

**Jeremiah 23.1-6 p.650**  
**Luke 23.33-43 p. 75**  
**20<sup>th</sup> November 2022**



## **One with Barabbas and the Brigands**

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*Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

William Knibb, born and raised in the Midland's town of Kettering, only went to Jamaica because his older brother, a BMS school master on the island, had died. He went to fill his brother's shoes. Yet, in 1988, 143 years after his death at just 42, William Knibb was posthumously awarded the Order of Merit by the Jamaican parliament, the country's highest civilian award. Why? What makes Knibb such a respected figure from the 1830's?

In an age of white rule and white supremacy, Knibb saw a different way of living and spoke up for the slaves. His advocacy of what today we would call, civil rights, made him immensely unpopular with his fellow countrymen and women living on the island from Britain. Indeed, he was so reviled by his peers, so detested by the land and slave owners, that they called him *The Monster*. This Baptist Minister from Kettering, who had found his life's work speaking up for justice in Jamaica, was thought to be nothing more than a monster by those who viewed his words as an outright betrayal of what he should have stood for.

By 1830 Knibb was back in Britain addressing anti-slavery rallies up and down the country and doing so passionately. He was called before committees of both Houses of Parliament. At the Baptist Assembly that year he walked on stage as the visiting speaking holding some grotesque, iron slave shackles which he threw on the platform table. Those shackles are today still on display at Baptist House.

He won people over and by 1833 a Bill was passed by Westminster outlawing slavery in the Colonies.

Knibb is rightly and fittingly commemorated in Kettering's coat of arms.

He spoke against the status quo because he saw a different future, one that he believed better reflected the values of the Kingdom of God. He spoke against those who might have thought themselves naturally his friends. That took courage, the sort based on deep conviction.

Well, in some small way, Knibb was reflecting his Lord. For Jesus too was considered monstrous by the establishment and the cross was their way of closing him down. Perhaps in today's speak maybe we'd described him as being *Cancelled*.

This morning's Gospel takes us to the Place of the Skull and the crucifixion of Jesus. No doubt it's selected for today because, on this Christ the King Sunday, Luke tells us the inscription above the cross read: *This is the King of the Jews*.

And that is probably the reason Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, because this sort of execution was reserved by Imperial Rome for any male who spoke, or acted, against the state. Pilate seems like a man with just one idea, to keep his Province stable. He hated those who disturbed the status quo, questioned the way things were done or even started to think outside the box. Jesus did all of those things. Just like Knibb he believed in a different future from the tainted present. And in all this Jesus became an enemy of the state and was executed upon a cross.

Historians tell us it was possibly the cruellest form of killing imaginable and Jesus endured it for six hours. Indeed, our word *excruciating* comes from the word *crucifixion*.

Forty years after Jesus the Romans were still slaughtering radicals this way. When Spartacus led the slave uprising of AD71 Imperial soldiers crucified no less than 6,000 men, a gruesome spectacle that stretched out for 120 miles.

It's the inscription that says it all. To proclaim, or let others proclaim on your behalf that you were any kind of king meant you were a threat to Caesar, and that was a crime against the state, and maybe that means the crucifixion of Jesus was an inevitability from the start of his public ministry.

And it's that inscription which forms a segway back into our reading from the Jewish Scriptures this morning.

In Jeremiah 23 the prophet longs and prays for a king who will *rule wisely and maintain justice*. Perhaps we ought to write into the committee planning next year's Coronation and suggest this as one of the readings!

These are heart felt aspirations, and although we Christians all too quickly place these words on Jesus, they were first and foremost a very real prayer for the next King of the nation.

Pope Pius XI instituted Christ the King Sunday, less than a hundred years ago, in 1925. He did so for a whole collection of reasons, and one was the growing nationalism and unwelcome accumulation of dictatorships that characterised the lead up to World War Two.

The leadership advocated in Jeremiah may be for a king, yet it is essentially pastoral in nature. In a phrase delivered in *Thus saith the Lord* style he writes: *Woe betide the shepherds who let the sheep of my flock scatter and be lost*.

So, says Jeremiah, a bad King is like a careless shepherd who lets the nation fall away like wondering sheep, uncared for and neglected. But a Good King, like a

careful shepherd, protects, guides and always looks after the nation. The sheep pen is secured, and the flock is counted in every night.

Perhaps we could add a bit to that letter that I'm probably not going to send to the Coronation committee and suggest a new piece of regalia. Instead of a mighty sceptre why not invest the new monarch with a simple shepherd's crook, rather like his mother used in her later years. A simple symbol of the pastoral duty of loving care laid upon any and every leader.

Well, I can't get that inscription above the cross out of my mind this morning. So, was it right to describe Jesus as a King? And if so, what sort? And why would a good King, a Shepherd King, end up a criminal in the eyes of the authorities?

It's the historical context that helps us make sense of what went on at that Good Friday execution. Because in Rome's eyes Jesus was absolutely a criminal and one deserving of death. Many were challenged by his radicalism, and some thought his talk was revolutionary enough to be viewed as seditious.

The New Zealand Bible Teacher, Bill Loader, reflecting on today's Gospel says of Jesus that basically he was *one with Barabbas and the brigands*.

Jesus upset a lot of people in three years. He was chased out of his home synagogue. He was criticised for eating with Tax Collectors. He healed those on the edge of the village who everyone else treated beyond the pale. He overturned the money changers tables in the temple.

This isn't *Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild*.

So, here are just a couple of observations I think speak out of today's readings.

The first is that Jesus was, quite simply, a radical figure, and that to many people in his day, he deserved the cross.

This is the Jesus who thought outside the box, challenged the status quo and probably challenges us. I've no doubt that if he were an elder or church member here there would never be a meeting when he didn't bring up something uncomfortable under Any Other Business! Oh dear, what have I just said!!

And secondly, and especially in the Christian reading of today's texts, doesn't it all feel the wrong way round?

Pilate was essentially a judge in Jesus' trial – he heard the final appeal and ruled for crucifixion. Yet he is the judge who doesn't really listen or engage. His motives were mixed and his investigation shallow. There was no real search for truth and understanding just expediency and self-preservation.

Instead, it's Jesus the so called criminal, who shows us what true justice looks like: to care for the poor, to uplift the down trodden, to make time for the children and to refuse to side with the rich and powerful in order to save oneself.

This is all a topsy-turvy world and everything about the Easter story is essentially

the wrong way round.  
 The judge acted criminally.  
 The criminal acted just-fully.

Well, I must bring this little talk to an end, and I want to do that with a story from Nelson Mandela's time in Pollsmore Prison.

In those days Mandela was viewed as a terrorist, at least by the State. On Sundays he enjoyed going to and receiving Holy Communion in the Chapel. He later confided to Philip Russell, Archbishop of Cape Town, that *each sermon made us feel we had a million friends*. I love that!

Well, one Sunday, Mandela asked Christo Brand, the guard on duty in the Chapel that day, if he was a Christian? Brand said he was. Mandela said: *Well, you mustn't sit apart, you should remove your cap and join us around the table*.

Just pause at that point, don't go too quickly to another thought.

Christo Brand was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church which in those days forbade racial mixing at services.

Father Hughes, who took that service, writes: *this wasn't initiated by me as I never once thought of involving the guards, it was suggested by one being oppressed, Mandela, who even whilst being incarcerated held out a hand of grace to his oppressors*.

Today, through our readings our reflection has been that often that grace, God's goodness, is expressed the wrong way round.

William Knibb, the monster, showed God's beauty by honouring the slaves he served.

Nelson Mandela, the terrorist, showed God's generosity, by inviting his prison guard to join him at The Lord's Table.

And the Lord Jesus Christ, the criminal, showed God's forgiveness to those who crucified him.

Praise God that even when we back the wrong person or cause, God's grace still wins through.

May it be so in Jesus' name, our Shepherd King. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 18<sup>th</sup> November 2022*