

“You’re Invited to an Execution”

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Introduction

Last night we were at a meal... Today we’re at an execution. The action has moved quickly. And it needs to for the purposes of the authorities, the established order of state and temple. Jerusalem is volatile – crowded with 200,000 pilgrims for the Passover – and there *is* significant support for Jesus. Moving against him is necessary but dangerous.

Thanks to the traitor Judas, they’ve been able to arrest him *away* from the crowds. Now... speed is of the essence. They rush him from the Garden to appear before a hastily convened late night tribunal of the Sanhedrin... the Temple elite. And then at first light, he’s taken to a pre-arranged sentence of death from Pilate, the Roman Governor... all of this before news leaks out and the crowds could stir themselves to protest.

The Gospel accounts *speak* of a Friday morning ‘crowd’... that calls for Barabbas instead of Jesus... But this is not the same street crowd that cheered for Jesus when we entered the city on Sunday. This is a small ‘invitation only’ mob, arranged by the Temple, meeting behind closed gates in the private courtyard of Pilate’s residence. All of this is stage-managed... indeed it’s fixed. The religious elite in collaboration with Rome eliminating a threat. And it’s done quickly and expediently.

Jesus is summarily tortured, beaten so badly the soldiers need to press a passer-by into carrying the heavy beam to the place of execution. It’s fast – he’s nailed to the cross by noon, dead by 3.00 and hidden away in a sealed tomb by nightfall... By the time news spreads through the city, it’s done... it’s over. All so fast! And the disciples – the men who knew what was happening and could have organised resistance – they’ve run away... hiding somewhere behind locked doors and shuttered windows.

Invited to an Execution

Today we’re invited to an execution... to that desolate scene of the crucifixion. Who else is present?

Well, his enemies are there, visible and vocal in the front row – the religious elite... priests, elders, scribes – mocking and taunting him. *'If you are so wonderful... if you are who you claim to be, then let's see you save your self now!'* Their hatred makes visible just how much this peasant rabbi from Nazareth has rattled them. Along with the usual mob of casual spectators – the type who turn out for any public spectacle no matter how cruel. They laugh at him too – it's sport for them. And the Roman soldiers, going about their work – they have to be there.

But there's no sign of the Movement that followed him to Jerusalem... well none of the men anyway. That includes the big names – Peter, James and John – all of them are absent... There's only a small circle of women followers, huddled in grief and horror... at a *distance* the gospels tell us. No one raises a voice of protest. Even the bandits nailed either side mock him.

We remember Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, explaining to his followers what lay ahead... asking them to join him in it to the very end... even if that meant a cross. But apart from these few faithful women, the Movement has failed. At the moment of crisis the leaders have fled into the night... afraid! We're haunted by Christ's words, *'Those who want to save their lives, play it safe and secure... they'll end up losing everything.'* (Matt. 16.25) That's what he said to them on the way to Jerusalem... So today, the execution, is a scene of discipleship absence and failure.

But let's not sit here comfortable in judgement. We all know what it is to be afraid... to be weak... and we've all betrayed Christ and the Kingdom in myriad ways... many times.

The disciples *will* get the chance to redeem themselves before this story ends... Today is our turn.

We're invited to an execution... What's being asked of us?

Here and now, it's simply to be present. Not to disappear into distraction, or anxiety about where all this might end, but to be here... to witness the pain; to acknowledge the suffering... and most critically, to stay open and vulnerable to what's happening before us.

Participation

Jesus had a particular understanding of what he was giving himself to, in risking the cross. When he spoke to his inner circle about what was going to happen when they reached Jerusalem, he explained his sacrifice, his self-offering, with these words... *“The Son of Man comes... to give his life as a ransom for many.”* The Greek word we translate as *ransom* (‘lutron’) has a specific use in Scripture. It doesn’t have any connection with *‘forgiveness of sin’*, but rather it refers to the payment made to liberate captives – prisoners of war or slaves. The *ransom* Jesus identifies his sacrificial action with, is a means of bringing release... freedom for those held in bondage. He goes to Jerusalem, knowing the likely outcome, in order that the people – and that includes you and me – may be set free from their captivity.

Hence his intentional connection with the Passover at the Last Supper – the festival that celebrates the night the captives of Egypt were set free. This is how he asks us to understand *his* self-offering. The Son of Man gives his life, doesn’t hold onto it... he risks it... put’s it out there... as a way of setting people free from all that holds and binds them. That’s what we’re watching. The cross is the exclamation mark of a life of self-offering.

But we’re not watching as spectators... We’re watching as disciples, and the call to us is to *follow*. *‘Pick up your cross and follow.’* The call to us is to *participate* in this death... simply put, to join in. This death we’re watching shows us the way to walk – indeed it opens the path for us to follow – and in the following of this way, we are freed from all that constrains and shackles us. All that terrible blockage we bundle together in the ugly name of *sin*.

So we too are called to put our lives out there... not to hold on to them in fear and control. The death we are called to embrace is the death of our old lives. Our old agendas for safety and happiness. Our old self-reliant, self-achieving, self-managed lives. It is the death of our compliance and collusion with the consumerist world of self-absorption and fear. As we sit and watch today, Christ is showing us the way to freedom.

Conclusion

Today we’re invited to an execution... to watch a man die in love and self-offering. Not as spectators, but as disciples... Or perhaps a plainer word for us would be *students* – those who come to learn. If we dare follow him... even in this... we are led and guided... carried even... and

unexpectedly find ourselves no longer in a prison of never-ending slavery to self, but alive in the Kingdom of God.

The question of Holy Week isn't *'Do you believe?'* but *'Will you be part of this? Will you join this Movement, walk this Way? Will you follow?'*