

Looking On

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on Good Friday April 2nd 2021 – Mark 14:51 – 15:47)

I am not sure in a fairly free society like Australia we can really appreciate the absolute horror of the crucifixion.

This was brought home to me a few years ago when I was leading a bible study on the subject with a group of Iranian Asylum Seekers. As we read the story, I looked around the room, and saw they were all crying, men and women, all crying. The violence and injustice of this story was part of their reality – they understood the horror in ways I could not.

I am guessing that our brothers and sisters in Myanmar would this year identify powerfully with Jesus' situation this year.

The authorities had been on the lookout for Jesus, waiting for the right opportunity to seize him. And they didn't let truth stand in the way of ridding themselves of this troublemaker.

We find many characters in the story looking on or standing by the events as they play out, many come face to face with the cross. These people are there for many different reasons. Some stand close, others a long way off. I want this morning to have a closer look at a few of them.

Firstly, Pilate. Pilate is in an unenviable situation. He is the symbol of the occupying force. He knows the truth and struggles with it. He tries three times to try and help the people baying for blood see that Jesus is actually innocent. He does try initially to avert the tragedy. He knows Jesus has been framed. He is to some extent a pawn in the game of others. He is played by the religious authorities who don't want to get their hands dirty. However, in the end, he allows political expediency to have the last word and lets truth be the casualty.

Next, we have Simon of Cyrene. An out of townner, who on his visit to the city finds himself dragged into the midst of the drama. He provides the assistance that he can to Jesus, he shares the load for a bit. I wonder if he stayed on and watched the end of the story, did he stand by and look on? What did he make of it all?

Then there is the Centurion. Other than the bandits, the one who stands closest to Jesus, is a Roman Centurion and he stands facing Jesus. He would have heard about all Jesus had done – healing the sick, signs and miracles, breaking religious rules, teaching of a new way. He would have heard the case against Jesus, and known it was a trumped up charge. He may have participated in the mocking or at least allowed it to go on. And he hears Jesus breathe his last. He makes the first confession after Jesus' death, he has put it all together – Truly this man was God's Son.

Why does he come to that conclusion? No doubt he had seen many people die on a cross before. Is it the defiant outburst of Jesus that moves him – an outburst that speaks of abandonment but also of deep connection with God? Is it the way in which Jesus takes the taunting and doesn't respond in kind? Is it the path of non-violence that Jesus has taken and his willingness to suffer absolute cruelty for such a path? Is it Jesus' bravery? Is it the contrast between Jesus and the religious and political leaders who have put Jesus on the cross that convinces him? Perhaps Jesus has said

something to him? Is it the way in which Jesus abandons himself into his Father's hands?

Whatever it was that lead to this confession, we have a Roman standing by the cross who really understands what has just happened – Truly this man was the Son of God. This man is changed.

And then the women. They stand at a distance looking on. are the women. The women who have cared for Jesus during his life. Horrified, grief stricken, in shock and disbelief they stand there watching. Perhaps unable to believe it has come to this, wondering what it has all been about. Watching and waiting – unsure of for what. Unable to move from their spot – loyal to the end.

We then meet Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph is an important man, a Jewish man, a religious man who is waiting for the expected Kingdom of God. Emboldened perhaps by all that he has watched happen. A man who now will show his true colours and courageously, risking ridicule from his peers ask Pilate for the body of Jesus. Generously offering his resources to see that Jesus is given dignity at the end. A man of compassion.

The cross is a paradox. It is a symbol of absolute cruelty, a symbol of humiliation and a symbol of great suffering. For us, 2000 years after the crucifixion of Jesus is it is also a symbol of hope – it is the place where we see God's love stretched out for us and for many.

All of those looking on, standing by are changed. Coming face to face with the cross changes us.

As we ponder the cross over the weekend may we be reminded of all who suffer unjustly. May we also be reminded that God shares in that suffering. May it remind us that God's love will outweigh such evil. May it remind us that God's love for us and all of creation stretches out from the cross toward us. And may we be changed. Amen.