

Two others Good Friday

John 19: 16-30; John 19: 31-42

In this bleakest and darkest day of the Christian Year, Good Friday, we, along with the women and John, the disciple Jesus loved, close at hand, and the menfolk further away, and the Roman soldiers, and the leading priests from the Jewish religious establishment, stand around, or near, or at a distance. They are all looking at Christ on the cross.

With despair. With anger. With fear. With disbelief. With hopelessness. With emptiness. As life drained from Jesus on the cross, I wonder if it also felt that life was draining out of those who came to watch Him, silently.

"Through the centuries great artists like Michelangelo, Rubens, El Greco, Delacroix, Grünewald, Vlazquez, Gaugin, Dali and Roualt have sought to express their perspectives on this brutal but sacred and enduring image. Like the individual Gospel writers, each has a different story to tell. Some paintings are detailed, explicit, and agonizing; others are soft and colourful. Some perspectives look up, others down. There are heroic and romantic, if not triumphant, depictions; still others show Jesus all but naked in humiliating defeat."ⁱ

Our focus is invariably on Jesus, as it should be. We are told that Jesus had carried His own cross to Golgotha, or Calvary. But, "...two others, one on either side..." were crucified on either side, with Jesus between them. His execution was part of the legal business of that day when others judged for their crimes were also sentenced to death.ⁱⁱ

The account of the 'two others' varies in the different gospels. Unnamed in all of the gospels, later Christian tradition names the one who abused Jesus as Gestas, and the other who in Luke's Gospel gains access to Paradise as Dismas.

Mark and Matthew have them both reviling Jesus from their crosses. In John's gospel the 'two others' are silent.

Luke has one railing at Jesus, and the penitent robber asking Jesus to remember him when Jesus comes into His kingdom. He is promised entry to Paradise.

The 'two others' are variously described as robbers, or bandits. The term is often used for guerrilla fighters, or terrorists. Remember Barabbas, hours before, a known terrorist already under Roman arrest, as the other choice for freedom offered by Pontius Pilate. Jesus was crucified in the place that the Romans had determined for Barabbas.

'Two others', two convicted criminals, the two humans physically closest to Jesus as they all died together on their crosses. The 'two others' sharing the same shame and degradation and agony. Did others come to mourn, or mock, them as they died? Did they have family and friends nearby, watching until the moment of death? Would their bodies be taken down after death, and hastened away to a hurried burial, or left, as was often the case, on their crosses until decay was complete, as was often the case with crucifixions?

'Two others'. Two convicted criminals on Good Friday. Penitent and impenitent. Unwilling companions in death. Symbolic of the whole of humanity – penitent and impenitent. Abusing Jesus or seeking the mercy of Jesus and praying to be remembered? I confess it's a detail of the immense crucifixion scene to which I had paid no attention before. Yet it throws into sharp relief what Jesus came to do. To die for the brokenness of the world, the brokenness of humanity, that each one of us, *any* one of us, might have hope.

Almost exactly five years ago to the day, in my year of travels, I was invited to visit Broadmoor Hospital. This high security establishment contains some of the most dangerous men in Britain. Alongside wards and a dining hall there is also a chapel, right there in the middle of Broadmoor.

A new chapel has been incorporated into the new building. Services are held there regularly for the patients, and there is a hard-working multi-faith chaplaincy team, led by a Church of Scotland minister.

When you go into the wards, like any hospital, you see the list of names of those who are 'in'. Except many of the names you recognise. Whilst there is great help given and kindness shown, there is also watchfulness. I was invited to meet with a discussion group that gathered on a regular basis. Each man present came with his own 'minder'. They'd had a chance to discuss the questions they wanted to put to me. They didn't often have a visit from a Christian leader. It was a few days after Easter and clearly it had been on their minds. We sat around a table, with these men who were serving lengthy sentences for crimes committed, and who were receiving extensive psychiatric and psychological treatment.

The first question: "So then, this Jesus you Christians talk about. Did He die for the likes of us?" What on earth do you answer to a question like that, in a situation like that? I found myself saying, "Well, what do you think?" I will never forget the conversation that followed. Some had lots to say, some said nothing. But the question of Jesus and His conviction; Jesus and His punishment; Jesus and His suffering; Jesus and His forgiveness; Jesus and His conversation with the penitent thief; Jesus and His death; Jesus and His love and mercy for all. At times like that and in a place like that and with men like that, all those great theological, ethical, moral, and Biblical questions become very sharp. Sitting with those men in Broadmoor, did Jesus die for the likes of them?

In a world quick to judge and quicker to condemn, sometimes without knowing all the facts and details, what is Jesus' response? A scan of any news headline in this last week will give you plenty of material. The man who raped a teenage girl. The politicians who, allegedly, had murky financial dealings in the UK and in the USA. The politicians for hire. The supporters of prison camps and

hulks for refugees and asylum seekers. The rogue officers in Police Forces. The London housing association that refused to investigate a notified missing person, to discover that she had lain dead in her flat for over two years. The instigator in Moscow of the Ukrainian war. The brutalisers of women's rights in Afghanistan. The perpetrators of gun shootings in schools. Did Jesus die for the likes of them?

The 'two others' dying alongside Jesus are representative of all humanity. Their crosses are crowded.

And we, who may not have committed the most reprehensible of crimes, yet in a thousand ways have denied, betrayed, mocked, abandoned Jesus. Did Jesus die for the likes of us?

We had better believe, and hope, that on our repentance, He did. Else there is no hope for anyone. None may deserve His mercy, but all have access to it. Them, all of them, even when we can't forgive them; and us, even all of us, even if we cannot forgive ourselves.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."ⁱⁱⁱ

'Two others.' Jesus died for the sins of the world, and they were present on His right and on His left on those crosses.

Bryan Stevenson is a black American lawyer. He trained at Harvard and works in Alabama. His great-grandparents were slaves. His grandfather was murdered in a race-connected crime. In a description of him it was said that Bryan Stevenson 'cares for difficult things.'

His work is in civil liberties. He takes up the rights of children in prison, some of them who have been convicted of serious crime, even murder, and with life sentences, are only aged 13 or 14 years old. Stevenson challenges a society ravaged by the politics of fear and anger.

Bryan Stevenson also appeals death row cases. He confessed that it is hard to work for people who have done terrible things. People who have been condemned and judged to have no moral redeeming features and are deemed to be beyond hope. Stevenson says he's never met anyone who was beyond hope, and he said, "Someone who tells a lie is not *just* a liar; someone who takes something that doesn't belong to them is not *just* a thief; someone who kills someone else is not *just* a killer."

And then he went on to say, "Each of us is more than the worst thing that we have ever done."

This Good Friday: 'Two others.' You, and me. And Jesus. Always Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Nick Carter, Feasting on the Gospels John, Vol 2, p285

ⁱⁱ Amy Heller, *ibid*, p286

ⁱⁱⁱ John 3:16-17