



Windows on the Passion – Holy Week Addresses

Holy Week 2023

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Monday in Holy Week – Reflections on the Season of Passiontide.

The Journey this Week.

For the first three days in Holy Week, I would like to offer you three quite different perspectives on Passiontide. Today will focus on some themes in the season of Passiontide, tomorrow a slightly different take on Art and Music working with Passiontide themes and Wednesday is a dive into what the biblical material tells us about how Jesus himself understood his vocation, including his suffering and death. This will then link us with Good Friday where we will reflect and pray on some passages from the set gospel of the year, St Matthew, that open some windows on the mind of Christ after he enters Jerusalem, finishing with one of the most stunning New Testament texts that unpacks some of the implications of the mind of Christ for us.

By way of introduction

Throughout Christian history there have been times when particular devotion to the suffering and death of Jesus has been at the heart of Christian renewal. In the late 15th century, we see the *Devotio Moderna* (Thomas a Kempis). This movement urged a more emphatic devotion and identification of the devotee with the physical suffering of Christ. This was reflected in the shift in devotional art from the triumphant Christ to the suffering Christ. Devotion to the Five Wounds of Christ and the Stations of the Cross also developed. The evangelical revivals in late 18th, 19th and 20th centuries also put the Passion well and truly central, in open air preaching but in new hymnody, using well-known tunes. The 19th century Anglo Catholic revival in this country saw new artwork, a proliferation of stained-glass windows and the recovery of liturgical material appropriate to Passiontide. In 19th century a new Roman Catholic religious order emerged called the 'Passionists'. They have a focus on the suffering Christ and the suffering world but now also, appropriate to our age, including the suffering earth.

I use this as a scene setter to pose a question – what part does Passiontide have in the shape of our faith and devotion? To pursue this, I would like to explore the meaning of Passiontide.

The Seasons / Passiontide

There are many gifts that our faith brings us. One of those gifts is the pattern of the Christian seasons. Each one has its different colour, stories, liturgy, hymnody, rituals, symbols and themes. Nature itself plays a part in that connection with Advent, Easter and Spring particularly powerful in the northern hemisphere.

My observation is that we can find ourselves drawn to one Christian season in particular – its perspectives shaping our spirituality and chiming with our personality. Maybe it's got something to do with where we are in life as well. This will affect the way we see the world and express our faith. I am probably an Advent person. Those emphases of waiting and expectation, the delicious fusion of time horizons (who was and is and is to come, the Alpha and Omega), the word beyond all words and the magnum mysterium all energise me. I sense a bit of Easter's God of surprises is in there as well!

Which season/s do you seem to be drawn to?

The truth is that for maturity in faith every season needs to be embraced for balanced spiritual development. So, you might like to review the Christian seasons and notice which ones are prominent for you and which ones are not – it is an interesting reflection. I would be interested in anyone who places Epiphany at the top of their chart!

So, what might be the themes of Passiontide?

The Passion primarily refers to the events of the last days of the life of Jesus in Jerusalem recalled in the Passion Gospel read on Palm Sunday. Apart from the obvious key themes of suffering and death Passiontide also raises other particular questions. Here is a quick overview of some questions.

- The power of fear. We see this being played out in the leaders of community, the disciples and indeed Jesus. For some of us fear is at the root of much in our personal lives and it is an exhausting energy (I know that's a contradiction in terms!) Fear of expectations, disapproval, not being able to cope, insecurity, intimacy. There is also a school of thought that it is dominant in our church life too – namely the fear of collapse. Recent post Covid congregational statistics have been very discouraging, with up to 30% of congregations not reappearing. What is the antidote to fear? Surely it is living with the steady conviction that we are in the hands of God who is true love and power. It is developing simple ways of growing in that trust, moving from fear to faith.

- Dealing with grief and loss – Jesus' death had layers of loss for his community. Not just the loss of their leader and friend in a sudden, traumatic way but their very meaning in life was tied up with him – where now for them after his death? All of us at some time enter this season of loss, when life feels as if you are swimming in deep water without a sign of rescue. "Life is growth in the art of loss" (John O'Donohue). How can faith in God grow in face of life's tough stuff?

-When we are under pressure – what are we really like? Peter's story. Can we be honest with ourselves. How do we maintain vocational clarity when life is falling apart?

- Passiontide has broken bread, wine outpoured as a central story. As those who receive communion regularly what are we doing? What is going on? What is 'eucharistic' living?

- Even more personally, how close do we want to get to Jesus when opposition happens...

From a secular point of view the story has to invite discussion about abuse of power, how people can be manipulated by those with power and the roots of injustice.

Fear, loss, pressure, eucharistic living, trusting God... this season of Passiontide has some deep and profound wells for us to draw on. But there is more.

There are two traditions concerning the beginning of Passiontide. Needless to say, both are played out in Church of England. One says that Passiontide starts on Palm Sunday when we read the Passion narrative in full, the other (and this is the mainstream C of E view) starts Passiontide on the fifth Sunday in Lent. In both traditions Passiontide sits within the season of Lent. A season within a season. Lenten struggle bleeds into Passiontide suffering. So, let me go back to Passion Sunday (Lent 5) and the story of Raising of Lazarus because it is the story that sets the overview of the season

John 11, Lazarus and Formation.

From the earliest times in Christianity, Lent was all about nurturing those coming to the life changing decision of Baptism at Easter. In the early days of the church Easter was the only date in the church year when baptism happened. In some sense that heightened the significance of the commitment.

As part of their formation seekers and returners were invited to reflect on a series of lengthy gospel readings from St John. We have had them this Lent on Sunday mornings. They are called the Scrutiny Sundays (certainly from the 4th century, possibly 1st) because of the searching nature of the texts. They used these stunning gospel readings (Nicodemus, Samaritan woman at the Well, Man born Blind and Raising of Lazarus) to reflect on the meaning of becoming one of those baptised into Christ, to consider their

spiritual thirst, the blindness and deathliness within but also Jesus as the thirst quencher, the sight restorer and the one who raises the dead. And of course, Lazarus is all about death and resurrection – the essential motifs for baptism.

The dominant model of baptism / confirmation training through my lifetime has been the systematic credal approach – God, Jesus, Spirit, Church etc. The Scrutinies approach takes some powerful gospel stories and invites interaction with the text so that it becomes a prayed and lived in text. The credal approach can be more about head knowledge whereas the scrutiny approach is more personally engaging. Both seem to have their place in learning the faith. Here are some formational themes from the story of Lazarus.

Here we have Jesus standing at the tomb of Lazarus, praying - ‘intercessor, friend of sinners, earth’s redeemer plead for me’. Christ prays for us. This side of Easter, the Spirit of Christ prays within us constantly. Let us ponder this huge affirmation of our humanity and the way it might change our way of thinking about prayer.

You might also like to reflect that, in a sense, we are all Lazarus, needing a resurrection. ‘Come out’. The very words are life. I rise. I live again, grateful to have a life but it is so different – the seeing, the choices, the goal, the meaning.

‘Unbind him, let him go.’ Others are invited to assist me in this new life because you can’t do this without others. “We may still need to be liberated from beliefs, attitudes, habits, addictions, constrictions, traumatic experiences, self-images, or whatever else hinders full living, keeping us bound up in things that smell of death and deprive us of freedom and that liberation usually needs the attentive help of other people.” (D Ford)

Just consider the richness of praying and living this text. I rest my case.

I want to leave you with a link to tomorrow’s talk. In John 11 we have a weeping Jesus. He is emotionally disturbed by the scene he encounters. The Greek word is really quite strong. What is causing this? Martha’s angry reaction, the pressure on him to perform a miracle, his own approaching death, death itself.... We don’t know, it is left open but something makes him snort with emotion and weep. Moved. He is suffering emotionally as he will suffer physically in the coming days. For centuries the idea of God experiencing suffering was rejected. It was said that God cannot suffer and is incapable of being acted upon by an external force. In the 20th century that view was challenged. To suggest that God can suffer, and indeed that he must suffer if he is to be truly loving, has become a strongly held view. This is addressed in a famous story.

Professor Elie Wiesel was a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust. Speaking out of his experience he stated that the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference. If God were indifferent, he could not love. This is made plain in Wiesel's story about the hanging of two Jewish men and a youth in a Nazi concentration camp. All the prisoners, Wiesel included, were paraded before the gallows to witness this horrifying spectacle. “The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. 'Where is God? Where is he?' someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, 'Where is God?' And I heard a voice in myself answer: 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.' ” “Any other answer would be blasphemy,” says Jurgen Moltmann. “Of what help to wounded people is a God who knows nothing of pain himself?” “Only the suffering God can help,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his death cell. The incarnation can only be ‘real’ if God suffers. As John Austin Baker says, “The crucified Jesus is the only accurate picture of God the world has ever seen.”

The sight of Jesus on the cross disclosed God as one who suffers with humanity. Thus, the human suffering of Jesus is really God's own suffering: God suffered as we do.

Here is the tail end of a broadcast that happened at Christmas. It was the Radio 4 Sunday service offered by Ukrainian Christians. The recording is off the radio so poor and it is not available on download any more. However, hearing the voice of Ukrainian writer Nadiyka Gerbish is important. If I was to read this it would devalue it. We need to hear her voice.

You may remember the incident when a Ukrainian station full of families trying to get away from the fighting was bombed. The press spoke about children's toys lying on the ground. This is where Nadiyka begins.

“ When I saw a photo of a little stuffed horse soaked in blood, lying on the platform of the Kramatorsk train station after the Russian army attacked thousands of civilians waiting for evacuation trains with rockets, I thought that there must have been a story behind it. A little person trying to escape the genocide/mass slaughter of Ukrainians that Russia has proclaimed and is currently enacting. A reason why this particular toy was chosen to be taken on this quest for safety and held close. Someone who presented this toy to this child. An occasion for this gift to appear. Dreams – maybe, to ride a real horse one day; memories – maybe, grandpa making the neigh sounds while rocking the child gently on his knee; daily routines, like a nap that required a favorite toy close by. Some very personal, God-given life. The news channel broadcasting the shot did not tell if the owner of that horse survived. More than fifty people were killed on the platform that hour, including children. This photo tells what the war against a sovereign state or even against humanity looks like. But also has a story of innocent blood that is still crying out to the heavens from that toy. The pain was so severe that it needed immediate treatment, and the only treatment I knew that was powerful enough was God himself. And He was there. Not as a God of the promise of a happy life that will come one day – in those dark first weeks of the war, even a thought of a happy life felt like a betrayal and seemed irrelevant. Not as a God who will restore the brokenness someday. Not as a God that will make everything work for our good. Not even as a God who heals. He was there, broken-hearted. He was not the God who was taking my pain away to dissolve it into un-being, but the One who took my pain to bear it Himself. His name was Emmanuel. I was looking for Jesus himself. My sweet brokenhearted Jesus.”

MUSIC: Shchedryk (Carol of the Bells; Sharovaari Orchestral Version.

Tuesday in Holy Week – Passiontide and the Arts

Introduction

Sometimes I need to remind myself that we have just come through a global human trauma. We are the survivors. There have been 215,000+ deaths in the UK of coronavirus. It is estimated that it is 7 million worldwide. Do you remember those months of 2020 before the first vaccine appeared and the stories of sacrifice and loss and fear. The American poet Amanda Gorman published a book of poetry rooted in the Covid experience. It is called 'Call us what we carry.' In one poem, 'At First,' she uses texting format to describe the experience and observes the way our language changed in the pandemic and we got used to "an overcrowded solitude." Trauma does not go away quickly. It is still with us in terms of personal loss, the fears that stalk our minds, our personal behaviours (sharing the Peace has changed for ever), and the strong emotions related to the pandemic being played out in public space (Covid 19 Inquiry).

Henryk Gorecki

As you arrived today you heard part of the 20th century Polish composer Henryk Gorecki's Symphony No 3 – Symphony of Sorrowful Songs. It has three movements, each referencing a traumatic event that shaped Poland's national identity. The first is a 15th-century Polish lament of Mary, the mother of Jesus; the second a child's message written on the wall of a Gestapo cell during World War II, 'Mama don't cry'; and the third a Silesian folk song of a mother searching for her son killed by the Germans in the Silesian uprisings. "I wanted to express a great sorrow", Górecki says. "The war...the rotten times under Communism...our life today...the starving. What madness! This sorrow, it burns inside me. I cannot shake it off."

The academic Maria Cizmiciu has written a book called, 'Performing Pain – Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe'. A breakthrough study that I confess I have not read! It looks at memory, truth, ethics and spirituality. One composer discussed is Henryk Gorecki and the theme of un-speakability in his music. How

does the music engage with this? Does it lose us in sadness? Does it leave us lost in pessimism or is there to be another outcome? Does representing it help find a path through it?

Theologically, the composition is helping us to face the truth of human suffering, not in an impersonal detached style but in a very personal way. This is what suffering sounds like. We are invited to contemplate the value of human beings made in the image of God, all capable of kindness. The child's message to her mother is an act of meaningful kindness and love. The music is helping us to process loss and grief both individually and corporately. And in that representation, there is a beauty that is born.

Again, and again people turn to music in order to assist them make sense of traumatic life events. Nick Cave's recent album 'Ghosteen' came out of his own experience of multiple and tragic personal loss. He is a highly articulate man, recently interviewed by Rowan Williams. 'Ghosteen' is a meditation on loss with poetic, mysterious lyrics that echo with pain and the consequent search for meaning and faith. It has been a companion to me since my younger sister's unexpected death last year.

Here, musicians are extemporising on human experience, staying with the pain but with a certain restlessness. And it is music that is to be performed. There is, I gather, a tradition of no applause for Gorecki's 3rd. Corporate silence is the only response to this. One music critic said of a Cave concert that she was trying to locate the emotions that she was experiencing. Then she located them in another corporate gathering, her childhood experience of church. The performance in some sense leaves you wrung out but not alone because a community has been formed around the performance of the music. This is how Nick Cave expresses his approach to performance at the end of the film 20,000 Days on Earth. "In the end I'm not interested in what I fully understand. The words I have written over the years are just a veneer. There are truths that lie beneath the surface of the words. Truths that rise up without warning and then disappear like the humps of a sea monster. Performance and song is a way to tempt the monster to the surface, to create a space where the creature can break through what is real and what is known to us. This shimmering space where imagination and reality intersect. This is where all love and tears and joy exist. And this is the place. And this is where we live."

Music can help process emotions, interpret memories, and create a sense of collective identity. When we look at stained glass windows and depictions of art, we can create a certain distance but I'm not sure we can do that with music. Music invades us. It connects with the power of our story and reminds us that "we are in the narrative of the world's history and never above it." (Williams).

What am I trying to say here? Surely this is about embracing corporate lament, owning it but not getting lost in it. With both Gorecki and Cave the lament is an ache. The sheer mesmerising beauty of Gorecki's music points to a depth and intensity and it is almost overwhelming but there is a beauty in there too and a gathering, a silent sharing of whatever pain you carry with a community. Love will suffer but love doesn't abdicate its place. Similarly with Cave there is this track, Spinning Song, where he pictures his wife, the fashion designer Suzie Cave, sitting at the breakfast table the moment before the phone goes to tell them that their 15-year-old son has had an accident and died. The song then ends with repeating the refrain "and I love you". Not in a typical pop song slushy way but in a real I am committed to you / we are one, sort of way. Love holds the sadness and the hope.

The Biblical theme of Lament is seen in the story of Jacob and Joseph, David's grief over Absalom, the Psalms and Jesus' tears over Jerusalem. This week the book of Lamentations speaks powerfully of Jerusalem, a city laid waste. All of these stories are about disorientation. It is not the only story in town but it is the story. We need to own the reality of loss and pain because it will help us shape the future. As Richard Holloway put it, "we are dust, but dust that dreams."

In the heart of human beings at their best is something that objects and sings out beyond death. As Gorecki's music fades you feel that you have been taken somewhere indescribable, where pain and hope exist together. And that is what is going on in the trauma of Good Friday.

Carpaccio's Dead Christ.

This leads me into a reflection inspired by Professor Ben Quash in his book 'Found Theology', on Vittorio Carpaccio's 'Dead Christ'. https://www.wga.hu/support/viewer_m/z.html

It was painted in Venice in the early 16th century. Its subject matter includes a classical scene of mountains, greenery, trees and baked fields, similar in style to a Mantegna or Bellini. The foreground is busy and shocking. The Dead Christ lies at the centre. Around him is activity, reflection and symbols of death and collapse. Human skulls and other human parts. There is a turbulent sky, a tree with one fruitful and one dead or dying branch. Buildings are lying in pieces. The greatest concentration of light is on the dead man lying on an altar like slab. The body could almost be sleeping if it wasn't for a gash in his side. The three crosses of Golgotha are up the hill and to the right of the tree the two Mary's weep and St John cradles his head, grief-stricken.

What does it mean? At one level it tells the story between the death and burial of Jesus. Possibly Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus are at the cave with a bowl to wash the corpse. Possibly there is a reference to the earthquake triggered by Christ's death in St Matthew. Supports of altar represent the five wounds of Christ. The column reminds us of the flagellation and the altar of the sacrifice of Christ. But who is the old man?

For centuries nobody knew Carpaccio had painted this. It had a fake signature on the painting. In 1911 it was attributed to Carpaccio but not confirmed until 1945 when a similar style painting with a fake signature was identified as a Carpaccio. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435851>

And guess what, we have the same old man accompanied by St Jerome before the slumped figure of the dead Jesus. Behind Jesus are Hebrew letters. The Hebrew says 'My redeemer lives 19'. We are being pointed to the book of Job and to 19.25. For I know that my Redeemer lives.

Jerome was a 5th century theologian and translator of the Bible into Latin and one of the first theologians to put Job and Jesus together as a paradigm of perseverance while suffering but also as a prophet who foretold Christ's resurrection. So, why Job? Well, the Venetians canonised Old Testament figures. They have churches named after St Moses and St Job. Job was seen as an intercessor – an interesting style of intercessor by today's standards and maybe you wouldn't let him loose in one of our liturgies!

This is also an era when death was close. There were 14 outbreaks of plague in Venice between 1456 and 1528 and famines too. Note Jerome's rosary (left) has human vertebrae and the top of his cane is a bone. Job was one acquainted with death. He had sores on his skin – perhaps plague? The Book of Job tells the story of a good and godly man who loses everything. It is about injustice and innocent suffering. And there is nothing that can be done. Job's comforters offer no solution. God appears silent. There is no answer to it all. At the end of the story there is some kind of resolution. God speaks and Job is silent as he is pointed towards creation and the wisdom within it. Yahweh speaks of the hippo and crocodile, animals that humans cannot control. It is as if God is saying, 'here in your world Job are inexplicable, unfathomable and fearful mysteries and yet I have power over them.' Job never gets a direct answer but he has seen the Lord and something has shifted within him.

Theological 'findings':

Carpaccio is a 'genre bender.' He has a fantastic imagination. He constructs 'real' spaces out of landscapes and architecture that are invented. Venice itself is genre bending. As 15th century Philippe de Comines commented, "It is a very strange thing to see such beautiful and large churches constructed in the sea." Still nowhere on earth like it. It is an experimental place c.f. the Venice Biennale – arts.

The painting is a theology of prophecy, time, death and hope.

So, the assumption that we work on is that Job is being admitted to a New Testament space. What if it is Job's space and others have been invited into it? Who is in whose landscape? Does Job anticipate Christ? All times are present to one another in God so that one moment can carry a connection to another within itself. There was an early Christian tradition that the words and actions of prophetic figures could refer forward to the incarnation. Here is a "fresh iteration of the theology of time." (B Quash)

Putting Job into a picture of the dead Christ is also making a connection. So, this is how the wisdom of God is worked out – God in Christ suffers – the innocent suffering – a man rejected, alone, hurting, abused, lost, abandoned, dead. Job is reduced to silence at this picture of God’s wisdom, power and justice lying on a slate. Cold and pierced. Life expended. So, the wisdom, power and justice of God are seen in the pouring out of life, the self-emptying. This is how God does power.

Interestingly, Quash says that at the time of Carpaccio there was “a newly interrogative attitude to death.” Not a ‘look what your sins have done’ approach but ‘contemplate oneself in Christ’s dead body’. In some way, as we contemplate ourselves in the dead body of Christ there is hope. Lazarus again. This is the ‘evangelical meaning.’ We are waiting for the cry of Christ – “Lazarus, come out.”. Note the trumpet figure. He is not playing a lament but a fanfare. Note the three figures making their way toward the dead Christ in an echo of Bellini’s figures in the painting ‘Resurrection.’ It can be read as a painting about the resurrection because of the fact that it shows a dead Christ and shows him alongside the most afflicted of Biblical figures, Job. The resurrection holds up even though death consumes most of the picture and action. God shares our flesh, goes the way of all flesh but... “I know that my Redeemer lives.” Carpaccio makes Job the presence of Christ’s resurrection. Job is the resurrection seer, the one who keeps the flame of resurrection promise alive while Christ himself is dead. Carpaccio “has a visual theology... he is the midwife of extraordinary theological discovery.” (B Quash)

This is a picture that provokes a conversation about how you might do theology. Scripture interpreting scripture is a good Reformation principle but this picture invites a certain level of theological imagination and the discernment of the activity of the Spirit of God through the creativity of an artist. So, what is the place of imagination in faith? To what extent is the Biblical story inviting us to imagine a new reality? Do we need the somewhat unorthodox approach of a Carpaccio to breathe life into faith?

Wednesday in Holy Week – The mind of Jesus at Passiontide.

Introduction

Over the last two days we have looked through two windows onto the themes and artistic landscape of Passiontide. Now we move to the central character, Jesus, and open another window. This evening’s address has been inspired by reading Tom Wright’s ‘Jesus and the Victory of God’. All 660 pages of it. I confess that I saved it for retirement. I cannot do justice to this text but it seems so important that I thought I’d give it a go.

He asks a question that we are going to carry into Good Friday as we open the window onto ‘what was in the mind of Jesus as he approached Jerusalem?’ This is not about psychoanalysing him. It is about looking for hints from the texts that we have about Jesus’ own understanding of his vocation. I want to suggest that the meaning was focused around the Last Supper and the events that took place in the Temple. But before we get onto that I think that it is worth reflecting on Jesus’ background and what influenced or formed him.

Jesus’ context.

He grew up in Nazareth. Today it is the largest Arab city in Israel. In 1st century it was a small village of a few hundred (half the size of Findern today). Nazareth is in hill country some 15 miles S/W of Galilee. It was not important place in 1st century and it is not mentioned in the Old Testament, the Talmud or the writings of the historian, Josephus. Clearly there was a well-known snooty saying “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

(John 1.45 - Nathanael). The Gospel of Luke records an incident in Nazareth at the start of Jesus ministry. (4.16ff) It takes place in the synagogue where he reads Isaiah 61 and then claims it for himself. There then follows a feisty interaction between Jesus and the locals who clearly feel that he has gone a step too far for their liking. He then tells the story about Elijah and the widow in Sidon (Gentile territory) and Elisha and the curing of Naaman (Gentile general). It turns ugly. The argument moves outside. Some want to do him violence but he passes through the midst of them. The rejection motif is there from the from the start.

This tells us that Jesus has an intention that reaches beyond his own Jewish context and he is using Isaiah and the OT stories to make that clear.

His is a gathering ministry that will be opposed. I am more and more convinced that this word 'gathering' is a critical theme that has been lost in the individualism of Western theology. It is a strong biblical theme and part of the mission of God, which I would argue is about both being sent and gathering. Cathedrals specialise in gathering – creating 2hr communities with the power to bless.

From Nazareth Jesus moves 20 miles east to north end of Lake Galilee and Capernaum. One of the main trading villages in the area. It was vibrant and prosperous home to about 1,500 people many of whom were involved in fishing. The main Via Maris went through Capernaum and it joined up with other ancient trade routes going north/south and east/west. There was a strong Greek influence. It was more cosmopolitan. This was where Jesus made his home during his ministry in Galilee and it was around here that he gathered his group of twelve. It had a customs border opening onto the Tetrarchy of Philip (Syria) with a military presence. So, Capernaum had a local Jewish population, possibly a Roman garrison as it was economically advantageous to collect customs at the crossing (note that Levi was one of tax collectors also called Matthew) and traders on the move constantly. It was a place where the Jewish / Gentile division was clear but could it also have nurtured a vision for a world where that Isaiah vision of all nations gathering on the mountain of the Lord was a possibility. The incident of a Roman asking Jesus to heal his daughter in Capernaum could only have kindled that in Jesus.

Other influences – Hebrew Bible - Psalms.

By the time of Jesus, the psalms had been around in their current form for about 200 years. Time and time again they come through in his speech. Famously, Psalm 22.1 is quoted by Jesus on the cross. By the way, do read the whole Psalm because there is a shift in movement. So, the Psalms were formative. As was Isaiah and those suffering servant passages in Second Isaiah and Daniel's Son of Man. All seem to find a place in Jesus' head.

Also, it is helpful to understand that in the 1st century the term Messiah was complex. There was no one picture. It was a flexible idea of kingship around which claimants could reshape their own agenda. But there was one theme that everyone agreed on, namely Israel's long history would reach its divinely ordained goal when Messiah came. The long night of exile and the 'evil age' would end and there would be a new dawn of renewal and restoration, a new exodus, the exile would be ended and the 'age to come' would be realised. It was a dream of national liberty and plugged into their centuries old story of Exodus freedom.

Key symbols associated with this were the restoration of the Temple and the conquering of evil (Israel's enemies). Jesus did neither. In fact, it is cast up to Jesus on the cross that he said he would destroy and rebuild the Temple. (John comments that he meant this about his body.) So, his attention to the Temple is in line with Messianic expectations but actually it's a riddle because the Temple will be destroyed and he will create a new space entirely for worship.

All this links us with the history of his people. Since their return from exile to Jerusalem in 6th century BC they had been overlorded by (amongst others) the Babylonians, Greeks and Romans. They were at home but still in exile as they believed that they had not been forgiven by God for the sin that took them into exile. The agony continued. Messianic hope grew out of this agony and expressed itself in revolt (Maccabean). They hung onto this way of interpreting their longing and redemption and violence became the narrative. Beware, dangerous controlling narratives that inhabit a nation! When Jesus cries out 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem...' he is connecting with his people's agony but not their nationalism. Jesus invited them to take the way of peace and predicted that the way of violence would be crushed – as it was, brutally in AD 70 in an act of grotesque violence visited on the city by the Roman Commander, soon to be Emperor. Perhaps ¾ million men, women and children were executed, enslaved or died of starvation. So, Jesus' approach to life was formed by his interaction with the texts and the contexts in which he lived, in some way as a reaction to what he experienced belonging to a community living in resentment, a centuries old simmering resentment, oppressed by one military power after another.

A Reflection

It is just worth reflecting on this for a moment. What frames the way we look at the world? Our worldview if you like? Culturally, we are not a blank sheet. We have ways of understanding that we have inherited as individuals, communities and churches. These are shaped by historical events and stories. Some of those stories work for the common good, some otherwise. What are the controlling stories of our time being played out in the life of humanity. What makes us the way we are? The influences can be both global and local.

Jesus as Messiah

It is Wright's contention that Jesus intended to bring the story of Israel to its God given climax in and through his own work. He summoned contemporaries to follow him in a way of being the people of Yahweh which was the fulfilment of the whole scriptural story. It was to be the great redemption that brought exile to a close culminating in the forgiveness of sins that created the exile. Through a series of stories that Wright calls 'messianic riddles' Jesus is claiming that Messiah is present and the Kingdom is present - but it doesn't look anything like what people were anticipating. Tom Wright writes, "To accomplish this, an obvious first-century option for a would-be Messiah would run: go to Jerusalem, fight the battle against the forces of evil, and get yourself enthroned as the rightful king. Jesus, in fact, adopted precisely this strategy. But... he had in mind a different battle, a different throne." So, matters come to a head in Jerusalem even though he was barely a revolutionary threat. His overall appearance decidedly unthreatening. However, his challenging of the cherished central religious symbol of the Temple and replacing it with loyalty to himself led to a charge of leading the people astray (false prophet). Pilate initially is not convinced at all. In fact, he can't understand what all the fuss is about. However, his administration was known for its brutality. Life had little value and he didn't need much prodding in order to sign off another crucifixion. He did a lot of that.

But what was going on in Jesus? Did Jesus embrace a worldview within which his own death, laying down of life, would make sense and would make more sense than anything else. This is where we go to Last Supper.

The Passover recalls the Exodus from Egypt and also the Great Exodus i.e., the return from exile that was still eagerly awaiting completion. The meal symbolised the forgiveness of sins but Jesus now involves himself in this drama. "This is my body, given for you... this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." The new Exodus is happening through Jesus himself. He is speaking of his own death as the way that exile will end, evil will be defeated, God's forgiveness will flood through and the kingdom will come. He is taking upon himself the suffering of God's people, not as an end in itself but as the way that the Messianic hope will be fulfilled.

In addition, we have the passages where Jesus tells the disciples that he will go to Jerusalem, suffer, die and rise again. He speaks of embracing the cup of suffering or martyrdom. He knew that he was going to die. There was also a school of thought that referenced the 'messianic woes', a time of suffering before the kingdom's arrival. The Qumran community mentions the sufferings of the Teacher of Righteousness and of course Isaiah's servant figure reflects the belief that a period of suffering would hasten the day of God's redemption for his people. You can add more evidence from the Psalms, Daniel and Zechariah. It is the full Messianic unveiling, but not as most expected. This is what seems to be in the mind of Jesus.

What I have tried to do is to explore the meaning of Jesus' death through his own self-understanding. So often, when we come to Passiontide, we are jumping into the post Easter apostolic witness and theologies developed through subsequent generations. That, of course, is vital, and evolving, but what was in the mind of Jesus? As his vocation "leads him into a dark tunnel, where the only thing left was sheer trust." he carried the conviction that he was ending the exile, releasing God's forgiveness, defeating evil and creating a new space where the great gathering before God could happen.

Do you know Caravaggio's great painting of the Emmaus Road resurrection appearance? Amazingly, he has tried to paint the very moment when the disciples recognise that it is the risen Jesus. As he breaks the

bread suddenly their whole world is being reorganised before their eyes. Presumably, some of that Messianic picture that has just been described may be falling into place rather dramatically.

How does this sound to us?

Let me personalise this as we close.

Like crushed lavender releases a powerful fragrance so the death of Jesus has released God's gifts for all time.

Your exile is over.

You are forgiven.

Evil does not have the last word.

Find your home in the gathering around the One who was and is and is to come.

This is his story.

This is our story.