

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Luke Tells The Passion

There are traces in Luke's Last Supper of the washing of the disciples' feet - to be enacted in Church next Thursday evening. It's John who tells us that deeply significant story: but it is echoed in the Lukan words, *Who is the greater - the one at table or the one who serves? The one at table, surely? Yet here am I among you as one who serves.*

Watch Peter!

The role of Peter in this Passion account is particularly important, and he's worth watching as it unfolds. Jesus makes special mention of him in his words about the Twelve: *Simon, Simon! Satan will sift you all like wheat, but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and when you have recovered, you must strengthen your brothers.* His story is foreknown; Jesus makes no mistake about the quality of his men. Peter's grandiloquent claim that he will *accompany Jesus to prison and to death* is waved aside: not necessary, not wanted, and anyway, embarrassingly, not true. Peter, we feel, is still nursing a private plan to rescue Jesus, the same one that was rejected with *Get behind me, Satan!* Luke, like Matthew and Mark, tactfully fails to tell us who draws his sword in the garden and cuts off the servant's ear. John blurts it out: it was *Peter's* last attempt to avert the story of the Cross. From then on, he follows, but only at a distance, and, because he has now quite lost his sympathy with the way Jesus is following, he can truly say, *I do not know him.* It is when Jesus turns and looks directly at Peter (this only happens in Luke) that Peter's private plan founders, and his heart breaks, and he is ready to let Jesus save the world and him too, not now in Peter's way, but in God's. *Not my will, but your will be done:* prayer of Christ, prayer of his disciple.

The Priests, the Prefect, and Herod

The Gospels do not pile on the physical agony of the death of Jesus. They didn't need tomato ketchup in that world where the Gospels were written, which quite simply knew more about pain than we ever will, and where crucifixion was known and understood. Even the Beloved Disciple's Gospel does not tell us anything about Jesus' bodily pain; the only details told speak of the *meaning* of what is happening. In this third Gospel, surprisingly, the deepest suffering happens *in the Garden on the Mount of Olives*, where Jesus is said to be in anguish, and where an

angel is sent to strengthen him. Once that is past, the Gospel narrative stresses more and more the themes of peace and reconciliation. Jesus does not simply call for the sheathing of the sword, he reaches out and *heals* the wounded servant. The voices crying for his condemnation are just as powerful; yet when he is sent from Pilate to Herod, Jesus acts as a reconciler: *they had been enemies before, but were reconciled that same day:* these two cruel men, obsessed with power, are *reconciled* on Good Friday. The daughters of Jerusalem bring *pity and sympathy* to the story, to mitigate the mockery and scorn described in the other Gospels. As Jesus is nailed, he prays for the *forgiveness* of all who have part in his death, pleading their ignorance; in this, the theme of the anger of God is mitigated - that is why in Luke the tearing of the Temple veil *precedes* the death of Jesus. Luke didn't want this dramatic sign of the ending of the Temple liturgy to carry the sense of God's wrath, but to symbolize a New Covenant as a new gift of God.

A Last Call

The greatest sign of the Lukan understanding of the Passion is surely the story of *the criminal* who has the privilege of Jesus' last earthly conversation. All Luke's sinners, outsiders, and foreigners meet in him - the Prodigal Son, the adulterous woman, the sinners and Samaritans and tax-collectors, even poor Peter in his absence - and we as well. There is no repentance in him, but no bitterness either. There is only a wondering awareness of Jesus' innocence, and a strange sense that it is a privilege to be dying beside him. He is quite certain that Jesus isn't dying the lost death *he* has accepted for himself. In him earth's failures and outcasts, hanging with the Messiah on all the crosses of the earth, turn to him, and express a dying faith in the Kingdom. No more questions about God's abandonment of his Son here: only a perfect trust at the end of the journey: *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.* It is still a line from the Psalms: but with no more questions to ask. This is the gift of Luke, on Passion Sunday.
Fr Philip