

Good Friday?

Jesus' ministry had started small. He'd been baptised by his cousin John in the Jordan, been tested in the wilderness for forty days, and then returned and called his first disciples. More and more people came to hear Jesus, the number of his followers grew, he preached the good news of the kingdom of God drawing near.

But even as his ministry grew, there was opposition. From the Pharisees and the Saducees and scribes and the teachers of the law.

And there's a saying that a week is a long time in politics and certainly this week – which we know as Holy Week – was a long one for Jesus. The first century equivalent of opinion polls would have shown Jesus' approval rating plummeting.

The crowds that had welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday had dissipated. The crowds that had cheered were no more.

Luke tells us Jesus' first stop in Jerusalem had been the temple. And there he drove out those who were selling things.

Each day Jesus walked in the temple courts where he was challenged by the chief priests and the teachers and the elders. They tried to catch Jesus out, they tried to entrap him – the question about paying taxes to Caesar, and the terribly hypothetical question about a woman who had been widowed by seven brothers in turn, and the question about which was the most important commandment.

Big things were happening. Each day in Jerusalem, Jesus would be at the temple, each night he would return to Bethany. The mood was getting darker and darker.

By Thursday night, there were only the twelve left.

And Thursday night was the Passover, a symbolic meal. During dinner, Jesus told the disciples it would be his last meal.

Then he took the bread, broke it and shared it, he took the cup and shared it.

He told the disciples that one of them would betray him.

They were saddened, and Mark tells of the disciples saying one by one to Jesus "Surely, not I?"

Jesus told them that they would all fall away.

But Peter, impetuous Peter, pledged his complete devotion – "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you" (Mark 14:29)

But Jesus answered "Truly I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me"

During the meal, Judas slipped away, and, after the meal, the remaining disciples went with Jesus to Gethsemane.

From the crowds of last Sunday, it was now just a few going into the Garden with Jesus.

Jesus had often been in the garden with his disciples; of course, Judas knew it too. So Judas went there with a detachment of soldiers and police from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They came with torches and weapons.

Jesus, we read, knew and understood what was happening, and he stepped forward, likely to protect his followers from violence.

“Who are you looking for?” he asked

“Jesus of Nazareth”, they said.

“I am he” Jesus answered, and they fell to the ground.

Which is a bit odd, if you think about it... they’re after Jesus, and Jesus says “Here I am” and they fall over.

Except that they didn’t fall over, as such, but John tells us they fell to the ground. They bowed. They were in awe.

Because Jesus didn’t say “Here I am” he said “I am he”. “I am” is how God refers to himself – remember way back in Exodus, when Moses encounters the burning bush, God says to him “I am the God of your father.”

Jesus saying “I am he” was either so blasphemous (to Jewish ears) or so forceful, that they were awed and they fell to the ground.

When he was confronted by those who came to arrest him, Jesus offered himself to them “...if you are looking for me, let these men go” he said.

I think it’s fair to say they would have come looking for a fight, but Jesus didn’t give them one... when Peter tried to start a fight, Jesus told him to stop.

So Jesus was arrested, and then he was alone.

The first stop for Jesus after his arrest was to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest. In his gospel (14:18), John gives us a wonderful aside, telling us, “Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people”.

While we can appreciate that as a wonderful truth today, it’s probably not what Caiaphas had in mind when he said it.

After going before Annas, and after going before Caiaphas, John’s gospel tells us that Jesus ended up before Pilate. He was handed over by his own people – the Jews – to the Romans. And Pilate was confused – he’d been handed this prisoner, but it wasn’t clear what Jesus had done. And we have a strange interview between Pilate and Jesus. Pilate who was effectively all powerful, and Jesus who was powerless.

At the beginning of Chapter 19, John tells us that Pilate had Jesus flogged.

Pilate told the people he found no case against Jesus, but the people cried 'crucify him!'

The crowds cried "crucify him". What happened to the crowds from last Sunday who'd be crying "Hosanna!"? Were they afraid? Were they hiding? Or possibly worse still... were they the same people?

We picked up the story in our second reading, as, in the face of this demand from the people, Pilate handed over Jesus to be crucified. John tells us that Jesus carried his cross to the Place of the Skull, and there they crucified him.

John tells us that Jesus' last words from the cross were "It is finished."

It is finished. Or 'it is accomplished' in some translations.

And we wonder what it was that was finished?

What could someone in total anguish. Total despair. On that cross. Completely alone, accomplish? What could make this Friday 'good'?

In Luke's gospel, we read more about the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus. One hurled insults at Jesus: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

The other criminal, though, reacted differently. He recognised Jesus for who he was. Luke tells us that the second criminal rebuked the first "Don't you fear God? ... we are punished justly... but this man has done nothing wrong"

And having recognised Jesus, he turns to him in hope "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom".

Just picture that criminal for a moment. Hanging there on the cross, waiting to die of exposure or trauma or blood loss or suffocation, and he turns to the man hanging next to him for help. A man in exactly the same situation that he is, and he says: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom".

Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus said to that man, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise".

Even though he himself was dying, Jesus was compassionate toward the criminal hanging next to him.

And the criminal had done nothing to earn Jesus' favour, he hadn't given money to charity, or made good on broken promises, or done good deeds. Indeed, in his situation, there was no chance for him to do any of those things.

But he did put his faith in Jesus: "remember me, when you come into your kingdom"

And no matter where we are or what we've done or how bad we're feeling, that's all we need to do. That criminal could put his faith in Jesus, and so can we. "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom".

At the beginning of his ministry we remember that "...Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news".

In Jesus' life and ministry, the kingdom of God had come near.

Now, in Jesus' death, the kingdom of God had arrived.

It is finished. It is accomplished. It is done.

The power of sin and death had been broken.

It is finished for the criminal. Jesus finished it for him.

And it is finished for us as well: The power of death over our lives is finished.

Yes, it's still daunting for us. But because Jesus died, because Jesus finished it. It is finished. Once and for all.

The distance from the Triumphal Entry to the place of the skull – Golgotha - isn't far. For Jesus, though, at one level, it was a long way, from the adulation of Palm Sunday, to the agony of the cross. The week, in the politics of first century Judea, had been a long one indeed. From the crowds' praise on Sunday, to sneering and mocking on Friday.

But at another level, the crowd's cries of "Hosanna!" which means "Save us!" on Palm Sunday, were answered by Jesus' death on that first Good Friday. "It is finished".

We have a choice, though. There were two criminals crucified with Jesus. One hurled insults at Jesus. One turned to Jesus. We have that choice. All people have that choice. Many, many people still today choose to hurl insults at Jesus, to mock him, to sneer at him, to turn away from him, even as they're dying.

But if we turn to Jesus and ask him to remember us, then truly, when our time comes, we will be with him in paradise.

Hosanna. It is finished. It truly was – and is – Good Friday.

Amen.