

When the children were little, I did holiday locum duty in Northern Ireland. The only sign of the Troubles were occasional military roadblocks by day, and the sight of soldiers stealthily patrolling the streets in the depths of the night. That was the only price to pay for the safe, peaceful time we enjoyed. I was on sabbatical in Jerusalem in the early weeks of the second intifada. The daily news was terrible, violent. Again soldiers were on the street in the occupied arab East of the city where I lived, but it was safe enough to go to a local store in the dark, when the busy streets of day were empty, without fear of being attacked or arrested. In both places, I was a beneficiary of strict confident security regime. Up to the moment of Jesus' arrest, those Galilean visitors, guests of friends in the holy city would have felt safe as I could in a military occupied land, safe enough to enjoy the peace of a Passover night outdoors. But at Jesus' arrest, as Scripture says, tersely "*All the disciples forsook him and fled.*"

I imagine most of us haven't had to cope with the experience of being invaded, or occupied, or even mugged, burgled, or unexpectedly awoken from sleep by police wanting to search our home, and take us off for questioning. To have one's private sphere of safe tranquility burst into without warning is a brutal shock, prompting flight or fight -- two of our most basic human reactions.

His most loyal friends ran off in fear for their lives, including Peter, who had, a few hours earlier vowed that even if everyone else let Jesus down, he wouldn't. He was ready to die for him if needs be, ready enough to fight, but thrown into confusion by Jesus rebuking his honourable intention. So like the rest he fled, though not for long. He tracked the arresting party to the residence of the High Priest, where the religious police had taken Jesus for questioning. Although he was one of his closest associates, Peter doesn't have the confidence to insist on pushing his way into the court where Jesus is being questioned, to demand to know what's going on, or speak on his behalf. He just assaulted someone and run off, and not wanting to draw attention to himself. So, he gets himself in among the servants at the gate. Chilled with shock in the cool of the night, he tries to get warm by the fire where a servant girl identifies him as a companion of Jesus, and questions him, just as Jesus is being questioned within.

"You're one of his disciples, aren't you?" He answers "No", but his Galilean country accent attracts attention, so again and again he denies association with Jesus. He is still running inside himself, fearing he knows not what, traumatised by the violent invasion of his world of faith, his hope his trust in the inevitable progress to success of his master. He hears the crowing of the cockerel, and remembers what Jesus said. *"Before the cock crows twice you will deny me thrice."* Jesus isn't clairvoyant. He just knows his friend's impulsive character so well. He understands that Peter must plumb the depths of his own fear and weakness, before he can truly become 'the Rock' as he is nicknamed.

Also present at the scene is John the beloved disciple. It seems he's known to the High Priest and thus able to enter with Jesus. Evidently nobody thinks him a threat. Peter hides away, broken in tears of shame at the realisation that he has failed Jesus. John quietly stays in touch with what's happening. While each evangelist tells the story of Jesus' trial their own way, all rely on John's eyewitness. He is so self effacing that he tells all about Peter, but nothing of himself, as if he's hardly there. Could it be that later on he could hardly bear to recall his feelings and keeps quiet about himself? Different accounts say that the religious authorities question Jesus about his teaching. Jesus asserts that he has taught openly in public and that anyone can be asked about what he really said. There are no secrets. Witnesses are brought in to testify. They make contradictory allegations against him. Contradicting because they can't agree on which lies to tell? Or because they didn't understand his teaching? They were told they're meant to be against him. He represents trouble, change to their little realm that their leaders fear will do them no good. Their fear is reflected in their confusion. The Gospels all recount the fact that Jesus is bullied, assaulted by those who had arrested him. If they hope to knock some sense into him, some new respect, they are cruel as well as stupid. More seriously, their leaders, their judges are willing to turn a blind eye to this abuse of a man under accusation but not yet charged with an offence. Can we hear this, and not think of Abu Graib or Guantanamo Bay recently?

Consider how many confusing accounts we've heard lately about the collapse of the world economic order. So much blame, such desire for punishment, for scapegoating

anyone thought to be responsible for bringing on our present fears and insecurities. Crisis is the test of our real qualities, our values and priorities. It was the same when Jesus stood trial. His outspoken criticism and challenging teaching made people nervous. They questioned him and got no clear answers. They found themselves being questioned by him, or by his awkward silences, his refusal to get drawn in by their anxieties and concern. Does he admit to being God's anointed one, sent to rescue his captive people, or not? He points beyond himself to God. He speaks of himself as Son of Man on several occasions apart from this, but is anyone sure what he means? In the end, the religious leaders decide that he's claiming to be the Messiah, that he is a blasphemer deserving the death penalty for this crime. Death by stoning, except that the religious authorities have no official power to enforce the penalties of Jewish Law. They might get away with stoning a poor adulterous woman to death when Roman police and authorities are not looking their way, as still happens in places where such so called 'honour crimes' are still a feature of life, even in civilised society. But with a public figure like Jesus, there was no possibility of bumping him off quietly, since he seemed to have so much support. Their only hope was to persuade the Romans to execute him, or to turn his supporters against him, and isolate him. They were to be successful on both counts.

Jesus in no way colludes with those who put him on trial. His answers oblige these, his judges to think for themselves. Here is a generation of leaders with a thousand year old tradition of law and justice behind them. But their ability to think straight, to think fairly deserts them. Their thoughts are clouded with fear. All they can recall is the High Priest's prophetic words: "*It is expedient that one man die for the people.*" But they have to get the colonial authorities to do their dirty work if they can, so they send him over to the residence of Roman governor Pontius Pilate to be examined They place their accusations against Jesus and insist these are worthy of his death. He asks why haven't they tried him under their own law. They need to remind him they have no right to exercise the death penalty. It's as if Pilate cannot grasp that these accusations of blasphemy merit such punishment. With so many Gods to choose from for good or ill, what sense could he make of blasphemy, apart from the obvious crime

of openly denying the emperor's divinity, and thus setting yourself against the state. Pilate interrogates Jesus. According to which account you read, Jesus is either silent, refusing to answer questions about whether he is Messiah or King. Or he discusses authority, responsibility and truth with Pilate, puzzling him, by seeming unconcerned about his own fate. Pilate, responsible for public security and regional stability, needs to be sure Jesus is no political threat to be reckoned with. He probes to establish if Jesus has ambitions for power, but all he finds is a man wanting constantly to refer upwards to divine authority, wanting to remind all these judges that they are being judged by the author of justice itself, judged by what they do to him, whoever he is, whoever they think he is. Pilate can find nothing in his demeanour to suggest he deserves to die, and starts by refusing to pass judgement on him.

According to Luke, he sends Jesus to the court of Herod, aware of Herod's interest in him, perhaps hoping for another opinion on the suspect. Herod is the local puppet king of Judea, member of a dynasty of warlords from the other side of the Jordan, Idumeans. They had made a token conversion to Judaism from their native religion, in order to establish a ruling house. They would have a broad understanding of religious politics and might have something useful to contribute to Pilate's dilemma. The religious leaders go along and repeat all the accusations before Herod, but Herod has no opinions, he just lets his own soldiers abuse Jesus with mockery, to add to that meted out by Pilate's soldiers. There is no justice at work among these upholders and enforcers of law. Nothing comes out of this extra interrogation, except more cruelty and humiliation for Jesus. This diplomatic gesture on Pilate's part forges an alliance between him and Herod for as long as either find it expedient to further their ends. The recent outrage about prisoners from Afghanistan innocent and guilty alike being held and tortured in different secret locations, and the denial by all governments involved that it was happening tells us how little has really changed in terms of the unjust treatment of prisoners over 20 centuries. Fear corrupts the best intentions of people, good and bad alike. They forge alliances from which nothing worthy can come because they are not rooted and grounded in proper regard for people, friend or foe alike. Once you start denying someone is as human and needy as you are, you

open the door to the kind of wicked abuse that we see in the treatment of Jesus. And if we're honest - it would have been no different if we we'd been in charge. Jesus returns to Pilate, and Pilate is pressurised by the religious leaders for a decision. He insists he finds no reason to condemn him, but they will not be satisfied until they get their way. Then Pilate has a face saving idea. As governor he exercises a goodwill gesture every Passover by freeing a condemned Jewish prisoner. Barabbas is perhaps a zealot, but John calls him a bandit awaiting execution for his part in a riot in the city and for murder. If the crowd desires, Jesus and Barabbas will swop places, the killer go free, the healer will die instead. He parades Jesus before them, beaten, exhausted by sleep deprivation and torture, clothed by mocking soldiers in a purple robe, crowned with a ring made from a thorn bush, jammed on his head, in contempt of any idea about his sovereignty. With equal cynicism and contempt for these wretched natives, Pilate declares "*Here is your King*". The crowd replies, "*We have no king but Caesar*", and in one chorus with their leaders they all shout "Crucify him." The same people that had welcomed him a few days earlier now want him dead, prefer to see a dangerous man free again on the streets. That's how much public opinion can ever be trusted, when leaders are consumed by fear of losing power, and need someone other than themselves to blame, and pour out their self-hatred upon.

Who is this man, who stands there condemned without protest? How can he bear such betrayal by all who have known and revered him?