

### Sermon Good Friday 2023

In the early part of the Passion Narrative we have just heard solemnly proclaimed for us, we hear our Lord ask twice, *Whom seek ye?* This question is asked of the *band of men and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, with lanterns and torches and weapons*. The 'band of men' is in fact a military cohort. The evangelist here suggests a troop of something like 600 men! And to this number is added the *officers from the chief priests and Pharisees*. Most likely they were servants of sorts who exercised a policing function. Here, Jew and Roman march alongside each other to take out their common enemy Jesus. Such a large group could not have moved quietly through the city. And so, we might imagine that added to this already large number was a further crowd. Those disturbed from their sleep or evening activities, excited by the prospect of violence. Hangers-on who get a cheap thrill from witnessing drama unfold.

We must remember that this armed throng goes out to arrest a man who has just spent the night in anguished prayer. But this just goes to highlight the dramatic *contrast* between Jesus and this large cohort with deadly intent. Into the swirl of activity, and noise, and latent violence Jesus steps forward and asks, *Whom seek ye?* We do not see here Jesus cowering in fear or running to hide. Jesus is fully resolved to his destiny. This solitary figure is in control of this situation. And he asks, *Whom seek ye?*

This is, of course, *the* key question, isn't it? *Whom seek ye?* This is the question that lay at the heart not only of this scene, but of Christ's entire life and mission, of his passion, death and resurrection. This is the question the entire New Testament seeks to address. When we look at Jesus, what do we see? And the question Jesus asks here, he asks of us now. Who are *you* looking for? Whom do *you* seek?

The account we have heard proclaimed for us today gives us no shortage of possible responses. What do we see when we look at Jesus? A troublemaker? A rabble-rouser? A blasphemer? A political malcontent? A disappointment? A frustrated hope? An unfulfilled expectation? Someone deserving death? Many who look at Jesus today come to the same answers. But is there something more? Can we see past the noise and confusion to something else? Now the entire gospel of John up to this point has been seeking to answer this question, *who is this Jesus, the One we seek?* And all the efforts of the evangelist to address this question now converge. In a variety of ways, we are shown how Jesus' final journey to the Cross gives dramatic answer to the question.

When Jesus asks the arresting mob, *whom seek ye?* they respond *Jesus of Nazareth*. Jesus says quite simply, *I am he*. But this I AM we should see as a dramatic revelation! This is none other than the climax of the great I AM statements scattered throughout the fourth gospel. You will remember them: *I am the bread of life*. *I am the light of the world*. *I am the door*. *I am the resurrection and the life*. *I am the good shepherd*. *I am the way the truth and the life*. *I am the true vine*. What's more, though, is that Jesus' simple declaration *I am* points us to nothing less than the God present to Moses in the burning bush. The God whose *very name* is revealed as I AM! When Jesus proclaims this before *the band of men and officers...with torches and lanterns and weapons* we are told they *went backward, and fell to the ground*. A curious detail you might think. Except that this recalls how Moses, before the burning bush, *hid his face* and was directed to remove his shoes for he was on holy ground.

Now there is power in this name! On the night of his arrest, Jesus prayed for the protection of his disciples by the Name, *which you have given me*. Here that Name is definitively revealed. And we recall Peter's conviction in Acts that *there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*. Yes, the band of men seek Jesus of Nazareth. But veiled in flesh is none other than the eternal God, the great I AM. The Name which will bring life and salvation.

The truth of divine glory hidden in the lowly man of Nazareth is precisely what is presented as Jesus's arrest moves to his trial. We have heard how a series of interrogations by Annas, then the high priest Caiaphas ends with Pilate. Despite his frustration with the process, Pilate orders Jesus to be whipped. In mockery, the soldiers then put on him the crown of thorns and a purple robe. The bloody and humiliated Jesus is presented to the crowds. *Pilate saith unto them, 'Behold the man.'* Look! The irony is surely not lost on the evangelist. As Pilate presents to the crowd this diminished, pathetic broken man, he is in fact presenting *The man, the New Man*, (in the language of Paul). This journey may have started with an assertion of Christ's divinity. But there is no escaping on this road to the Cross the truth of his humanity. *Whom seek ye?* Look! *Behold* Jesus and we see a man like all men. Look at Jesus and we see one bearing the full weight and brunt of human suffering. We see one betrayed, mocked, beaten, bloodied and shamed. Jesus is presented in such a sorry state not so much to inspire pity, as highlight the absurdity of the situation. What possible risk could this diminished man be? Such a man was no challenge to Jew or Roman.

*Whom seek ye?* Well, the man Pilate presents, the crowd rejects. The escalating movement, the toing and froing between Pilate and Jesus, and the crowd finally reaches its climax. At the place of judgment, again the invitation to look. Look *here*. *Behold your king*. Is this not another strange irony? Pilate who could not recognize truth unwittingly proclaims it! But this too is rejected. *We have no king but Caesar!* It is a rejection of the kingship Christ proposed. A rejection of the reign of God, the kingdom of God, Jesus had commenced. By rejecting him the crowd have given up hope for a messiah king sent by God and have settled for Roman lordship.

Importantly, at this final moment when Jesus is finally condemned we are *told* *'it was the preparation for the Passover, and about the sixth hour*. Jesus is sentenced to death at the very hour when lambs for the Passover began to be killed. At the end of the gospel, we are directed to the start of the gospel, when John the Baptist declares *Behold, the lamb of God*. Look! *Behold*. The death of this man, the death of this king, is a sacrifice. A sacrifice of deliverance.

*Whom seek ye?* 2000 years have shown that many strange things have been said – and are still said - about Christ. Strange things that often appear under the façade of faith. For many, the radical truth of what is shown here is too hard. What is seen instead are impossible claims and contradictions, and he is rejected still. But the insistent invitation of the gospel is to trust, and to trust a Mystery. It is trust of those who knew it to be true. *Behold I am. Behold the man. Behold your king. Behold the lamb of God*. These mysterious truths are all brought together and find their meaning in the Cross.

Shortly in our service today, a veiled cross will be carried through this church. And as we move through the church it is gradually uncovered. And Fr James will proclaim: *Behold the wood of the cross on which hung the saviour of the world. Behold the man. Behold your King. Behold the Lamb. Behold the Cross*. The invitation is insistent. Look. *Behold!* The distance of twenty centuries might have us hold back. The distance of twenty centuries might have us miss what is being shown us. But today – to you, to me, to all of us – it is right there in front of us, in the midst of us. A Mystery is *uncovered* for us. And we are invited to come close. Without distraction, without hesitancy. And to see there.... Well, what do we see there? A man? Yes. A king? Yes. The Lamb of God? Yes. And One to whom God has entrusted the Name above all names. Behold him, and with the eyes of faith, we will see upon the Cross none other than the God who saves. *Whom seek ye?* Look at the Cross and we will find him. Amen.