

Voices of the Passion

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How can we hear something new in the Passion narratives of the gospels each time we listen to them? Perhaps there are voices in these accounts of Jesus's trial and crucifixion which we have not really heard before, or words to which we have never listened attentively. Scripture scholar, Peter Edmonds SJ chooses three voices from the Passion narrative of St Matthew whose words can guide our prayer this Holy Week.

In recent years, a series of books has been published entitled, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*, *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War* and so on. We are now in Holy Week, a period in which we will hear proclaimed yet again the narrative of the trial and execution of Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom we venerate as Saviour and Lord. The passion narratives we find in our gospels contain many voices and I have selected just three of them to focus on in the hope that they might guide our prayer this Holy Week. We take them all from the Gospel of Matthew, whose passion account was heard in all the Catholic world on Palm Sunday. The passion story is familiar to all of us and has a special place in the prayer of Jesuits since it provides the backbone of the third week of the Spiritual Exercises. A principle of the Exercises is that it is not an abundance of matter that feeds the soul, but rather a readiness to rest where the soul finds satisfaction; hence these three voices selected from Matthew's account.

The Voice of Jesus

'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?' (26:52-53)

The first voice is the voice of Jesus speaking to his disciples after one of them has struck a servant of the



high priest with his sword. Matthew's Gospel is the gospel for the teacher. How is the teacher to explain the arrest of the Son of God by a rabble sent by a corrupt priesthood? This voice is part of the answer.

Jesus is speaking as the person who had preached the Sermon on the Mount. There he said, 'Do not resist an evildoer'. Here is a teacher who takes seriously what he teaches.

Jesus speaks of the close relationship he has with the Father. We have heard his earlier prayer, 'No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.' (11:27) This is the same Father to whom he had previously instructed his disciples to address their prayer.

Jesus speaks of twelve legions of angels. One of his twelve disciples had used a sword; in biblical tradition, angels too could take up arms. During his temptations, Jesus had refused angelic assistance; he does the same now. He remains faithful to the prayer he had earlier prayed to his Father, 'Let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' (26:39)

The Voice of Pilate's Wife

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him' (27:19).

The second voice we hear is the voice of Pilate's wife; she sends him this message as he sits on the judgment seat. This is indeed an ironical situation. The one who was to judge the world awaits the verdict of a minor Roman official.

Here is a reminder to us not to neglect the minor figures of the gospels, those who appear but once on the gospel stage and then withdraw back into obscurity. Some are Jews, some are Gentiles; some are male and some are female; some are slaves and some are free: but each of them has something to tell us about Christian belief and behaviour. We can add Pilate's wife, a free, gentile, woman to this list.

We attend to her words. She calls Jesus 'that innocent man'; a more accurate translation would be that 'just man', that *dikaios*. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus told John the Baptist that they were to fulfil all '*dikaiosune*'. He warned his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount that their *dikaiosune* was to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. Joseph was described early in the gospel as a *just* man. This wife of Pilate is a witness to the righteousness of Jesus.

She belongs to the club of dreamers in Matthew; her fellow members are Joseph – who had three dreams, which instructed him to accept Mary as his wife, to take the child and its mother to Egypt and to bring them back again – and the Magi who received revelation not just from a star but in a dream too. This foreign woman at the end of the gospel joins with the foreign Magi at its beginning in witnessing to the true king of Israel.

The Voice of the Centurion and Those with Him

Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son' (27:54).

The third voice we hear speaks at the end of the passion story, from another unexpected source. It is not of one person but of several, a military voice of the centurion, and those with him, their work of execution complete.

Mark related how a centurion, having seen the tearing of the temple veil, confessed that Jesus was the Son of God. Matthew adds details about an earthquake, the opening of tombs and the resurrection of the just (27:51-2). He also notes that not only did the centurion speak, but that others joined him in making the same confession. Again we may pick up three points.

Here we have a group, not an individual. Matthew is not only the teaching gospel but is also the gospel of the Church. It is the only gospel in which this word occurs. Peter, the rock on which it was built, confessed Jesus as Son of the Living God. After the walking on the water, the disciples confessed Jesus as Son of God. Here a group of Gentiles does the same.

These soldiers were keeping watch over Jesus. We may contrast their watch and its result with the response of Jesus' disciples in Gethsemane who, told to keep awake and pray, fell asleep.

Their voice teaches us about true conversion. Not only had they killed Jesus, but they had also had dressed him in a purple robe, put a crown of thorns on his head, and knelt before him in mockery. Now they repent with a *metanoia* such as Jesus and John the Baptist had called for when Matthew introduced their story.

Throughout this Holy Week, we pray that we can listen out for the voices we will hear speaking in the gospels, and not be deaf to the words they speak.

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