

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Cross and Religion – Wednesday of Holy Week

Wednesday 5 April 2023

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Sermon by Fr Max Kramer

Welcome to this third in our series of Holy Week Compline Addresses ‘beyond small talk’, as we move from considering the Cross and Politics, and the Cross and Religion, to thinking about the Cross and Truth.

‘Do not write, “The King of the Jews,” but “This man said, I am King of the Jews.”

It’s an odd moment in the story of the Passion this. Amidst the urgent drama, the violence, the pressing onwards of the action, we have a fragment of dialogue that sounds like pedantic nitpicking.

Nitpicking about the exact wording of what should be written on the cross, and a request that was hardly ever likely to be successful. What Roman Governor is going to go to the hassle of tidying up some signwriting over a criminal half way through an execution?

Yet as so often with these strange moments in the story, the jarring pettiness of this request reveals a deeper truth. For in these words the anxiety of the Chief Priests and the message of the Gospel writer is the same: that on the Cross Jesus is indeed held up to the whole world as *The King of the Jews*. The juxtaposition between the *titulus*, the words on the board, and this crucified man makes a provocative and subversive claim.

Yet to understand the nature of what is going on here we need to remember the context of Pilate’s signboard. It’s not as if Pilate set Jesus up on a throne in Jerusalem, placed a golden crown on his head, surrounded him with trumpets and there had a placard put up: The King of the Jews.

No, everything else about the appearance of the cross suggests the very opposite to the fact that Jesus is King. He dies the death of a criminal, he is outside the city, he has notably not secured a great military victory, he is humiliated in nakedness rather than robed in glory – and all the rest. The *titulus*, the signboard, is just one lonely, stray detail that suggests the truth in a scene which seems to point in a wholly different direction.

And once you notice this indirect way in which God communicates truth in this scene – just one little clue – one little ironic gesture which complicates the nature of what we think we are looking at, you start to see this method of divine communication everywhere in the Passion story.

Sometimes John makes it explicit: when Caiaphas says “it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed,” [Jn 11.49] and the Gospel writer informs us that this apparent piece of realpolitik is in fact a prophecy of God’s salvation. The truth has emerged by accident.

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But more often this indirect way the truth emerges is left for us to notice. We see it again in visual communication where the mockery of the soldiers clothes Jesus in a form of royal robes that reveals to us the truth of his identity even as the explicit meaning of this gesture is one of humiliation.

We see it again in the soldiers' teasing in Luke when those beating Jesus call out to him "Prophecy! Who hit you" and his failure to respond, which seems to mark a lack of divine power, alludes to his refusal to condemn. The silence itself is the prophecy.

But most systematically, perhaps, we see this indirect and ironic way in which truth is communicated in the persistent evasion and silence of Jesus in the Passion narratives. "Are you the King of the Jews", "You say so", "But Jesus gave him no answer." Jesus does not shout out what is true, but rather allows his evasions and his creative silences to allow the words of others to speak truth, even against their own intentions.

And so the Passion narratives, present a way of communicating divine truth that is distinctive and, to some extent surprising. The truth of what is going on is not presented through the words or actions of the narrative's characters in their most basic sense, in the way they are intended, but rather through creative re-interpretations and re-envisionings of words, through meaningful silences, and actions that reveal deeper meanings. God's truth is revealed not necessarily by providing more words, but rather allowing us to look at words or actions that are already there in a particular way, or under a particular light, just as shining light of a particular colour or direction on an object reveals something we had not seen before, and enables us to look at the object in wholly new way.

God's meaning, God's truth, therefore, is not somehow trapped in words and actions themselves, but exists somewhere in the space between the words and the interpretation. Somewhere in the silence.

And this indirect, sometimes ironic, way of revealing truth that we see in the Passion narratives is important because it is emblematic of how so often God chooses to communicate with us.

A juxtaposition of some words with a piece of music or an experience, the coincidence of a chance encounter or a casual phrase that means more to us than the speaker knows, a misunderstanding that leads us to make a new connection, all these speak to us indirectly and give us a glimpse of a divine truth that the explicit day-to-day way of the world seems to prevent us from believing, like chinks of light shining through a fissure in an apparently self-enclosed and Godless world. Just as Pilate's signboard gave to those who gazed upon Christ Crucified a glimpse of something beyond, that all was not as it seemed.

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And if I'm right that this is how God so often chooses to communicate his truth to us, then we need to allow ourselves to take the opportunity this Holy Week presents to be better attuned and more attentive to the small complicating signs on the edge of things that might speak God's truth into our world.

We live today, more than ever perhaps, in a world of strong opinions strongly expressed. This is what I think, that is what you think, and you are wrong. But if we allow ourselves to be caught up in all that noise, all those binaries, all those crude simplifications, all that uncompromising shouting, the world of capital letters if you will, we risk missing the truth of God, which, the Passion narrative suggests, inheres dancingly in the nuance, in the complexity, in the interpretation, in the indirection and silent ironies of things.

'Do not write, "The King of the Jews."' The High Priests want to pin this down. They want to remove all room for interpretation. They want Pilate to make his claim – and the limitations of his claim – explicit and clear. But God wants to leave that signboard as an open question, he wants to leave it unclear, he wants to leave space for us to stand before the Cross and to contemplate what it might mean to see the image of such great suffering and torture under that incongruous title 'The King of the Jews'. It is an invitation to attentive contemplation that we need to accept. For it is in the space of interpretation between words and meaning that God truly speaks to us and reveals his truth in our world.