

# Good Friday.

14.04.2019  
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## Introduction

For Good Friday, we are offering you a narrative reflection on Jesus, our powerful friend. In the face of violent power — particularly the violent power of the Romans — we see narrations of Jesus, who had a profound relationship with power, but a power that included, rather than lashed out.

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## Text

John 18:33–19:30

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” They shouted in reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.” So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!” When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.”

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says,

"They divided my clothes among themselves,

and for my clothing they cast lots."

And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

## Jesus our Powerful Friend.

The ninth Station of the Cross is "Jesus is stripped of his garments".

The stripping was part of a Roman torture. As a devout Jewish man, Jesus would have been circumcised. To be crucified is to be hoisted up on a pole, your arms outstretched, unable to cover yourself. To be crucified naked, as Jesus was, is to be made a mockery of, as if your pain was not enough, you are exposed both to indignity as well as indescribable pain.

And this is Good Friday. We might better call it Awful Friday. This Friday reveals something about the character of Jesus who, even in death, continued to live the way that had caused his death in the first place. This Friday also reveals something terrible about the human condition. We are capable of beauty and brilliance and trouble and terror. In the last weeks, bombings in Turkey and Belgium have changed the lives of families.

Once, on good Friday, I was in Bethlehem. I was there meeting people who worked for peace and justice. I thought "It's good Friday, I'll go to a church and do the stations of the cross." I went, and I tried walking around the stations of the cross, but it was busy, and I was only one of many tourists, and I couldn't find a way to pray. Later that day, I went to meet a man, Ali Abu Awaad, who had lost his brother in the hostilities between Israelis and Palestinians over territory.

Ali spoke about what it felt like to lose a brother. He spoke of his own grief. He spoke, too, of the trauma that those who killed his brothers must have felt. "To kill a man means you must have already denied your own humanity" Ali said.

Suddenly, I was there, at the stations of the cross. Not in a church, but sitting around a table, listening to this chain-smoking Christ, a Palestinian Muslim, speak.

I got talking to him after and told him that it was a holy day for me, and that he had brought me to the place of prayer. I cried when I told him this. He put his arm around me and said "I'm not a very good muslim." I laughed and said "I'm not a very good Catholic."

We stood and watched the beloved city, stretching from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, stretching across farms, apartment blocks, bulldozers, fruit shops, separation walls and nationalities.

During that trip, I had also taken a journey with some friends, to the place in the wilderness where it is said that Jesus was tempted by the devil. It is dry and magnificent. There are rocks and sand and a monastery cut into the dry stone.

In the gospels of Matthew and Luke we hear the stories of Jesus being tempted in the desert.

What's this got to do with Jesus being a powerful friend? Is it because he was powerful enough to fight away the voice of temptation? Well. Yes. Mostly. But Jesus was powerful in a way that showed a different way with power.

In Jesus, our powerful friend, we see a man who had a mature relationship with power. The gospels were written in Greek, and in Greek, the word power is "dunamos" — it's where we get the word "dynamo". It's where we get the word "dynamic". It's where we get the word "dynamite". Power can be used to explore or explode. How will we use it?

In both Matthew and Luke, although in a different order, Jesus is tempted to turn stone to bread, to throw himself from a temple, to bow at the feet of temptation.

In each of them, the tempter says "If you are the son of God..."

It's a subtle choice of word in the Greek. In English "If you are the son of God..." can be understood to say "maybe you are and maybe you're not". However, this is a mild complication we have in translation from Greek to English. This text can also be understood as "forasmuch as"

So the temptations are less about saying to Jesus "maybe you are and maybe you're not the son of God". It's saying something more like "

Seeing as you are the son of God..." On a level of temptation, we can hear this as a test of Jesus — "Given that you are the son of God, get whatever you want in whatever way is fastest, or whatever way will gain you public opinion."

So this isn't necessarily a test of who Jesus thought himself to be. But how Jesus thought he should respond to who he understood himself to be. It's not a temptation about "Who are you?" but a temptation about "How are you going to act?"

The temptation was to say:

*Seeing as you're so powerful, Break your commitment*

*Seeing as you're so powerful, End yourself. We all have a bit of chaos in us.*

*Seeing as you're so powerful, Exploit your power.*

Or, said in another way:

*Seeing as you're powerful, Satisfy yourself, indulge yourself, be excessive. Use what would be good for others to be good to yourself.*

*Seeing as you're powerful, get as much attention as you can.*

*Seeing as you're powerful, get as much power as you can.*

The story in the desert seems a million miles away from us but it's not. It's right here. It is a story about what we do with the powers that we have, the privileges we have, the responsibilities we have.

When Jesus was on the cross, stripped, exposed to the world — I think of Jesus as saying "I was always open to the world anyway. I hid nothing." He had lived with the integrity that ultimately caused him pain. But he lived with it anyway. He is powerful not because he uses power to dominate but because he uses power for the kinds of reasons he considered powerful:

*to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

This is what power is – using power to heal rather than harm.

When I was a small boy, I jumped into the middle of a fight and found a friend.

I was not a fighting boy. I had known Cathal a little bit in school. We weren't great friends. He was friendly enough, a shy boy I suppose. He was also popular. A shy popular boy. He was a little bit smaller than me.

I don't know what happened, but when I was 11, there was a fight in the playground during the lunch break. The guys that Cathal was especially friendly with were kicking, kicking, kicking. In the face, in the stomach. We can read stories of Roman soldiers being cruel to Jesus and think it's a thousand miles away, but that's never that far away. In the gospels we see the blessing and the burden of human strength revealed.

These boys were his friends. The ones he used to hang around with. He had one friend who was leading the fight.

Nothing decided for me – I don't remember making a decision – I just remember pulling Cathal off the ground, taking him over to the corner and saying "You can be our friend now". In a way, he had more to lose than me. He was popular suddenly being befriended by the class poet. Not a step-up. He was the one who had to look at power.

We stayed friends for years. And, such as is the way of friendships, as years went by, we drifted apart a bit too. He started to drink a lot, I started to love Jesus. He was in AA by the time he was sixteen. He was dead by the time he was 24. During one of his drinking games with fellas that I barely knew, he told them that he'd been diagnosed with schizophrenia. He was sixteen or seventeen. Very young. The guys he'd told didn't know what to think, and in the morning after the hangover they thought that it must be something that he had for a short-time, but that it'd go away. He was one of the most naturally intelligent guys I knew.

We were, in my mind, part of each other's landscape like smoke and fire. Was it power that put me in there to rescue him? I don't know. He certainly needed all the power he could get to live.

He hung himself in the garage where we used to waste time. Him smoking cigarettes his parents knew he smoked. Me writing poems on the back of brown paper bags.

When I think of the death of my friend, and his last lonely moments, I always think of Jesus, our powerful, stripped friend on a cross. When Jesus faced the tempter, the tempter said that if he raised him up high he could draw all nations to himself, if only Jesus would bow at the feet of the wrong kind of power. Instead, hanging, naked and dying on a cross, raised up for the world to ridicule, Jesus turned to another one who was at the end of himself, and offered companionship, hospitality, healing.

When you open him up, you find what is inside. You find generosity. Even if you strip him, you find him still trying to cover others.

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## Response

The Stations of the Cross are an extraordinary practice for Good Friday. The American Episcopal Church have put together [Stations of the Cross for Global Justice and Reconciliation](#) which you will find by clicking [here](#). They link the prayers to the Millennium Development Goals.

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## Prayer

Dying Jesus,  
at the end of yourself  
you turned,  
and spoke words of  
togetherness  
in the places of the torn.  
May we always find  
words to hold,  
especially in times  
when the world  
harms.  
Because sometimes  
words can  
heal.  
Amen.