

# **THE PASSION NARRATIVE**

**Luke 22:1 - 23:56**

### The leaders wish to kill Jesus

**<sup>1</sup> Now the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was near.**

**<sup>2</sup> The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people.**

We have heard Jesus inviting us to see just how closely he is involved in our history (21:5-38). Prior to that we have been challenged to look at what we call religion (19:41 - 21:4) and to discern how much of it is related to God, and how much of it is a substitute for being truly open to God's action in our lives.

Now we see Jesus facing death, and in circumstances that reveal it in all its horror. We see him a victim of the kind of violence that continually tears our world apart. We see him facing his death with realism and with dignity, and above all with faith, hope, and love.

It is this which binds our hearts to him and has the power to convince us that God, who is there for Jesus in his agony, is there for us as well. The resurrection confirms Jesus' trust. The promise of it for us encourages us to live our lives as his disciples, following him in his living and in his dying.

Jesus' death occurred during the period of the celebration of the Passover and the events of his final days are placed by Luke within the context of that feast.

Originally Passover was a pastoral festival celebrated on the night of the first full moon after the spring equinox. The finest year-old lamb from the previous spring was offered in sacrifice to God by way of a prayer for a good season of new lambs. It took only a small step to associate the festival with God's choice of Israel as his 'flock'.

Egypt saw itself, and with reason, as the mightiest nation on the earth. In their religious consciousness, they identified themselves as the first-born and favourite of the gods. In their liturgical reliving of the Exodus, the people of Israel re-enacted God's rejection of the Egyptians, their oppressors. Israel is the Lord's first-born, not Egypt. Through the mighty action of the Lord, the Israelites avoided the terrible catastrophes that Egypt brought upon itself by its arrogance. They were passed over (hence the name 'Passover') and redeemed from Egypt to begin their journey to the Promised Land.

The slain lamb was called the 'Passover Lamb' (*pascha*). Its blood was poured out upon the ground, symbolising the return of its life to God, and its body was eaten in a communal meal, celebrating the familiarity of the people with their God.

compare  
Matthew 26:1-5  
Mark 14:1-2

According to the ritual, the Passover was first celebrated on the eve of God's saving act. From then on it was to be celebrated as a memorial, so that each year the community would re-enact the Exodus and receive anew the grace and the promises attached to it. The ritual text is found in the Book of Exodus:

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

– Exodus 12:11-14

Luke is preparing us for the new Passover Lamb, for the death of the new first-born, for our redemption from all that enslaves us, and for the new covenant that God will make with us as we journey towards the fullness of the promise.

The festival of Unleavened Bread (*Matzoth*) was originally an agricultural feast celebrating the beginning of the grain harvest (Exodus 34:18). It too was a spring festival, beginning with the first full moon after the spring equinox – the 15th Nisan according to the Jewish practice of beginning the day at sunset. The celebrations went for a week (Exodus 12:15-18). At some time prior to our historical records, it was combined with the feast of Passover.

Those plotting Jesus' death were looking for a way of doing it that would not cause trouble for themselves. As Luke tells us, 'they were afraid of the people': afraid of those who would take Jesus' side; and afraid that he might become a rallying point for disaffected elements among the pilgrims and so get them into trouble with the Roman garrison.

**<sup>3</sup> Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve;**

**<sup>4</sup> he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them.**

**<sup>5</sup> They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money.**

**<sup>6</sup> So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present.**

compare  
Matthew 26:14-16  
Mark 14:10-11

### **Judas arranges to betray Jesus**

The betrayal by Judas comes to the reader as no surprise, for he has already been introduced as ‘Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor’(6:16). The statement that Satan entered into him recalls Luke’s earlier remark at the conclusion of the temptation scene where we were told that the devil ‘departed from him until an opportune time’(4:13). This is the opportune time. Jesus is about to face the final struggle.

Though he mentions that they offered Judas money, Luke makes no attempt to enter into Judas’s motivation for the betrayal.

Let us not underestimate the pain this betrayal must have caused Jesus. When he chose Judas, his heart must have been filled with hope for himself, for Judas and for the mission which he saw Judas as being graced to share with him. Not even the pure and constant love of Jesus could prevent whatever sin it was that Judas allowed to cause decay in his soul.

In this we see what it meant for Jesus to share to the full the weakness of our human condition. Love cannot force entry. Love cannot control. Love cannot ensure success. Love can only love and wait for the free response which brings about communion. If love is rejected there is nothing love can do except to keep loving.

## Preparations for the Passover Meal

There appears to be a connection between this and the previous scene. Does Jesus' guarded language indicate his desire to ensure that Judas does not know where the supper is to be held? There are obvious parallels with Luke 19:29-34.

The dramatic effect is to leave the reader with the impression that Jesus is somehow master of his own fate, acting in accordance with a higher divine design that transcends the evil plotting of those around him. He may appear to be the victim of other people's evil decisions, and in part this is true. But there is something else happening here as well. He remains free, and he is choosing to continue his mission in the face of the betrayal and its consequences. Convinced of his Father's love, he entrusts himself to God.

**7 Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed.**

**8 So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it.'**

**9 They asked him, 'Where do you want us to make preparations for it?'**

**10 'Listen,' he said to them, 'when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters <sup>11</sup> and say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks you, 'Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?''**

**12 He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there.'**

**13 So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.**

compare Matthew 26:17-19  
Mark 14:12-16

**14 When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. <sup>15</sup> He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; <sup>16</sup> for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.'** <sup>17</sup>**Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; <sup>18</sup> for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'** <sup>19</sup>**Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'** <sup>20</sup>**And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.**

compare Mark 14:22-25  
Matthew 26:26-29

## The supper

After expressing to the apostles his longing to eat the Passover with them, Jesus tells them that he will not eat it 'until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God'. He proceeds to thank God, recalling, according to the traditional liturgy of the feast, God's wonderful redemption of their ancestors from Egypt.

They then drink the first cup, the so-called kiddush, which opens the feast and sets it aside as sacred. At the drinking of this cup the traditional Jewish ceremony (the seder) includes the following prayer:

You are blessed, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Creator of the produce of the vine. You are blessed, O Lord our God, King of the universe. You have chosen us from all peoples, and have exalted us above all tongues, and have sanctified us by your commandments. And you have given us, O Lord our God, in love, seasons for rejoicing and gladness, this feast of Passover, the time of our liberation, a holy gathering in memorial of our departure from Egypt. You are blessed, O Lord, who sanctifies Israel and the festive seasons, who has preserved us, and sustained us, and brought us to this season.

Jesus and his apostles drink from this cup and proceed with the paschal meal. There is no mention of a Passover Lamb, for Jesus himself is the one whose life is about to be taken, whose body is about to be broken, whose blood is about to be poured out.

The rubrics from the Jewish seder tell us that after drinking the first cup, hands are washed, greens dipped in salt water are distributed, the account of the Passover is recited, the second cup is poured and all the elements of the meal are explained.

Jesus reinforces his previous remark by telling them that he 'will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes'. Two verses later we see him drinking from the fruit of the vine. The message is clear: the Passover is now being fulfilled; the kingdom of God is finally present.

It is at this point that the leader of the assembly, in this case, Jesus himself, takes the unleavened bread, and it is at this stage that Jesus gives his meaning to the events which were about to overtake them all. He expresses eloquently in word and symbol what he is going to give them the following day in the silence of his passion, when the 'kingdom of God' would come in glory.

He wants his disciples to remember, when his life is so brutally taken from him, that he is not just a victim of his enemies. He has always given himself for them. On the cross this self-giving will reach its consummation. When he breaks bread this night and when he share the blood-red wine, he gives them a special meaning symbolising the final offering he is about to make. When they take and eat this bread, he wants them to know that it is his body they are taking. It is his whole person that he is giving, everything he is and everything he has done in sharing the human condition: his weakness, his brokenness, his dying — and all as a gift of love to nourish their hearts and their minds, their bodies and their souls.

When they take the wine this night and drink it, he wants them to know that it is his life poured out for them. It is his Spirit that they are drinking into their thirsty souls. Yes, his life is about to be taken from him, but he wants them to know that he is giving it for them as his final act of love. All he has left now is himself, and he is offering himself to them in love. This is the new Passover meal. It is the meal of the new covenant. The first covenant of Sinai was also sealed symbolically with blood and was celebrated in a meal. As we read the ritual text in the Book of Exodus, notice (in our italics) the parallels with Luke's account of the supper:

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.' And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up *twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel*. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of wellbeing to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, '*See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you* in accordance with all these words.' Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also *they beheld God, and they ate and drank*.

– Exodus 24:3-11

Like the Exodus Passover meal, Jesus' final supper celebrates God's great act of redemption to be realised the following day. As in the first Passover meal, the covenant is sealed by the pouring out of blood (compare Zechariah 9:11). Likewise, the twelve tribes of Israel, symbol of the universality of God's saving action, are symbolically represented by the apostles who behold God as they eat and drink. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews recalls the Sinai covenant (Hebrews 9:18-20). Recognising its imperfection, he quotes Jeremiah, who looked forward to the establishing of a new covenant (Hebrews 8:8-12):

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors ...

## The last supper

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people ... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

– Jeremiah 31:31-34

It is this new covenant that Jesus sealed when he poured out his life in love right to the very end:

He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

– Hebrews 9:26

Our earliest account of the last supper is found in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written from Ephesus in 54AD, years before Luke's gospel:

I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

– 1Corinthians 11:23-26

The meal, as we have just said, is a meal held in anticipation of the morrow when Jesus, the Passover Lamb, will give his life for the world. It is also held in anticipation of the final communion with God when the process of redemption and salvation of the world is consummated. It proclaims the Lord's death 'until he comes'. Already it is the beginning of the Messianic banquet promised by the prophets and celebrated in Hebrew poetry:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

– Isaiah 25:6

Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

– Proverbs 9:5

Paul's account reminds us that it is more than a meal held in anticipation of the redemptive act of God. It is also a meal to be continually re-celebrated, so that the memory of what Jesus did will never be forgotten and so that, in the ritual celebration, the fruits of Jesus' self-giving can be enjoyed by his disciples. Luke stresses this also when he has Jesus say: 'Do this in remembrance of me'. The ritual meal celebrates the fact that Jesus is always with them. Jesus is inviting his disciples on the last night of his life to share this meal with him and to continue to share it together with him after his death.

We know that Jesus' disciples celebrated this memorial meal on the first day of the week, the day on which God began his new act of creation, the day of the resurrection of Jesus. They celebrated this memorial meal as a statement of their belief in his presence among them, sustaining and nourishing them to carry on his mission in the world (1Corinthians 10:16-22; 11:17-34; Luke 24:30,35; Acts 2:42,46; 20:7,11; 27:35).

It is still celebrated by the Church as the great Thanksgiving ('Eucharist') Prayer. To eat his body and to drink his blood is to accept his self-offering and to take into ourselves his life, his love, and above all the intimate communion he experienced with God. It is also to accept a commitment to carry on his mission. At the last supper Jesus invited his disciples to do what he was about to do: to give their lives in love.

Holiness, as is stated clearly in the Second Vatican Council, consists in tending to the perfection of love:

The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful, and so must it be. It is expressed in many ways by individuals who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love.

– Lumen Gentium, n.39

Moreover, as Jesus demonstrated throughout his life but especially in the way in which he offered his life on the cross, to love is to offer oneself with Christ in the obedience of faith to God and in self-giving for others:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

– 1 John 3:16

The documents of the Second Vatican Council make it clear that sharing in the Eucharist means welcoming the glorified Christ into our lives so that we, as his disciples, may offer ourselves as he did:

Christ's faithful should be instructed by God's word, and be nourished at the table of the Lord's body. They should... learn to offer themselves. Through Christ the mediator they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and each other so that finally God may be all in all.

– Sacrosanctum Concilium, n.48

All their works, prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit — indeed even the hardships of life if they are patiently borne — all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.

– Lumen Gentium, n.34

In the Eucharist Christians celebrate the self-offering of Christ as we commit ourselves to offer our lives with him. We are nourished by him and so are able to carry out our mission of mediating between God and people. In this way is realised the reign of God's love in this world as all are drawn to an eternal redemption and to fullness of communion with the living God.

The beauty and heroism of Jesus' self-offering is highlighted by the following scenes in which we see his closest companions still failing to understand him. In his hour of trial they betray him, deny him and desert him.

### Jesus speaks of his betrayer

**<sup>21</sup> But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table.**

**<sup>22</sup> For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!**

**<sup>23</sup> Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this.**

In the writings of the New Testament we find many indications of the attempt by the early Christians to search through the sacred Scriptures in order to find indications in God's word that would help them make sense of what happened to Jesus.

Without explicitly quoting a scriptural text, Luke states that 'the Son of Man is going as it has been determined'. He is probably meaning to take in the full sweep of references that had been built up within the Christian community by this time, which, on retrospect, were seen as speaking of the suffering of the Messiah.

Central to Luke's plot is the truth that God is able to effect redemption and salvation in spite of human injustice, obstinacy and rejection of grace. Even the terrible murder of Jesus could not lie outside the mysterious providence of God. Jesus' sharing of our human impotence enabled him to reach to the very depths of our human poverty and to draw us with him into the grace in which he placed his trust.

The Son of Man is representative of the suffering faithful (see 5:24). Luke's statement here presumes all that has gone before in the gospel since Peter's confession of faith (9:20), and the link that Jesus himself has made between the expression 'Son of Man' as applied to himself, and the necessity of suffering (see the commentary on 9:43-45). More specifically in the present context, Luke may be alluding to the following psalm:

Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread,  
has lifted the heel against me.

– Psalm 41:9

Another text also may have some bearing:

It is not enemies who taunt me – I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me – I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company.

– Psalm 55:12-14

Notice that Luke does not say that only the apostles were eating with Jesus. His reason for explicit mention of them is, as we have seen, symbolic. Notice that he does not name Judas here. Is he trying to ensure that his readers do not see all this as going on 'out there', but ask themselves whether we 'would do this'.

Jesus' lament over his betrayer is not a condemnation to hell. It is a judgment on how awful it is to betray the 'Son of Man' — to betray the poor and the one who gives his life for them. Who of us has not been guilty of this?

compare  
Matthew 26:21-25  
Mark 14:18-21

## Jesus, the Servant of God

Luke has chosen a most powerful setting for this scene. Jesus has just spoken of his longing to be with his disciples and of his gift to them of his life which is about to be taken from him. Yet those closest to him can think only in terms of power.

According to Jesus, greatness is measured by willingness to do the will of God; that is to say, to be God's 'servant'. 'One who serves' is one who is sent by God to carry out a sacred ministry and who carries it out faithfully. For a disciple of Jesus, this means sharing in Jesus' ministry.

Obviously the precise way in which individual Christians contribute to the mission of the Christian community will be determined by the gifts of the Spirit which each receives.

The present passage seems to make it clear that each disciple does share in Christ's mission, and has to learn that total obedience to God's call is of the essence of divine service.

It is true that carrying out one's sacred commission will be characterised for the disciple, as it was for Jesus, by humility, compassion, love and all the other qualities we see in Jesus. Doing God's will, being God's servant, places us in a special kind of relationship to others. It is a call to give one's life: to be at the disposal of others in total dependence on God's will.

The essential focus of ministry, however, is not on the one to whom the minister is sent but on the one who is sending the minister, that is to say, on God. Jesus is God's 'minister': the servant of the Lord. So must it be with the disciple.

<sup>24</sup> *A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.*

<sup>25</sup> **But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors.**

<sup>26</sup> **But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.**

<sup>27</sup> **For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.**

compare  
Matthew 20:24-28  
Mark 10:41-45

<sup>28</sup> *'You are those who have stood by me in my trials;*  
<sup>29</sup> *and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom,*  
<sup>30</sup> *so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*

compare Matthew 19:28

### **Jesus commissions his apostles**

The apostles have shown that they have still not grasped the essence of Jesus' revelation. However, he knows them and places his trust in their ultimate fidelity to him. As he approaches his death he entrusts to them the kingdom which it was his mission to establish.

After his death they will continue to celebrate the Eucharist which they have just celebrated with him (22:30). It will also be for them to 'sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel'. They will give prophetic witness to the whole of Israel that Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises made to their ancestors. Luke gives us an example of such 'judgment', when Paul stands trial before king Agrippa:

I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the gentiles.

– Acts 26:22-23

## Jesus warns Peter

Peter will deny Jesus. However, sustained by Jesus' prayer and by his faith in the one he truly loved, Peter will repent and go on to 'strengthen his brothers'.

Some of the ways in which Peter in fact strengthened the Christian community in the days after Jesus' death are recorded by Luke. He is mentioned as a significant witness to the Resurrection (24:34). He took the initiative in reconstituting the Twelve after the death of Judas (Acts 1:15-26). He played a leading role at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41) and in the Jerusalem church (Acts 1-5). He visited converts in Samaria, Lydda and Joppa (Acts 8-9), and he began the outreach to the Gentiles (Acts 10-11). He also played a significant role in the Jerusalem Assembly (Acts 15:7-11).

<sup>31</sup> *'Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,*

<sup>32</sup> *but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.'*

<sup>33</sup> *And he said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!'*

<sup>34</sup> *Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.'*

compare

Matthew 26:33-35

Mark 14:29-31

### **The eschatological battle is imminent**

<sup>35</sup> **He said to them, 'When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?' They said, 'No, not a thing.'**

<sup>36</sup> **He said to them, 'But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one.'**

<sup>37</sup> **For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, "And he was counted among the lawless"; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.'**

<sup>38</sup> **They said, 'Lord, look, here are two swords.' He replied, 'It is enough.'**

Jesus reminds them of the instructions which he gave them when he first chose them as his apostles (9:1-6). Now he invites them to carry out their commission with courage and with all the resources available to them. They will need courage in the face of rejection, hostility and persecution, similar to that which confronted Jesus. We are reminded of the statement by Luke's mentor, Paul:

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.

– Ephesians 6:10-18

It appears from the final verse that the apostles are not ready yet to grasp Jesus' message. They still cannot comprehend his message of suffering and humiliation. Jesus abruptly ends the conversation. The time has come for him to face his agony alone.

## Jesus' Agony and Prayer

After the supper, Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives on the eastern side of the Kedron valley opposite Jerusalem. He is about to enter upon the final struggle with the powers of darkness, the 'time of trial'. His first and final thoughts are for his disciples, urging them to pray that God will protect them against the kind of frontal attack by evil that he himself is about to face. It could overwhelm them.

Then he withdraws from them to pray. Luke gives no indication of any physical or psychic weakness in Jesus as he prays to be delivered from this time of trial. Jesus is serene, a perfect model of a martyr, his will in perfect conformity with that of his Father. God answers his prayer not by removing the trial but by sending an angel to strengthen him to face it. The contest (the literal meaning of 'agony') begins. It is the final confrontation of darkness and light, of good and evil, of Jesus and Satan. The strengthening angel does not take away the struggle – a point made clear by Luke's mention of sweat and of blood.

The verses telling of the presence of the angel strengthening Jesus for the contest are placed in brackets by the editors of the NRSV. This is because their absence from a number of important ancient manuscripts casts some doubt on their belonging to Luke's original text. However, in spite of the doubt, the editors judge it more probable that they are authentic.

With the peace that comes only from total abandonment in trust and complete conformity to the mysterious will of God, Jesus comes back to his grieving disciples. His heart goes out to them as he once again warns them to pray that the hour of trial may not come upon them, as it had now come upon him. When confronted with the meaninglessness of death, there is nothing else to do but to pray.

Though Luke chooses to accent Jesus' serenity rather than his human anguish, he portrays the awful nature of the struggle in which Jesus was engaged. We should reflect on the words of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews:

'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

– Hebrews 5:7-8; see 4:15

<sup>39</sup> **He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him.**

<sup>40</sup> *When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.'* <sup>41</sup>

**Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, <sup>42</sup>'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.'**

<sup>43</sup> *[Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. <sup>44</sup> In his anguish ['agony'] he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]*

<sup>45</sup> *When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, <sup>46</sup> and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.'*

compare Mark 14:26, 32-42  
Matthew 26:30, 36-46

### Jesus' arrest

**47 While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; <sup>48</sup> but Jesus said to him, 'Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?' <sup>49</sup> When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, 'Lord, should we strike with the sword?'**

**<sup>50</sup> Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear.**

**<sup>51</sup> But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched his ear and healed him.**

**<sup>52</sup> Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit?'**

**<sup>53</sup> When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!'**

Jesus is the victim of treachery and betrayal and he is powerless against the 'power of darkness' which is using Judas, the chief priests, the officers of the temple police and the elders, and which now overpowers Jesus. The sudden appearance of Judas comes as a surprise to the reader: we have not been told that he left the supper and have no reason for thinking that he was not with the other disciples in the garden. Some of those with Jesus attempt to meet violence with violence. Not so Jesus, the Saviour, who heals the wounds so foolishly inflicted.

Jesus continues to reach out to Judas, seeking to touch his heart in this fatal hour. Should not Judas know by now that in betraying Jesus he is betraying 'the Son of Man' (see 9:44; 18:31-33)? Should he not know that it is in weakness and in suffering that the Son of Man comes in glory (21:27)?

Jesus has placed his trust in the providence of God, but, as we see in this scene, providence may not safeguard us against the sin of others, for providence is love and love does not control.

Love invites, enables, and forgives, but it always respects human decision which may, as here, resist grace. Providence does, however, guarantee the presence of grace and it is grace that makes all the difference for the one who responds to it. It makes all things possible.

Jesus must face the awful betrayal in the same way that we all must face it should it be our experience. He has only his trust in God to support him as 'the power of darkness' has its 'hour'.

## Peter's denial

When Luke speaks here of the 'high priest's house', it is possible that he is referring to the house of Annas who was high priest from 6-15AD and who retained his influence, even though in 18AD the Roman authority had appointed his son-in-law Caiaphas to the office. This would be consistent with the tradition recorded by John (18:12-23).

Luke focuses attention on Peter. He tells us that Peter followed Jesus, but 'at a distance'. In spite of his earlier boast (22:33), Peter's courage fails him and he denies any association with Jesus. His denial is tragic and persistent (threefold).

Then the cock crows. It is daybreak and the high priest is preparing to offer his personal sacrifice to God. The silence is broken by the cry of a cock, announcing the dawning of God's great day of salvation. Peter is the first to benefit from the outpouring of God's forgiveness over mankind. 'The Lord turned and looked at Peter'.

Jesus had prayed that Peter's faith would not fail (22:32). Here, in the midst of his betrayal of the one he loved, and in spite of Jesus' strong words about those who would deny him (12:9; see, however, 12:10), Peter's eyes are turned not inward to himself but outward to the one he truly loves. And so it is that he sees into the heart of Jesus. He sees the hurt, but he sees also the forgiveness in Jesus' eyes, and 'he went out and wept bitterly'.

However unfaithful we may be, Jesus remains faithful (2Timothy 2:13), present to his disciple and caring for him in his hour of trial.

**<sup>54</sup> Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. <sup>55</sup> When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them.**

**<sup>56</sup> Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, 'This man also was with him.' <sup>57</sup> But he denied it, saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.'**

**<sup>58</sup> A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not!' <sup>59</sup> Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, 'Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.' <sup>60</sup> But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about!' At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. <sup>61</sup>**

***The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.'* <sup>62</sup> And he went out and wept bitterly.**

compare Matthew 26:57-58, 69-75  
Mark 14:53-54, 66-72

Jesus is blindfolded and mocked

<sup>63</sup> *Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him;*

<sup>64</sup> **they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, 'Prophesy! Who is it that struck you?'**

<sup>65</sup> *They kept heaping many other insults on him.*

compare Matthew 26:67-68  
Mark 14:65

### **Jesus is insulted**

It is Jesus' own people, the Jews, who are mocking Jesus here in a game of blind man's-buff. Throughout his ministry, Jesus has often spoken of himself as a prophet (4:24,27; 13:33-34), and been acclaimed as such (7:16; 9:8-19; see 24:19; also 7:39).

The irony of this scene is apparent, for this arrogant abuse has itself been prophesied by Jesus (18:32-33).

### Jesus' testimony before the Jewish authorities

It is likely that Luke is drawing on two traditions: one, that the Sanhedrin had passed judgment on Jesus (compare John 11:47-53); and the other, that there had been an investigation by the high priest between the arrest and the handing over to Pilate (compare John 18:12-25).

The council asks Jesus two questions. The first concerns his mission. Is he claiming to be 'the Messiah'? Jesus knows that their understanding of the Messiah is wrong. He knows, too, that their question does not come from a desire to ascertain the truth (see 20:41-44). He replies in terms of the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13, the one who will be 'seated at the right hand of the power of God'.

Jesus can be identified with the expected Messiah only if people recognise that he identifies with and represents the oppressed. The council is passing judgment on Jesus. However, when the judgment of God is revealed Jesus and those with whom he identifies will be vindicated by God and their oppressors will be condemned. They will see Jesus sharing God's throne, for God will achieve victory through him. The growth of Jesus' disciples and their destruction of Jerusalem, and with it of the temple and the priesthood, will vindicate Jesus as God's Messiah.

Their second question focuses on his identity. Is he claiming to be the 'Son of God'? They must answer this question for themselves in the light of what they have seen and heard. In the words 'you say that I am', there is an echo of the 'I am' which was God's response to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14).

Luke uses this dramatic confrontation between Jesus and the highest court of Judaism to assert his faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah – not according to any and every understanding of that term, but precisely because of his relationship to God as Son, and because of the mission given him by God as the 'Son of Man'.

In this scene, Luke does not mention a judgment passed by the council, though comparison with other texts indicates that he does understand this scene as a trial (9:22; 24:20; Acts 7:52; 13:27-28). They are pleased to have at last trapped him 'from his own lips' (see 20:20).

<sup>66</sup> *When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council.*

<sup>67</sup> *They said, 'If you are the Messiah, tell us.' He replied, 'If I tell you, you will not believe; <sup>68</sup> and if I question you, you will not answer.*

<sup>69</sup> *But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.'*

<sup>70</sup> *All of them asked, 'Are you, then, the Son of God?' He said to them, 'You say that I am.'*

<sup>71</sup> *Then they said, 'What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!'*

compare Matthew 26:59-66  
Mark 14:55-64

### Jesus' Roman trial : I

**<sup>1</sup> Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate.**

**<sup>2</sup> They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.'**

**<sup>3</sup> Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?'**

**'He answered, 'You say so.'**

**<sup>4</sup> Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.'**

**<sup>5</sup> But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'**

**<sup>6</sup> When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.**

**<sup>7</sup> And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.**

The reason for taking Jesus to Pilate is not given. It is probable that under Roman occupation the Sanhedrin lacked the power to condemn a person to death, except in specific circumstances conceded by the Roman governor. However, even if they could have stoned Jesus on their own authority, it may well have suited them to avoid the responsibility and possible backlash of such an action (see 22:6).

The Jewish leadership is at pains to present their accusations with as much political twist as they can (compare the accusations brought against Paul in Acts 16:20; 17:6-7; 21:28; 23:5). If it is true that Jesus is claiming some kind of Jewish kingship, this could certainly tell against him, so Pilate questions Jesus on the subject.

Jesus does not categorically deny being 'King of the Jews'. The whole of the Gospel has portrayed him as having a special role in effecting what he constantly speaks of as 'the kingdom of God', and we have witnessed his refusal to rebuke those who hail him as a king (19:38-40). His response to Pilate echoes his response in the parallel trial before the Sanhedrin (22:70). Jesus places the responsibility back on Pilate to seek a proper understanding of the accusation being brought against him.

Luke cuts this initial trial short, insisting only on Pilate's preliminary conclusion that Jesus is innocent. This does not satisfy Jesus' accusers. Displeased with the way Jesus was influencing the people (19:47-48; 20:6,19,26; 22:2), they are determined on his death.

In their insistence they claim that Jesus had stirred up insurrection in Galilee. Herod, the 'tetrarch of Galilee' (3:1; 9:7) was in Jerusalem for the feast. Pilate sends Jesus off to Herod for an independent investigation.

compare

Matthew 27:1-2, 11-12

Mark 15:1-3

## Jesus before Herod

We know already that Herod had first imprisoned (3:20) and later beheaded (9:9) John the Baptist. We know also that he is interested to see Jesus (9:9), and that, at least according to some Pharisees, he was intending to kill him (13:31).

Jesus stands silently before him, while the accusations are repeated. He has already been insulted by the guards at the house of the high priest (22:63-65), now he is mocked by Herod and his soldiers. However, the substantial point as far as Luke is concerned is that Herod too found Jesus innocent – a judgment symbolically indicated by the elegant robe in which he clothed him.

A statement made by Luke in the second part of his work, the Acts of the Apostles, throws light on the final comment of the present passage:

In this city, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

– Acts 4:27-28

Herod and Pilate are portrayed as examples of the kings of the earth, mentioned in Psalm 2 as conspiring against the Lord and his anointed. Luke is telling us that we have to look beyond the historical actions of the human beings involved to focus on what God is bringing about through them. Because of Jesus' fidelity God is able to achieve his will despite human infidelity.

In different ways and to varying degrees everyone bears some responsibility for the terrible events we are about to witness. But in the providence of God something of far greater significance takes priority. 'Predestined' is not a good translation for the Greek *prohorizô* in Acts 4:28. Luke is speaking of a priority at the level of being, not of time. Whatever we choose to do is secondary to what God chooses to do and comes within and under divine providence.

If we look at the various characters involved we see betrayal, denial, desertion, petty-mindedness, fear, compromise, cruelty and blatant injustice. If we keep our eyes on Jesus we see the revelation of God and the merciful love of God reaching to the depths of our human misery and healing us there.

**<sup>8</sup> When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.**

**<sup>9</sup> He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer.**

**<sup>10</sup> The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.**

**<sup>11</sup> Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.**

**<sup>12</sup> That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.**

<sup>13</sup> *Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, <sup>14</sup> and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him.*

<sup>15</sup> *Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. <sup>16</sup> I will therefore have him flogged and release him.'*

(Some ancient manuscripts add <sup>17</sup> Now he was obliged to release someone for them at the festival.)

<sup>18</sup> **Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!'**

<sup>19</sup> **(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.)**

<sup>20</sup> *Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again;*

<sup>21</sup> **but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!'**

compare Matthew 27:15-18; 20-22  
Mark 15:6-13

## **Jesus' Roman trial : II**

Once again Pilate has to find a way of dealing with the Jewish leadership. Luke has consistently made a distinction between the leadership and the ordinary people. He presents the latter as favourably disposed to Jesus (19:48; 20:6,19,26,45; 21:38). Pilate seems to be aware of this, so this time he makes sure that the 'people' are present as well.

For the second time (see 23:4), Pilate declares Jesus innocent of the charges being levelled against him. This judgment has now been corroborated by Herod. Pilate speaks of releasing Jesus.

However, he has miscalculated. For whatever reason (are they afraid of their leaders?) the crowd choose Barabbas rather than Jesus. Pilate tries in vain to appeal to them. They cry out for Jesus to be crucified (compare Acts 4:27).

There is a terrible irony in the name of the released prisoner. 'Barabbas' (see Acts 3:14) is Aramaic for 'son of the father'. He is a symbol for all of us. The guilty son of the father is freed; the innocent one dies in his place. In Paul's words: 'He loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Luke stresses the fact that Pilate declared Jesus to be innocent 'a third time'. By Roman law a person could not be condemned after being declared innocent three times.

Pilate is weak, but the primary responsibility for Jesus' death cannot be assigned to him or to Roman law. It is the responsibility of the anonymous crowd (see Acts 2:22-23; 2:36; 3:15; 4:10; 7:52; 13:27-28). It is the responsibility of us all, in so far as we are caught up in the sin that tears humanity from its God, and so tears us from each other. This is, indeed, the 'hour' of the 'power of darkness' (22:53).

<sup>22</sup> *A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.'*

<sup>23</sup> *But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed.*

<sup>24</sup> *So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.*

<sup>25</sup> **He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.**

compare Matthew 27:23-26  
Mark 15:14-15

### On the way to Calvary

***26 As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.***

***27 A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him.***

***28 But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.***

***29 For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed."***

***30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." 31 For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?'***

***32 Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.***

Simon is portrayed by Luke as doing what every disciple of Jesus must do:

If any want to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

– Luke 9:23; see also 14:27

The lamenting of the women recalls Jeremiah 9:16-19, and the following lament from Zechariah:

I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born.

– Zechariah 12:10

Jesus' addresses the women as 'Daughters of Jerusalem', an expression found on the lips of the lover as he speaks of his beloved in the Song of Solomon (2:7; 3:5; 5:8,16). They are adding their tears to those of Jesus himself (19:41), weeping over the destruction that is soon to befall the city.

The quotation from Hosea (Luke 23:30 = Hosea 10:8; see also Revelation 6:16) links the destruction of Jerusalem with the terrible havoc caused by the Assyrian armies. If Jesus is being treated in this way at a time when there is peace, what will happen when war ravages the land?(see 11:49-50; 13:34-35; 21:20-24). There is value in quoting Hosea chapter 10 at some length.

Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars. Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt. YHWH will break down their altars, and destroy their pillars.

For now they will say: 'We have no king, for we do not fear YHWH, and a king— what could he do for us?' ... They shall say to the mountains, Cover us, and to the hills, Fall on us ... nations shall be gathered against them when they are punished for their double iniquity. You have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed.

## The crucifixion

Though the account of Jesus' crucifixion is simple and stark, there are indications in it of the reflection upon the Scriptures whereby the early disciples attempted to make some sense of this terrible event.

Luke mentions that he was crucified with criminals and prayed for those who were crucifying him. We recall the following from the fourth song of the Servant of the Lord:

He poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

– Isaiah 53:12; see Luke 22:37

That those who crucified Jesus did so out of ignorance (see 19:42) is stated also by Peter (Acts 3:17), and by Paul (Acts 13:27; compare 1 Corinthians 2:7-8). In praying for their pardon (compare Stephen's prayer in Acts 7:56), Jesus is expressing a sentiment found in the Lord's Prayer (11:4). He is witnessing to his faith in God as a God who is gracious in forgiving (15:20; 19:10). His attitude to enemies can be seen also in 6:27-29.

The casting of lots for Jesus' clothing and the scoffing of the leaders recall Psalm 22, a psalm that was used by Jesus' early disciples to help them to penetrate the mystery of the heart of Jesus at the end. It is worth quoting in full as it provides an appropriate meditation on this scene.

In quoting it we will divide it into various sections, applying the psalm to Jesus on the cross and putting in italics the parts that relate to the passage upon which we are reflecting.

The opening lines invite us to contemplate Jesus' situation as he hung on the cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

– Psalm 22:1-2

The next verses present Jesus remembering his tradition and the faith of his religious community:

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

– Psalm 22:3-5

<sup>33</sup> **When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.**

<sup>34</sup> *Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'*

**And they cast lots to divide his clothing.**

<sup>35</sup> *And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!'*

<sup>36</sup> *The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, <sup>37</sup> and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'*

<sup>38</sup> **There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'**

compare  
Matthew 27:33-43  
Mark 15:22-32

## The crucifixion

However, the situation persists:

But I am a worm, and not human; *scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; 'Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver – let him rescue the one in whom he delights.'*

– Psalm 22:6-8

We are then invited to watch as Jesus remembers his personal religious experience:

Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

– Psalm 22:9-11

Even these tender memories, however, fail to alleviate his condition:

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shrivelled; I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; *they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.*

– Psalm 22:14-18

Jesus continues to cry out to God in his distress:

But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! . . . I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

– Psalm 22:19, 22

Only at the end is Jesus' persistent cry heard, and his abandonment issues into a song of praise and delight as he sees the face of God:

You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

– Psalm 22:23-24

The following passage from the Wisdom of Solomon is also useful as a reflection on the scene before us:

Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God and calls himself a child of the Lord. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father.

Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected.

– Wisdom 2:12-20

In mocking Jesus as 'the Messiah of God, his chosen one', the Jewish leaders stand in direct opposition to the central belief of Jesus' followers, who accepted Jesus as the Messiah of God (9:20), precisely in terms of the Suffering Servant, God's chosen one (9:35).

The action of the soldiers in offering Jesus sour wine recalls the following injunction from the Book of Proverbs:

Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more.

– Proverbs 31:6-7

The soldiers do not understand. Jesus does not wish to forget his poverty. His trust is in God to whom he has given his whole heart, mind and strength in complete abandonment.

Ironically both the leaders and the soldiers call on Jesus to save himself. This is the very thing that Jesus has repeatedly said we cannot do. Salvation is a grace from God to be received with the trust of a child. Those who seek to save themselves can only be lost (9:24; 17:33).

**39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'**

**40 But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?'**

**41 And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.'**

**42 Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'**

**43 He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'**

### **The two criminals**

The first criminal repeats the call of the leaders and the soldiers for Jesus to save himself (compare 23:35,37). He adds a plea for himself and for his companion.

Jesus remains silent. He has entrusted himself to his Father who alone can change the human heart. The heart of the second criminal is moved, and he speaks in Jesus' defence.

This is the only time in the whole of the gospel that anyone addresses Jesus simply by his name. This criminal has no theology, but he responds to something in Jesus which attracts him and he reaches out to him who alone can save him (see Acts 4:12).

To 'remember' means much more than to call to mind. In biblical usage it is what God does when he bestows the blessings promised in the covenant (1:54,72). We recall the words of the psalmist:

The Lord regarded their distress when he heard their cry. For their sake he remembered his covenant, and showed compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love. He caused them to be pitied by all who held them captive. Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise.

– Psalm 106:44-47

Jesus has already promised: 'You are those who have been with me in my trials; and I confer on you, as my Father has conferred name, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom'(22:28-30). 'Ask, and you will receive'(11:9). On announcing his mission, he declared that he was sent: 'to proclaim liberty to captives'(4:18).

Luke wants to focus on this saving mission in Jesus' last words spoken to a human being prior to his death. This criminal symbolises all who suffer with Jesus. If in our suffering we turn to him, we will experience, in the trial itself, the 'today' of God's salvation (see 2:11; 4:21; 19:5,9).

## Jesus' death

Using language that is well attested in Greek and Roman literature when narrating the death of a great person, Luke tells us that while Jesus is dying on the cross 'the sun's light failed'. This is the eschatological darkness of the Day of the Lord. Darkness reigns as the whole of creation is overwhelmed by the 'power of darkness'(22:53).

On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight.

– Amos 8:9; see also Joel 2:2; 3:4; Zephaniah 1:15

We should not forget, however, the promise given us at the very beginning of the gospel: 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace'(1:78-19).

The tearing of the sanctuary veil symbolises the destruction of the temple foretold by Jesus (21:5-6). It has also a more profound significance. At the very moment when darkness is threatening to overwhelm the earth, God is opening the way for Jesus to pass into heaven and to take with him all those for whom he is offering his life. It is light, not darkness, which has the last word. This curtain veiled the holiest part of the sanctuary as a symbol of the fact that we cannot look upon the 'face' of the transcendent God. That was true up to this moment. But in his dying, Jesus sees the face of the One who delighted in him, and we, looking upon the face of Jesus, can now behold, unveiled, the glory of God.

At his baptism, the heavens were 'opened'(3:21). Now, at the end, Jesus the Lord, 'suddenly comes to his temple'(Malachi 3:1) beyond the veil into the embrace of his Father. Jesus is inviting all to follow him into the 'house of prayer' (19:46). Paul expresses it this way:

When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed . . . And all of us, with unveiled faces, see the glory of the Lord.

– 2Corinthians 3:16,18

As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says:

Jesus entered once for all into the Holy Place.

– Hebrews 9:12

We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain.

– Hebrews 10:19-20

**<sup>44</sup> It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,**

**<sup>45</sup> while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.**

compare  
Matthew 27:45,51  
Mark 15:33,38

**46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.'**

**Having said this, he breathed his last.**

**47 When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent [‘just’].'**

**48 And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts.**

**49 But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.**

Jesus dies in an act of supreme trust in the one he calls his 'Father' (compare 22:42; 23:34). His spirit came from God (1:35; 3:2). The power of darkness has not been able to separate him from his Father. Now, his mission complete (4:14), death opens the way for full union. His words are taken from the Psalmist:

In you, O Lord, I take refuge;  
do not let me ever be put to shame;  
in your righteousness deliver me.  
Incline your ear to me, rescue me speedily.  
Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.  
You are indeed my rock and my fortress;  
for your name's sake, lead me and guide me,  
take me out of the net that is hidden for me,  
for you are my refuge.  
Into your hand I commit my spirit;  
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

– Psalm 31:1-5

Just as one of the criminals crucified with Jesus dissociated himself from his companion in responding to what he was witnessing (23:40-42), so the centurion separates himself from his mocking companions (23:36), and, like Pilate (23:4,14,22) declares Jesus innocent. He goes further is declaring him to be 'just' (see Psalm 31:19; Wisdom 3:1; Acts 3:14; 7:52).

Both the criminal and the Gentile soldier do something of which we are all capable. They see what is manifest before their eyes. They hold out hope for us all as they recognise the beauty of this man dying on the cross. Condemned, mocked and rejected, Jesus continues to believe, continues to love, continues to forgive, and continues to place his trust in God his Father. This is the salvation which God has prepared in the sight of all as a light of revelation to the Gentiles (2:31-32).

The crowds (see also 23:27,35) are overwhelmed with the awesome nature of what they have witnessed, and they go home repenting of their folly.

Luke has the whole world gazing at this final revelation of God, including 'all his acquaintances'. He focuses special attention on the women (see 8:1-3) because of the role they will play in the resurrection narrative.

compare  
Matthew 27:46,50,  
Matthew 27:54-55  
Mark 15:34,37,39-40

## Jesus is buried

Like the criminal and the centurion, Joseph is willing to stand apart from his colleagues. In burying Jesus, he incurs ritual defilement. Though a member of the council, he will not be able to celebrate the Passover because of his actions this evening. He has waited expectantly for the kingdom of God. Now that he has seen it realised in the Suffering Servant-Messiah, he chooses to go with Jesus.

The dying criminal is a symbol of all those who have acknowledged their sin and sought salvation in Jesus. The centurion is a symbol of all those Gentiles who threw in their lot with Jesus' disciples. And now Joseph is offered us by Luke as a symbol for all those of Jesus' own people who would recognise him as their Messiah.

To follow Jesus is to leave all one's possessions, all one's security. It is to die with him and to go into the tomb with him, placing our trust in the love of God.

The Sabbath is beginning, the day on which God rests having completed his creation (Genesis 2:2). We have had a foretaste of the new creation in Jesus' preaching (see 4:16,31; 13:10) and in his healing ministry (see 6:1-9; 13:14-16; 14:1-5). Now, as the women prepare the spices for a proper ritual burial, we wait in silence, wondering what the dawning of a new day will reveal.

***<sup>50</sup> Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, <sup>51</sup> had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.***

***<sup>52</sup> This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.***

***<sup>53</sup> Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid.***

***<sup>54</sup> It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning.***

***<sup>55</sup> The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid.***

***<sup>56</sup> Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.***

compare  
Matthew 27:57-61  
Mark 15:42-47