

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

**What did Jesus Die for?
Maundy Thursday 2008**

Who brought about Jesus' death? Do you pin the responsibility on Judas, on the Chief Priests, on Pilate? Or, if all were responsible – how do you distribute the weight of responsibility?

What about the argument that the person chiefly responsible for Jesus' death was Jesus himself? It has struck me forcibly as I've read and heard the Passion story this year that this is perhaps how we should answer the question. And yet it makes me feel very uncomfortable to put it as baldly as that – Jesus was chiefly responsible for his own death.

I can remember, years ago, hearing Ian Paisley being interviewed on the Radio 4 Sunday Programme about how he viewed the troubles – the atrocities – in Northern Ireland as a man of religion. The interviewer asked him about forgiveness, and the possibility of a non-violent response to attacks and murders – wouldn't that be the right way for Christians, imitating the attitude of Jesus to those who murdered him? And I was rather shocked by Paisley's answer: there's no parallel, he said. Imitating Jesus doesn't come into it. Because Jesus wasn't murdered; and he quoted St John 10.18,19: 'no man takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again...'

I was shocked at the time, because Paisley's way of reasoning seemed to distance the story of Jesus from all human choices we might be called upon to make in dreadful times; it seemed to leave no moral inspiration to be drawn from Christ's manner of dying. His sacrifice was seen purely as a 'one-off', a transaction between himself and the Father – something done *for* us, in no sense requiring any transformation *within* us and our world.

I still feel quite shocked by Paisley's conclusion, that Christian people in Northern Ireland had nothing to learn from the idea of imitating Christ. But I'm now willing to give more weight to at least part of his argument – that Jesus, it seems, did quite determinedly pursue his own death. He laid down his life of his own accord. He set his face towards Jerusalem. He repeatedly said that his death was destined. His disciples couldn't shake him in his determination, and were left resignedly, at one point, saying 'Let's go with him, that at least we may die with him'. It seems that when Jesus got to Jerusalem he did everything he could to provoke confrontation with the Temple authorities. That was the route that he took to his death – via the fury of priests and religion scholars.

How did he make them so furious? They saw him act outrageously in the Temple precincts (what would any Dean and Chapter want to do today to someone who behaved as Jesus did, when he attacked the place with a whip of cords, sending tables crashing, cattle stampeding and doves fluttering in the sacred courts?) To add insult to injury Jesus kept evading arrest, and

spent the subsequent days brazenly preaching to a rabble within the Temple about how wicked the religious authorities were. And every time they tried to show him up, he made a monkey of them with his sharp answers – which no doubt made the crowd laugh at their elders and betters in a very subversive way. I should think that by Thursday night of that week the Chief Priests were almost inarticulate in their rage and irritation; if the account of their trumped-up trial of Jesus in the early hours of Friday morning, shows a certain amount of inconsistency and confusion, perhaps this was the reason.

Deliberate confrontation with the guardians of his nation's faith and worship – that was the route Jesus took to his death.

But perhaps the account I've just given makes it all sound too instrumental – as if he chose to confront the Temple authorities simply to provoke the anger that would most surely bring about the death which he believed was his destiny.

What if we look at it the other way round: Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem because what was going on there simply had to be confronted? But, like Oscar Romero in San Salvador two thousand years later, Jesus knew that to confront the powerful would mean certain death – as a by-product of his protest. Looking at the matter from this point of view, Jesus could be said to have made himself a martyr for the sake of true religion – religion which would include the poor and 'ritually unclean', rather than exclude them; religion which would leave a way clear for the Gentiles to approach God, rather than filling up the Gentiles' designated space in the Temple with the tables and trappings of trade; religion which would welcome children, women and the crippled to the centre of things, rather than banishing them to the edges; religion which would be about healing and service, rather than about holding priestly-caste and the religiously righteous safely in place, with all their privileges.

If we look at this way, we can still make sense of Jesus' face 'set towards Jerusalem', and all his prophecies of ignominious death. We can understand the power of those days of confrontation in the Temple. But it's harder to make sense of those words of his – 'I lay down my life as a ransom for many'; it's harder to make sense of the thought that it was in the *dying itself* that he would be achieving freedom for his people.

I have looked at the issue of what Jesus may have thought he was doing from two very different angles – from the angle that says, 'he was setting out to die because he believed it was his destiny', and from the angle that says, 'he was setting out to confront false religion in its citadel of power – and death would be the inevitable result'.

Of course, the opposition between those two possibilities is a false one. There is a third way of looking at the issue which draws them together. And this is what tonight is all about.

I believe that Jesus laid down his life in the divine conviction that in his dying he was creating a new temple, a new sacrifice, a new worship, a new covenant and community of God's people— (one into which many would be included later, who could not have been included under the old dispensation). His very body was to be the locus of this new way, the meeting point where God would be worshipped in Spirit and in truth. His body – that physical frame that had healed the sick, fed the hungry, eaten with the unclean, and travelled the roads with the poor. And tonight, on this eve of his death –his physical body, that with tender hands washed the feet of his friends, before breaking the bread and lifting the cup, whilst speaking out with mysterious authority the inner meaning of it all.

Jesus came to challenge the old way not just by dramatic actions and excoriating words, uttered in the midst of crowds. No, he brought his very body, ready to be broken, as the main substance of his challenge, and as the birthplace of something utterly new. This is what we celebrate tonight. 'This is my body' – the new covenant, the new temple, to be torn down and mysteriously raised up again. And now we are called to be mystically *in* his body, too – that new meeting place of God and humanity.

But if ever our faith slips into the old ways – and it has done so, many times in the history of those called 'Christian' – if our faith ever becomes a rigid system which excludes and makes victims of others, a rule-book for self-righteousness and measured purity, a hierarchy where ambition and power can trump self-forgetful service, or worship become an ostentatious show – if and when our faith falls back into ways like that, then the reality of Christ in his body, meeting us in bread and wine, becomes our judge, as St Paul solemnly warned the Corinthian Christians elsewhere in the passage of which we heard a part tonight. He warned them in these solemn terms because they had failed to honour Christ's body in their contemptuous treatment of each other, particularly their poorer brethren, even whilst purportedly celebrating the Lord's Supper. (I Corinthians 11.17-22 and 27-29).

This would be a dark and gloomy note to end on, so I shall say one more thing: the essence of the old sacrificial religion was to find a way in which sin could be forgiven. That is the essence of the new way, too – the purpose of the new temple, the new sacrifice, the new covenant and people: so much hasn't changed.

We get things wrong. We sometimes even corrupt and spoil the most precious of gifts. We Christians have often denied the body of Christ and all it really means. But it is a body which died for us, and from the cross invites us home again – home to the Father's house along the new way which is Jesus himself - serving, healing, loving, giving – and showing forth the truth in all of it.