armed rebellion. Mark does not mention which of Jesus' followers struck out and injured one of those who had come to arrest Jesus, though John mentions Peter's name (John 18:10).

Mark does not even mention the word 'disciples' when describing the way in which everyone deserted Jesus and ran for their lives, possibly because he does not see these men acting as would be expected, so refuses to call them by that description.

Compared to all the action in this scene, Jesus appears to have accepted that the



scene is over, and he is on the path that must now be followed. There is the intriguing note in the last verse about a young man following the action who is almost caught but flees naked. He remains anonymous, but speculation is that this is a young Mark,

the writer of the gospel letting his readers know he was there. It might explain how Jesus' prayers in the garden were heard and remembered.

## Discussion

- Q: Bearing in mind Mark's description of Judas' kiss as that of 'a lover', can it reveal anything to us about his underlying motives and actions in betraying Jesus?
- Q: Where do you think you, as a disciple, would be in this story?
- Q: If the young man, possibly a boy, was indeed Mark himself, does it help in our understanding of the whole story from Last Supper to the Cross?



## Before the Sanhedrin

(Read Mark 14:53-65)

It is worth noting that the Sanhedrin broke many of their own rules in the way they treated Jesus. The court could not meet at night, or on one of great feasts. It had to be held in a designated building, which this was not, verdicts had to be given separately by each member, and if there was a verdict of death a night must pass before it was carried out so that the court had the opportunity to change its mind and grant mercy. In their eagerness to get rid of this troublesome man, they were happy to break their own laws.

The basic charge was that Jesus was a false prophet who would lead Israel astray. The miracles listed earlier in gospels and his teachings had previously led to accusations against Jesus (Mark 3:22) and these would be on the mind of those present. That Jesus had done remarkable things was well known, but the question remained as to whether he was a true prophet or an imposter. Some remembered that he had mentioned the Temple being destroyed and took that as a real threat, totally missing the point of Jesus' words (John 2:19).

The Sanhedrin were aware that what Jesus had done and said could imply that he saw himself as the true King and

*"Jesus answered them,  
"Destroy this temple, and I will  
raise it again in three days"  
(John 2:19)*

*'The Lord says to my lord: "Sit  
at my right hand until I make  
your enemies a footstool for  
your feet."  
(Psalm 110:1)*

*'Peter followed him at a  
distance, right into the  
courtyard of the high priest.  
There he sat with the guards  
and warmed himself at the  
fire.'  
(Mark 14:54)*

Messiah. Though claiming to be a Messiah was not a capital offence, a claim to be the rightful king would certainly incur the wrath of the Roman governor and end in death, as both Jesus and the high priest Caiaphas would know.

Jesus was asked a leading question (this was against correct procedure) and at this point must have decided that the whole procession of false witnesses and accusations had gone far enough, so brought

it to a conclusion by answering that he was indeed Christ, the Messiah, and goes on to quote Scripture claiming that he would be vindicated and share the throne of the God of Israel, giving his accusers the opportunity to charge him with blasphemy, worthy of death and handing over to Pilate as a rebel king.

## Discussion

- Q: Can you imagine a newspaper headline that would sum up the way that the Sanhedrin handled this matter?
- Q: What might be the reasons for the religious hierarchy breaking the law to achieve their purpose?
- Q: Compare the actions and words of the Sanhedrin with those of Jesus. Do they have any echoes in the way Christians and other faith groups are persecuted in the world today?



## Disowned but not forgotten

(Read Mark 14:66-72)

In the previous passage, Mark has placed Peter warming his hands by a fire in the high priest's courtyard whilst Jesus is being falsely accused in front of the Sanhedrin. Peter, who said he would never desert Jesus and had possibly gone as far as grabbing a sword to defend him, may have had an attack of conscience and decided to follow the action, huddled under his cloak to avoid recognition.

Then someone asked the question, and he didn't run away but simply denied he was a follower of Jesus. The question was repeated twice, and a third time the response was the same, but now Peter called down a curse on himself if he should be found to be lying.

The Roman night was divided into four watches. At the end of the third, at 3am, the watch was changed, preceded by a bugle call called the 'gallicinium' or

*'Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."' (Mark 14:61,62)*

*'Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the cock crows twice[c] you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.'* (Mark 14:72)

cock-crow. Perhaps it is this sound echoing over the city that Peter heard, and instantly remembered what Jesus had said.

Papias, writing toward the end of the second century tells us that Mark's gospel is based upon the words of Peter, and this might explain how he has access to this pivotal moment in Peter's life and journey of faith. Papias calls Mark the interpreter of Peter, and Peter calls him 'my son Mark' (1 Peter 5:13).



## Discussion

- Q: How would you describe Peter's behaviour?
- Q: How can Peter's story, here and afterwards, speak into our lives?
- Q: What does this chapter say to you in your own journey toward Easter?
- Q: Mark's Gospel may be based upon Peter's words and life. How can the story of our own lives inform and help others?

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## Prayers for the week

Pray for Christians throughout the world who are suffering for their faith, either physically or through disadvantage in the workplace or community in which they live.

Pray for justice for all who suffer for who they are, and for governments to engage in the fight against injustice wherever it takes place.

### Quotes

*'The gifts of the Master are these: freedom, life, hope, new direction, transformation, and intimacy with God. If the cross was the end of the story, we would have no hope. But the cross isn't the end. Jesus didn't escape from death; he conquered it and opened the way to heaven for all who will dare to believe. The truth of this moment, if we let it sweep over us, is stunning. It means Jesus really is who he claimed to be, we are really as lost as he said we are, and he really is the only way for us to intimately and spiritually connect with God again.'*  
(Steven James, Story)

*'And now brothers, I will ask you a terrible question, and God knows I ask it also of myself. Is the truth beyond all truths, beyond the stars, just this: that to live without him is the real death, that to die with him the only life?'*  
(Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*)

*'The cross of Christ justifies God; He remains holy because He has punished sin in the death, the shed blood, of His Son.'*  
(D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

## Study Five:

# Crucified and risen

## Opening prayer

In our reading of the Scripture, help us to unravel the mystery of Easter and the power of the Cross, that our lives might be enriched and faith strengthened. Amen

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## Opening discussion

Is it possible to live 'well' and 'sacrificially'?

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## Jesus is prosecuted

(Read Matthew 27:1-31)

There are tragic human stories throughout this passage. The Sanhedrin meet to formulate the charges they will formally present to the Roman governor. So far, they had come up with blasphemy (Matthew 26:65,66) but that wasn't enough to go with as Pilate would tell them to go away and settle it themselves. So, Luke tells us that they came with three trumped-up charges (Luke 23:2), all conscious lies, that Jesus was a revolutionary leader, opposed payment of taxes to Caesar and claimed to be Christ, a king.

Judas meanwhile had realised the true horror of what he had done and took his thirty pieces of silver not just into the outer precincts of the Temple, but right to the barrier in front of the Court of



the Priests, throwing the money at them before taking his own life.

Pilate had enough problems of his own without this case coming before him, being disliked by the Jews from the start. Even when he sought to appease them by constructing a new aqueduct to bring an improved water supply, he took money from the Temple treasury to pay for it. There were many tales of corruption, cruelty and unjust killings.

Feelings were so high that the Jewish scholar Philo talked of the Jews reporting Pilate to the emperor for his misdeeds, which left him very vulnerable.

According to Luke's account (Luke 23:6,7), on hearing about Jesus the first reaction of Pilate was to send him to Herod, under

whose jurisdiction Jesus stood as a Galilean, but when Jesus performs no miracles for him, Herod hands him back to Pilate.

It is clear Pilate was impressed by Jesus' demeanour, possibly even sympathetic to his plight, but politically he also wanted to hold on to his position so sought a way out of the predicament that might suit all parties, taking advantage of a custom that allowed a prisoner to be released during the Feast.

So, he offers them a choice of Jesus who he appears to think is not guilty, or Barabbas, known as a notorious prisoner, and in doing so attempts to shift the blame from his own hands to those who have brought Jesus to him, even symbolically washing his hands as a sign of his frustration. But even this did not stop him handing Jesus over to be cruelly flogged before being taken away.

## Discussion

- Q: Does Judas' action as described here change your opinion about him as a person?
- Q: And what of Pilate and his predicament, and indeed the soldiers - possibly foreign conscripts simply following orders to flog a prisoner, as was always the case prior to crucifixion?
- Q: Pilate tried to distance himself from the situation by symbolically washing his hands. In the 21st century how do those in power try to do the same?



## The Crucifixion

(Read Matthew 27:32-61)

The story we have been handed down of the Crucifixion speaks for itself, of humiliation and unimaginable agony.

It was customary for the condemned person to carry their own cross beam; the upright was already in the ground. Jesus was exhausted after the flogging and mockery of the soldiers, so they commandeered someone to carry it for him. Simon, a visitor from Africa may simply have been there for the Passover and had no choice but to follow the soldiers' orders. Mark identifies him as the father of Alexander and Rufus, which may mean the sons had by then become known in the early Church, and maybe a blessing had come from their father's distress and shame.

Condemned prisoners often had labels placed above them stating the crimes they were guilty of, and Matthew is keen for us to know the label Pilate and the others used for Jesus, which in his eyes simply stated the truth, that 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews'.

*'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

*Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?'*

*(Psalm 22:1)*

*'All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.*

*"He trusts in the LORD," they say, "let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."*

*(Psalm 22:7,8)*

Mark tells us that Jesus was crucified at the third hour (9am) and that he died six hours later, mercifully quicker than for many hung on a cross to die.

That final cry in v.46 is not easy to fully understand. Is it simply the weight of the world's sin blotting out even the light of God's love, or is this Jesus sinking to the absolute depths of human experience, way beyond the loneliness of the garden where he prayed, 'Yet not as I will, but as you will.'

And from that dark place John tells us that Jesus' last shout was, 'It is finished!' (John 19:30) which is a victor's shout of triumph, both in the Greek and Aramaic. The shout of

one who has won the struggle, risen through the darkness and holds the crown. And at that moment the Temple is shaken and the curtain beyond which no one could pass other than the High Priest is torn in two. No longer is there to be separation between humankind and God.

The power of the Cross is shown in the reaction of the centurion and others guarding Jesus. And in the distance, we see the women who had cared for the needs of Jesus and his disciples and would play such a crucial role over the next few days and beyond.

## Discussion

- Q: Simon's shame may have become a blessing to the Church. How can darker moments in our own lives help in the building up of the fellowship to which we belong?
- Q: Jesus is crucified and mocked as 'King of the Jews'. What is your understanding of the kingdom over which Jesus is King?
- Q: Whether we take the story of the curtain torn in two literally or symbolically, how does this speak about our relationship with God in the context of our worship?

## From death to life

(Read Matthew 27:62 – 28:10)

A body could not be left hanging overnight according to Jewish Law (Deuteronomy 21:22,23), so enter a wealthy donor, Joseph from Arimathea who Mark tells us was a prominent member of the Council who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God (Mark 15:43).

This was a brave thing to do, as Joseph may have faced hatred and mockery from the Jews opposed to Jesus. But the body was duly buried, and we are told that the two Marys kept watch from nearby.

*'All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations.'*  
(Psalm 22:27,28)

*"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.'*  
(John 12:32,33)

*'The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."'*  
(Matthew 28:5,6)

The next day the chief priests and the Pharisees tidied up after their dirty work, looking to make sure that no one disturbed Jesus' body as some remembered him saying he would rise again after three days. And so, the tomb was properly sealed and guarded.

But the seal proved useless. As dawn was breaking Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, present at the Cross and burial were still there to encounter the risen Jesus, accompanied by earthquake, angel and guards now reduced to unconsciousness.

The women are drawn in their amazement to worship, and encouraged by Jesus to believe and share the good news.



## Discussion

- Q: Can the empty tomb become a barrier to belief? To a sceptic it may appear too good to be true, so what can we do or say to help dismantle this barrier?
- Q: The two Marys at the tomb were encouraged to believe, share and worship. How good are we at doing all three?
- Q: So many in the Gospels looked at Jesus and saw in him the presence of God, even the centurion and those standing guard beneath the Cross. How can we sense that same presence of God today?
- Q: How would you describe Easter to a non-Christian, without using theological language?

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## Prayers for the week

As Easter approaches, pray that those passing our churches might venture inside to try and understand what the celebration is all about.

Pray that lives might be transformed by the power of the Cross.

### Quotes

*'If man had his way, the plan of redemption would be an endless and bloody conflict. In reality, salvation was bought not by Jesus' fist, but by His nail-pierced hands; not by muscle but by love; not by vengeance but by forgiveness; not by force but by sacrifice. Jesus Christ our Lord surrendered in order that He might win; He destroyed His enemies by dying for them and conquered death by allowing death to conquer Him.'*

*(A.W. Tozer, Preparing for Jesus' Return: Daily Live the Blessed Hope)*

## Resources

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