

GOOD FRIDAY 2021
Isaiah 53:1-7 John:18 &19
Peregrine 9.30am 2 April 2021
Sermon by Chris Johnson

We live in a very angry world. It's always been angry but maybe today it's amplified by

- the Internet,
- the 24/7 news cycle
- and of course the Twittersphere.

I've heard ABC journalists Leigh Sales and Julia Baird complain about the tirade of abuse they receive on Twitter after a political interview. Just this week Peter Dutton declared he is going to fight back against those who abuse him on Twitter. He will now pursue people in court for defamation. The Liberal member for Boothby in South Australia Nicole Flint is resigning from her seat because of the personal abuse and sexual slurs directed at her by political opponents.

Have you heard of the saying, ***"I may not agree with what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it."*** It seems to have gone by the board today.

We live in an angry world where there is increasing polarisation. There is a great cry for non-discrimination and tolerance yet there are many who set out to achieve this by shouting down their opponents. By bullying their opponents with a barrage of abuse.

Well was it any different in the 1st century? On that first Good Friday the crowd shouted, ***"Crucify him, crucify him!"*** Pilate pushed back not once, but 6 times! The Jewish leaders and the crowd would not relent. They were angry, they were baying for blood. Jealousy, self-righteousness, and political power led them to crucify an innocent man.

The amazing aspect of this narrative is **Jesus' response to the abuse.**

It is not passive. It's not like Jesus is just going to roll over and treat the Chief Priests or Pilate with contempt by not engaging with them.

It is not aggressive. Jesus doesn't return the vitriol of the chief priests and the crowd. Many prisoners I'm sure would have returned fire with some very choice language. Jesus shows no such anger.

I think Jesus response could be summed up as **resolute composure**. He stands in stark contrast to every other player in the drama. Everyone else is flustered, agitated, desperate to save face, determined to assert their will.

Jesus alone shows resolute composure.

So let's look in a little more detail at Jesus' response.

I want us to take up the story a little earlier than our reading this morning at the beginning of Chapter 18 where Jesus is arrested.

It is interesting that in John's account we don't get a record of Judas giving Jesus a kiss in order to identify him for the soldiers. Instead on two occasions Jesus says to the officials and soldiers, *"I am he."* in vv5 and 8. Knowing the horror of crucifixion anyone else would have been either hiding or running away or preparing for a fight, but Jesus twice openly identifies himself placing himself at the mercy of the soldiers.

Even when Simon Peter draws a sword and cuts off the high priest's servant's ear, Jesus rebukes Peter and indicates clearly that violence is not going to be the way of his Kingdom. The reason Jesus can be so composed is revealed following the rebuke of in v11, *"Shall I not drink the Cup the Father has given me?"* Even although it appears the authorities and the soldiers are in control, Jesus is the one who is really in control because he knows he is following the Father's plan.

If we look ahead to the confrontation with Pilate, in 19:10 Pilate says, *"Don't you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"* But Jesus answers, *"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."* So the source of Jesus resolute composure is the Father's plan. Jesus has a much bigger mission in mind than these other bit players in the drama can possibly imagine.

The soldiers bring Jesus to the high priest Annas. [18: 19 – 24] Annas seeks to question Jesus about his teaching but Jesus won't answer directly. This is where we see that Jesus is no shrinking violet. He knows the high priest has already made up his mind so he simply deflects the questioning by saying that he has taught very publicly in the synagogues and the temple so ask those who have been listening.

One of the officials interprets this as rudeness and slaps Jesus in the face. Jesus continues to challenge the high priest by calling out the injustice of striking someone who is speaking the truth. Here is a very resolute Jesus.

Jesus is brought before Pilate [18:28-40, 19:1-16] Here we find a most interesting exchange over 30 verses. For the most part Jesus does not answer Pilate's questions directly. The only one is the last question we've already mentioned where Pilate claims to have the power to free Jesus or crucify him, and Jesus tells him that he would have no power over him if it was not given to him from above. But for the most part Jesus is cryptic, I would say even teasing Pilate with morsels of the gospel.

Let's look briefly at the exchanges.

In v33 Pilate asks, *"Are you the King of the Jews?"* Jesus could have given a simple yes or no but instead he says, *"Is that your own idea or did others talk to you about me?"*

In v35 Pilate asks, *"What is it you have done?"* Jesus doesn't give him a summary of his teaching and actions he simply says, *"My Kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my Kingdom is from another place."*

Pilate latches on to this last idea, *"So you are a King then?"* he says. Once again Jesus doesn't say yes or no, he says, *"You say that I am a King."*

Jesus changes the topic to truth. *"I came into the world to testify to the truth."* he says. *"Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."* This prompts the famous line from Pilate, *"What is truth?"*

In Chapter 19 the tension increases with Jesus being flogged.

- The mocking soldiers place a crown of thorns on his head.

- The crowd intensify their call for crucifixion.

Pilate is getting more worried so he in v9 we read he goes back inside the Palace to further question Jesus, *"Where do you come from?"* But now Jesus is silent. There is nothing more to be gained, Jesus knows crucifixion is inevitable.

Jesus' resolute composure shines brighter and brighter even in the midst of the descending darkness.

So Jesus is led out to be crucified [19:17-37]. His words on the cross continue to show his resolute composure. In the midst of his own agony he is concerned for his mother. We can only imagine the dagger that must have been in Mary's heart as she sees her beautiful boy being so cruelly treated. Jesus commends her to the Apostle John and John to her.

We see Jesus humanity in his words, *"I am thirsty."* and then in verse 30 those final words, *"It is finished"*. On anyone else's lips these would be words of defeat but on Jesus lips this is a cry of triumph. He has fought the good fight, finished the race, and won the victory.

I want to come back to the saying I quoted at the beginning, ***"I may not agree with what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it."*** It is a quote often attributed to Voltaire although it doesn't appear in his writings but is attributed to him in Evelyn Hall's writings in the early 20th century. It is more likely the words of Evelyn Hall.

I want to suggest to you that no one has ever exemplified this saying more than Jesus. In his passion Jesus certainly is in complete theological disagreement with the Jewish authorities. But he doesn't lift a finger to assault them or even admonish them. Quite the opposite, he shuns violence and is prepared to go to his own death rather than fight back.

I want to suggest that it is only in understanding Jesus crucifixion that we can come to a full appreciation of what it means to, *"disagree with what you say but defend to the death your right to say it."* To allow our enemies full voice even when it means our own demise is indeed the way of the cross.

We live in a world that desperately needs to learn again the way of the cross. The current polarisation in our society is about people holding a utopian dream that their social and political system is the only way for society to organise itself and everyone must conform. In its extreme forms it may be the communism of China or the Islamist religious governments of some countries in the Middle East.

The problem with these utopian dreams is that people become so convinced of the absolute truth of their system that they can justify killing those who take a different view. They reason that sacrificing a few for the benefit of the many is worth it. The dream is so wonderful that you can justify any means of getting there.

This indeed was the thinking of Caiaphas who earlier in John's gospel said, *"One man must die for the sake of the nation."* He had a utopian dream of what his Jewish world should look like. Jesus was getting in the way of this ideal and so he had to go. Of course what Caiaphas and the other priests didn't recognise was their own lust for power and desire to establish their own position in the current order. And this is the problem with all totalitarian regimes. The absolute dream has to be enforced by absolute power. And of course as we know absolute power corrupts absolutely.

In Australia we can thank God that we don't have the absolute extremes found in other parts of the world. But we do have extremes and as I suggested at the beginning of this sermon they are getting more shrill and ready to attack anyone who doesn't agree with their utopian system.

This is not surprising as our society moves further away from its Christian roots. Without the ideal of Christ in front of them people have lost the ability to hold an absolute view, yet show grace to those who differ. The idea that you would, *defend to the death the right of someone to disagree with you*, just seems so far away from where our body politic is at the moment. People don't realise what they're losing by abandoning the Christian faith.

But it is easy to be critical of others especially in politics and religion. This Good Friday I would ask you to reflect on how you respond to those who you disagree with politically and theologically. Do you sometimes hear arguments which make you very angry? Where you wish that those who proposed such ideas could be drowned in the deepest ocean to silence their foolish ideas? Maybe it is not just in politics or theology but in family arguments. Who is the irritating uncle or aunt at the Christmas family gathering who just drives you bananas? Or is that irritating person found in the workplace? Or even maybe in church?

The challenging message of Easter is that we all need to look at ourselves rather than point the finger at others. If I look at others I will always be able to find those who are morally inferior and feel OK about myself. But Easter pushes me to look at Jesus and find a better standard by which to compare myself. When I look at Jesus I see all that I should be but am not. I see someone who engaged with those he disagreed with and was fearless in pursuing the truth no matter what the cost. Jesus shows up my deficiencies.

But the good news message of Easter is that the cross is the means by which we can be forgiven for not living as Jesus did. Jesus continually taught that he was dying for the sins of the world, that is your sins and mine.

So the cross offers us both the ideal and the forgiveness for our failure to live up to the ideal. This really is the most wonderful gift from God, the most wonderful Good News, and this is why it is called Good Friday.

So do you aspire to the ideal of, *"I may not agree with what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it."* Well don't try this at home without Jesus.

My friends

It is only the cross which gives us the ideal.

It is only the cross which gives us the forgiveness when we don't reach the ideal.

It is only the cross that is the means by which we can lead this extraordinary life of following Jesus.