

Were You There?

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church Good Friday March 29th, 2024vfor the Ecumenical Service – Mark 15)

Our world is not so different from the one in which Jesus found himself more than 2000 years ago. Many places are occupied by foreign forces, people are accused unjustly, war and violence surround them, truth never gets in the way of a story, religious disputes lie at the bottom of many conflicts, people suffer great indignity and are subject to inhumane acts and women grieve.

Today we have walked around Footscray and reminded ourselves of the events of that first Good Friday. There are many characters in that story and what a variety of characters there are! Some stand close to the events, others watch from a distance and yet others are pivotal to all the goings on.

The religious leaders had for some time been looking for an opportunity to silence Jesus, the one who they saw as a troublemaker or worse, the one who was constantly challenging them and their abuse of power.

Judas, the so-called friend who by colluding with the religious leaders has set the ball rolling. Where is he now? Racked by guilt or counting his silver coins?

Peter, too scared to own up to his friendship with Jesus, the one who would follow no matter what. Where is he now? Is he in the crowd watching from a distance or can he not face his friend? Is he too racked by guilt?

The disciples, most of the twelve seem to have fled too.

Pilate, the symbol of the occupying force, the one with the power to make a stand for truth but alas his political career comes first. He finds the holes in the trumped-up case but gives in anyway.

Barrabas, a violent rebel and insurrectionist. Did he count his lucky stars that he was about to be released? Did he even think about the fact that his freedom was bought with the life of an innocent man?

Soldiers doing their job as part of the occupying forces, not present by choice. However, they did choose to add to the indignity of the proceedings, did they really need to taunt, mock and jeer?

Simon of Cyrene – co-opted by the occupying force to carry the cross. An African man in the city just going about his business pulled into the drama. A foreigner sharing the load for Jesus.

The crowd, passers-by who seem to be caught up in the frenzy. Only a few days ago were they greeting Jesus with greet applause. How quickly they have turned their cries of 'Hosanna' to 'Crucify Him'. Fickle and now waiting for the sideshow.

Two rebels crucified with beside him. They had no choice in being there either, indeed they are paying the price for their crimes. They did however, have the choice in whether or not, they heaped insults upon the innocent one between them.

A centurion standing close to the dying Jesus, he too having no choice in being present. Had he heard about Jesus? Had he listened to the case against Jesus? He had watched the mocking and taunting. He hears Jesus breathe his last. A Gentile who utters the first confession of faith – truly this man was the Son of God. Why such a conclusion? Is he moved by Jesus crying out to God? Is he moved by the way Jesus takes the taunting and mocking without responding in kind? Is it the path of non-violence that Jesus has taken that moves him? Has the injustice of this entire event dawned on him? Ironically his statement – truly this man was the Son of God, confirms the very charge of blasphemy that the religious leaders were bringing.

The women, they have not fled. They had followed Jesus for quite some time, offering him care and hospitality. They stand at a distance, they can't bear to watch. Horrified at the injustice and violence of it all. Hearts breaking, barely able to believe it has all come to this. Looking for the male disciples, but they are nowhere to be seen. Watching and waiting, unsure of what will happen next. Loyal to the end.

Joseph of Arimathea, a Jewish man, a religious man who was waiting for expected Kingdom of God. He had come to Jesus with his questions in the shadows of the night. Emboldened now, after watching this all play out, courageous now, prepared to show his colours and risk ridicule as he asks for Jesus' body so that he can bury him with dignity.

If we are honest, we each have a little bit of all of these characters in us. We are sometimes afraid, other times emboldened. We are sometimes too scared to stand up for others and find it easier to go along with the crowd. We betray, deny and flee when the going gets too hard. We allow injustice to continue. Sometimes we carry the burdens of others. We too are crippled by grief and disbelief as we look at the way others are treated.

The cross is a paradox.

The cross is a symbol of cruelty, humiliation and great suffering.

The cross for us is also a sign of great hope, it is here we see God's love outstretched for the whole world. Like the centurion, coming face to face with the cross changes us.

As you ponder the cross in the next two days, may you be reminded of those who suffer unjustly. May you be reminded that God shares in our pain and suffering. May you be reminded that God's love outweighs evil, that God shows us a way through the darkness. May you be reminded God's love stretches out from the cross to the whole world. May you be changed.

Remember too that death and violence will not have the last word.