

PALM SUNDAY

Luke 22:14—23:56

The crucifixion of the innocent one

As he begins the story of Jesus' passion and death, Luke has his own way of narrating the plot to kill Jesus (22:1-6). He associates Judas with the plot from the very start, linking him with the chief priests and scribes to betray Jesus in the absence of the multitude, the crowds of ordinary people who loved Jesus so much. Luke never condemns the crowds. They maintain their sympathy for Jesus, but can be led into evil by their leadership. As they plot, Jesus has his disciples prepare the passover meal (vv. 7-13).

The last supper is highlighted by the meal itself, and a long discourse of Jesus (vv. 14-38). The meal culminates the many suppers which Luke has reported throughout the Gospel. During his life and ministry Jesus often shared meals with others. These meals are consistently marked by Jesus' questioning the *status quo*. He shares the table with sinners, he radically questions the Pharisees on the numerous occasions where he is reported to have been invited to dine with them. Jesus shared a meal with Levi, the sinful tax collector. More than that, there were other sinners at the table who had been

gathered by Levi to share fellowship with Jesus (5:27-32). Invited as 'a prophet' (see 7:39) to share the table with another important religious figure, Simon the Pharisee, Jesus shows that his love cannot be contained within the limitations of conventional religion. He allows and even encourages the intimacy of a woman well-known for her sins (7:37). Her love has drawn her to the table and to Jesus' forgiveness (7:36-50). Again at table with the Pharisees, he challenges them to recognise their lack of true justice (11:37-54). He uses a further meal with the Pharisees to heal the disadvantaged man with dropsy on a Sabbath, to question the way the Pharisees 'religiously' organised their meals, and to urge them to follow his example: 'When you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you' (14:14. See 14: 1-24).

The final eloquent witness to this Lucan theme is found in 19:1-10. As Jesus approaches Jerusalem he catches sight of Zacchaeus. Despite the murmuring opposition of the people standing by, Jesus publicly announces that he will stay and dine with Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector. In his own turn, Zacchaeus commits himself to the way of Jesus by promising to give half his possessions to the poor.

It is from this background of meals shared with sinners that we can best understand 22:14: 'And when the hour came, he sat at table and the apostles with him'. Despite the importance for the overall argument of Luke-Acts that the apostles must play an essential and foundational role 'on the other side' of the death and resurrection of Jesus, Luke wants to show that they too share this final meal with their Master as sinners and broken people. They are the last of a long

group of broken people who have shared meals with Jesus during his life and ministry. This final meal, shared by Jesus and his disciples, marks the end of a long journey which led Jesus to Jerusalem. It is the beginning of a new journey. The disciples will begin a journey from Jerusalem, and they will share their table with all people, 'to the ends of the earth'.

The theme of Jesus' presence to the broken and the sinful throughout the whole Gospel, which stands at the basis of what the apostles will witness to the ends of the earth, reaches its high point at the Last Supper. This final meal on the feast of Passover crowns the meals, both everyday and festive, which he has taken with his disciples and with sinners during his earthly life.

Into the theme of the meal, Luke inserts a final discourse for his disciples. In Mark and Matthew the account of Jesus' words and actions with the bread and wine at the supper form the very centre-piece of the last evening which Jesus spends with his disciples. This is not the case with Luke. Indeed, it is only a part of the section of the story of the prophecy of the betrayal of Judas (vv. 19-23). Luke 22:14-38 is not primarily about Jesus' eucharistic words. It is about the last testimony which Jesus left his disciples, within the context of a meal, as he parted from them.

The practice of placing a 'farewell speech' on the lips of a great man as he goes to his death is a reasonably common practice in many religious writings from the first three centuries of the Christian era. It is particularly widespread in biblical literature and other Jewish literature. Luke 22:14-38 is an excellent example of this genre. There are four basic elements to this form:

1. *Prediction of death.* The speech is understood by the reader as a 'farewell' to disciples. Thus there is some indication or prediction of his oncoming death in all of the testaments. In some cases, the death is unexpected. This prediction serves as the occasion for the speech. In Luke's Last Supper discourse, this is found in 22:15: 'I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer', and again in 22:22: 'For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined'.

2. *Predictions of future attacks upon the dying leader's disciples.* This feature of the farewell speech is also basic to its structure. One of the motivations for the speech is to forewarn disciples that they are in imminent danger. Most of the other farewell discourses portray this imminent danger as a sign of the end time. In the Lucan text this feature is found in 22:31-34: 'I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren . . . I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you three times deny that you know me'. It is also present in 22:36: 'Now let him who has a purse take it, and likewise a bag. And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one'.

3. *There is an exhortation to ideal behaviour.* Other farewell discourses devote a lot of attention to the difficulties to be endured in the future. They are to be met with a behaviour which will both protect the members of the group from danger, and help them to overcome their difficulties. In Luke's Gospel there is a slight intrusion of the uniquely Lucan use of his meal theme, where failing disciples are the object of his exhortation. The instruction to ideal behaviour of

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Mark and Matthew follow the arrest of Jesus by their account of the trial, the mockery, and conclude with Peter's denial. Luke changes this order. He begins the trials with his version of Peter's denial (vv. 55-62). By doing this Luke enables his reader to draw a comparison between the behaviour of Jesus and Peter. On the Mount of Olives Jesus gave permission for his arrest (v. 53), but Peter, recognised because of his association with Jesus, denies that he knows him (v. 57). The difference is, of course, that Jesus has prayed to the Father, that his will be done. He does not fail in the moment of temptation. Peter, who has not prayed, falls.

But by placing Peter's denial before the cruelty and injustice of the trials, Luke is also able to disassociate the chief apostle from the violence done to Jesus. In fact, immediately after the denial, Peter remembers the words of the Lord and repents (vv. 61-62). While in Mark, Peter's denial takes place in the midst of mockery and insult, Luke has Peter deny his Lord, but repent before the agony begins. He repents, however, because he recalled the words of the Lord: 'And Peter remembered the word of the Lord . . . and he went out and wept bitterly' (vv. 61-62). The message to the reader is again clear: We are all capable of betrayal and denial, but by recalling the words of the Lord, we will be saved from the fate which befell Peter.

Luke's version of the trials of Jesus is a little different from that of Mark. Prefaced by a short scene where Jesus is mocked (vv. 63-65), Luke places his Jewish trial (more correctly) in the morning after the arrest (vv. 66-71), while in Mark it took place in the night. He also has two trials before Pilate (vv. 1-5, 13-25), broken by a visit to Herod (23:6-12). It is clear that Luke has used these trials to proclaim —

ironically — the truth about Jesus.

Before Jesus is taken to trial, 'the men who were holding Jesus' mock him and beat him. They demand that he prophesy. The reader has just read of the fulfilment of Jesus' prophecy concerning Peter's denial, and he knows that Jesus is indeed a prophet. The guards may think that they are mocking a criminal. They are, in fact, proclaiming the truth about Jesus the prophet.

In the trial before the Jewish authorities he is asked whether or not he is the Christ (v. 67). In response, the prophet Jesus tells them: 'From now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God' (v. 69). Since Jesus' other prophecies have come true, the reader can rely on this prophetic word. As a result of the passion, Jesus will be enthroned as the Son of God. The Jewish authorities understand this all too well, and thus ask: 'Are you the Son of God then?' (v. 70a). Jesus' acceptance of their confession leads to their refusal of him and his claims (vv. 70b-71).

Before Pilate he is again called Christ, but two further dimensions are added before the political authority: he is King (23:3-4), and most important of all for Luke, he is proclaimed as the innocent one (23:4). Jesus' innocence must be understood at two levels. In the first place, Jesus' message has not been political; there is no danger to Rome. Secondly, Jesus will eventually be handed over to death by one who has declared that he is innocent. He goes to death as the innocent suffering servant.

Unable to come to a decision, Pilate tries to pass Jesus off to Herod, but that only leads to further mockery where the silent dig-

nity of Jesus makes the fumbblings of Herod look so foolish (vv. 9-11). However, Luke informs us that as a result of this encounter two evil forces (a corrupt Jewish ruler and a corrupt Roman governor) join in collusion against the innocent and holy one (v. 12).

Jesus' return to Pilate leads to a further double proclamation of Jesus as the innocent one (vv. 13-16, 22), but between the 'frame' of these public proclamations of Jesus' innocence, Barabbas, whose violent life-style is described in some detail, is preferred to Jesus. A choice of violence over against goodness and innocence has been made (vv. 17-19). Pilate has said: 'Nothing deserving death has been done by him; I will therefore chastise him and release him (vv. 15-16), and: 'What evil has he done? I have found in him no crime deserving death; I will therefore chastise him and release him' (v. 22). Then Pilate delivered him up to their will (v. 25). The evil and corruption of the powers lined up against Jesus are evident: the innocent one has been condemned to death.

Although the traditional story of the cross is told, there is again a carefully insinuated Lukan message throughout. On his way to the place of the Skull, Jesus is followed by someone carrying his cross, Simon of Cyrene a model of all future Christians following Jesus in his 'journey' (23:26). On the road to his place of death he speaks words of comfort and warning to the women of Jerusalem (vv. 27-31). The point of this story is not the compassion of the women, but Jesus' final prophetic word to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Luke goes on portraying Jesus as a prophet, calling his people to conversion. As he entered the city, he wept over it and prophesied its destruction (see 19:41-44). Now as he leaves it to be crucified outside

the city walls, women weep over him as he pronounces his last prophetic word.

Jesus, the innocent one, is crucified between two criminals (v. 33). Jesus is not a criminal but, as we will see, he comes to offer salvation to those whom the world would count as criminals. From the cross other themes that are important throughout the Gospel reappear. Ironically, the truth is proclaimed about Jesus: 'the Christ of God' (v. 35 — recalling 9:20), 'the Chosen One' (v. 37 — recalling 9:35) and King (v. 38). The theme of the innocence of Jesus is picked up by one of the crucified criminals (vv. 39-41). Jesus forgives all who have worked for this moment of darkness (v. 34), further forgiving and welcoming into his kingdom the one who, no matter what his defects may have been, is prepared to turn from sin, and confess his faith in Jesus (vv. 42-43 — looking forward to 24:46-47).

Signs which indicate the end of the old religion, the darkness and the tearing apart of the veil that separated the holy of holies from the rest of the world, greet the death of Jesus (vv. 44-45). But, unlike the Gospel of Mark and Matthew, the death of Jesus is not marked by anguish and loud screams. For Luke the crucified Jesus prays for those who have executed him: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (v. 34). Indeed they don't, as they continue to mockingly ask whether he is Messiah and King (vv. 35-37). The truth is proclaimed by the sign on the Cross: 'This is the King of Jews'. As he dies he gently gives his spirit into the hands of the Father, for whom he has spent his life in love and service: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit' (v. 46).

The response of the Gentile centurion to this life is not the Marcan proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God, but one of Luke's very dear themes: 'Certainly this man was innocent!' (v. 47). Luke, who has never condemned the ordinary people, reports: 'And all the multitudes who assembled to see the sight, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts' (v. 48). The implication is that because of the manner of Jesus' death, the crowd already begins to repent. Jesus' death is salvific.

Matthew and Mark had dismissed the disciples from the passion story in Gethsemane: 'They all forsook him and fled' (Mk 14:50). Luke is not so harsh: 'And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance and saw these

things' (v. 49). In Luke's Gospel the disciples do not abandon Jesus, and Jesus does not die forsaken.

An unknown leader of the people, Joseph of Arimathea, who had not consented to all that had been done, emerges and buries Jesus in a newly prepared tomb. It is the day of the Preparation, the eve of the Sabbath. Watched by women, Jesus is taken down and buried (vv. 50-56). 'On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment' (v. 56). We too watch and wait, knowing that these same women will discover an empty tomb on the day after the Sabbath, the first Easter Sunday. This is not the end of the story. We wait for the beginning of another liturgical season.