

OpenTheo

Good Friday: 1 Peter 2:11-25 & Luke 23:18-49

April 2, 2021



Alastair Roberts

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree. St Luke's passion narrative.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

1 Peter 2 verses 11 to 25. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the Emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

Honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the Emperor. Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while

suffering unjustly.

For what credit is it, if when you sin and are beaten for it you endure, but if when you do good and suffer for it you endure? This is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

When he was reviled he did not revile in return, when he suffered he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. Rather they belong to another place, their citizenship lies elsewhere. Such an understanding is paradigmatic for the people of God.

You see the same thing in Philippians chapter 3 verse 20. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Or in Hebrews chapter 11 verses 9 to 10, By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. In the very early Christian letter, the Epistle to Diognetus, you also see something of this understanding, in a passage that is very heavily informed by 1 Peter chapter 2. For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind, either in locality, or in speech, or in customs, for they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practice an extraordinary kind of life, nor again do they possess any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men, nor are they masters of any human dogma, as some are. But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and Barbarians, as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs and dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts expectation.

They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners, they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like all other men, and they beget children, but they do not cast away their offspring.

They have their meals in common, but not their wives. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.

They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men, and they are persecuted by all. They are ignored, and yet they are condemned.

They are put to death, and yet they are endowed with life. They are in beggary, and yet they make many rich. They are in want of all things, and yet they are bound in all things.

They are dishonoured, and yet they are glorified in their dishonour. They are evil spoken of, and yet they are vindicated. They are reviled, and they bless.

They are insulted, and they respect. Doing good, they are punished as evildoers. Being punished, they rejoice, as if they were thereby quickened by life.

War is waged against them as aliens by the Jews, and persecution is carried on against them by the Greeks, and yet those that hate them cannot tell the reason of their hostility. They are charged to abstain from passions of the flesh, because these things wage war against the soul. They are living in hostile territory, and the flesh that is being referred to here is more like Adamic humanity in its fallen and weak condition.

Our souls, by contrast, are our own selves, which are compromised and threatened and challenged by the passions of the flesh. We are in constant warfare, and Christians will face constant accusations, false accusations. Christians should live lives of exemplary godliness, lives beyond slander.

The hope is that such conduct will lead Gentiles to glorify God on the day of visitation. Gentiles is an interesting word to use here. It is applied to those outside of the church.

The church is contrasted with the nations in the way that Israel formerly was. Israel set against the Gentiles is now the church set against the Gentiles. In the verses that follow, Peter will particularize this message to people in particular relationships and callings.

The beginning of verse 13, be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, could be read as a heading for what follows. As in Ephesians chapter 5 verse 21, being subject or submitting ourselves to others is fundamental to Christian behavior in the world in every single context. Peter's approach is very similar to Paul's.

We must place others before ourselves and behave with meekness towards all. Ultimately this is for the Lord's sake and an obedience to him. This is applied first of all to the emperor, which is presumably Nero at this time, and to governors and other rulers.

These have been given the task of punishing evil and praising those who do good. This is similar to what Paul says in Romans chapter 13 verses 1 to 4. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Rulers in both Paul's teaching and in Peter's are spoken of as servants of Christ and they must be treated in such a manner. They may be unfaithful servants of Christ, but they are servants nonetheless. This both underwrites their authority and also demystifies their authority.

The ruler or the king or the emperor is not ultimately overall. He is not divine. He is a servant of God.

That's all he is. He is not someone who can place himself over God. The ruler has been given the task of punishing those who do evil and praising those who do good.

This is fundamentally a task of judgment, a task of establishing a moral order within the land. Christians must live meekly as exemplary citizens, silencing any slanderers. As people in a democratic society, our relationship with government is of course different in some respects from that which would have existed in Peter's day, but the fundamental note of subjection must be retained.

In part, this approach to subjection is informed by the fact that we are citizens of another country. The lands that we currently inhabit are not our final home and as a result we should not be overly preoccupied with our political rights or the honor of our nations, but should be far more concerned with the place where our citizenship is from and where our treasure is, in heaven with Christ. Part of what Christian freedom entails is the fact that the governors and rulers and other people over us in this age are not the final horizon.

We can look beyond them to God, to whom our submission ultimately is given. Freedom then must be rightly understood. It must not be a cover-up for evil or rebellion.

We have a general duty of honor to others. Christian faith is a faith that accords dignity to all. The radical nature of this, in societies where people are often denied all dignity or others are granted dignity at the expense of their neighbors, should really not be missed.

While we can often focus upon the unequal distribution of wealth, the deeper inequity can often be the distribution of dignity. Many people in our societies feel despised by their neighbors. Many feel ignored, unseen or denigrated.

Much life is lived as a vaunting of ourselves over others, an attempt to gain the upper hand, to gain dignity at other people's expense. The two words honor everyone could not be more radical in such a context. In addition to this more general duty of honor, there is a particular duty of love to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This love is one that must engage both the actions and the affections. It should also be the distinguishing mark of the people of God. See how they love one another.

The supreme duty of fear of God comes above everything and before everything else. And this is the third charge that he gives in this verse. The emperor is the final one.

He must be honored. The way that we speak of him, the way that we live under his rule, all of these things must be characterized by respect of the office and of the one who is within it. Yet the honoring of the emperor is not the same thing as the fear of God.

The fear of God comes first. The emperor is not God and cannot take his place. Peter does not address masters but speaks to servants and particularly servants in households.

The servant must submit to his master. Peter doesn't deal with the injustice of the institution of slavery but rather speaks of the way that someone in the position of a servant must act. The institution isn't simply invalidated.

However, it is noteworthy that Peter chiefly deals with it within a frame of injustice. He focuses not upon masters in general but upon cruel and unjust masters in particular. The submission of the servant is not contingent upon the goodness of their masters.

This is biblical teaching more generally. When we think about submission, many people want to have escape clauses, whether it's to government or wives to husbands or servants to masters. Many people are most concerned that there should be exception clauses and these will be foregrounded over the duty of submission that really should take first place.

It is important to recognize that such statements are not justification of the institution of slavery more generally, nor are they supposed to be turned around as if they granted the master a divine claim over the servant. The servant's subjection is on account of Christ, not on account of his master. The servant is called to identify with the way of Christ himself, who suffered injustice righteously and not on account of any sin on his part.

There is no honour in suffering for sinful behaviour. Indeed, suffering for righteousness sake is suffering to which all Christians have been called. It is a matter of walking in the footsteps of Christ and being joined with him in his suffering.

He has given us the example and we must follow after him. Peter speaks of the sufferings of Christ in a way that presents them as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah, weaving allusions to Isaiah chapter 53 in with descriptions of Christ's behaviour in his trials and on the cross. Verses 3-5 and 7 of Isaiah chapter 53 read, He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted, but he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

Peter concludes the chapter by returning to verse 6 of Isaiah chapter 53, All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned, every one to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all, and he connects this to the redemption that they have received, you have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. A question to consider, what are some broader ethical patterns that can be seen in Peter's teaching concerning Christian conduct in wider society and in the context of the household? Luke chapter 23 verses 18 to 49 and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them, Jesus said, The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

There was also an inscription over him, This is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

But this man has done nothing wrong. And he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And he said to him, Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. And having said this, he breathed his last.

Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, Certainly this man was innocent. And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home, beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances, and the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

In Luke chapter 23, when Jesus is sent back to Pilate, Pilate gathers the chief priests, the rulers, the people, and declares that neither he nor Herod had found anything deserving of death in Jesus. He expresses his intention merely to punish and release him. However, the priests, the rulers, and the people all cry out to do away with Jesus and to release Barabbas to them.

Throughout the trial, it is clear that the chief priests and the leaders of the Jews are the instigators and the drivers of everything. Were it not for them, Jesus would not have been crucified. They successfully get the crowd on their side, and they cow Pilate into submission.

The reference to Barabbas seems to assume what is mentioned in the other Gospels about the custom of Pilate at the time of the feast. Pilate is rolling the dice here. He sees that he has an angry crowd and the Jewish leaders against him, and he doesn't want unrest.

He hopes that, if he gives the choice between Barabbas and Jesus, Jesus will be chosen and it will take the decision out of his hand. Barabbas then serves as a foil for Jesus. He's a murderous insurrectionist.

Yet the people prefer him over Jesus. This is revealing, as if they truly cared about the sedition they claimed to be delivering Jesus over to Pilate for, Barabbas is precisely the sort of person they wouldn't want to go free. In choosing Barabbas, the people choose the violent revolutionary over the true Messiah, and this is a choice that would eventually seal their fate.

Pilate tries once again to calm them down and to release Jesus, but now they insist that he be crucified. He tries a third and a last time, stating that he found nothing in him deserving of death. But the crowd gets even more vehement.

The actions and description of the crowd here is similar to the descriptions that we find elsewhere used of demon-possessed persons. The crowd are in a sort of demonic frenzy. The driving force within much of this narrative is the power and violence of the mob and the leaders who whip them up.

Nothing is capable of withstanding their power. Even Pilate, who desires to release Jesus, is not able to resist the power of the mob, and ultimately surrenders to it and is absorbed into it. The mob won't be pacified without a victim.

Pilate is prepared to use someone such as Barabbas as a conveniently guilty scapegoat, upon which the fury of the crowd can be expended, but for the crowd only Jesus will do. More than any other writer, René Girard has revealed the dynamics whereby a victim can act as a sort of lightning rod for the violence of society. The energy of the mob is like a social avalanche.

It catches people up in it and crushes all who would stand in its way. Those who are caught up in it are in the grip of a greater power and are unaware of what they are doing. The behaviour of the crowd in the period of the betrayal, trials and crucifixion of Christ is akin to that of a possessed person.

The many individuals within the crowd fuse into a single entity, driven by a violent frenzy

that none can withstand or understand. Social contagion is an intoxicating and powerful force. It gives a sense of unity, purpose, an intoxicating morality, and all ends up bowing before its impulses.

Principles of justice are abandoned. The governor entirely capitulates. He tries to reason and bargain with the mob, but then completely fails.

The result is that Jesus is put to death with the sanction of Rome, but a sanction wrested from Pilate by fear of the crowd. Pilate ends up underwriting mob justice instigated by the religious leaders, who are envious of Jesus. Simon of Cyrene takes up the cross and follows Jesus.

Notably, he was a gentile. Simon of Besseda denies Jesus, but Simon of Cyrene follows him. At this point, when the twelve have largely abandoned Jesus, it is the unlikely disciples and converts, Simon of Cyrene, even if Simon of Cyrene was not an actual disciple, Luke has him symbolically acting out the role, taking up the cross and following Jesus, the centurion, Joseph of Arimathea, and the women who come to the foreground.

What is happening to Jesus is just the harbinger of more terrible things to come in Jerusalem. Its leaders have favoured the way of insurrection over the way of Jesus. Jesus is followed by a multitude, and by many women mourning and lamenting for him.

We might perhaps hear the voice of Zechariah 12, verses 10-14 here. The expression that Jesus uses here, daughters of Jerusalem, should recall the way that Jerusalem or Zion is often spoken of as a daughter in the prophets, the city often being represented by its women. However, perhaps even more than the prophets, it should remind us of the Song of Solomon.

The daughters of Jerusalem appear on several occasions within that book, and here the daughters of Jerusalem are witnessing the greatest son of David, as the bridegroom tragically departing. Jesus presents his death as a foreshadowing of Israel's own fate. The people who are following may weep for him, but they should recognise that Jerusalem as a whole will follow him in their time.

Jesus quotes from Hosea 10, verses 8. Jesus is led away to be crucified with two criminals. Luke has a much lighter narrative brushstroke than Matthew, but he wants us to notice prophecy being fulfilled in the background. Isaiah 53, verses 12.

One criminal is on his right, and another on his left. Jesus is like an enthroned king, flanked by others. If Simon of Cyrene illustrated discipleship in carrying the cross after Jesus, the criminals illustrate those positions that disciples that wish to be exalted must occupy.

Jesus responds to the situation by prayer for the very people who are crucifying him. He intercedes for the transgressors. He appeals to the fact that their sin is unwitting.

The unwitting character of the people's sin is also asserted by the apostles in places like Acts 3, verses 13-19. His name, by faith in his name, has made this man strong whom you see and know. And the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.

And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out.

They will have another chance. But if they reject the message of the church, only certain judgment will await them. Jesus is here fulfilling his own teaching, given near the beginning of his ministry in Luke 6, verses 27-29.

In Psalm 22, verses 18, Jesus is then mocked by the rulers, the soldiers, and even one of the criminals crucified alongside him. The mockers decrease in status. Among other things, this manifests how humiliating Jesus' position is.

The mockery focuses upon Jesus' claim to be the Christ, and his supposed identity as a failed We might remember the challenge of Satan back in chapter 4, If you are the son of God, and hear this satanic challenge repeated in the words of the scoffers here. Jesus is mocked as a king. He is served sour wine by cup bearers, placed with someone on his right hand and his left, and given a royal superscription above his head.

Once again, the prophetic words of the scripture lie in the background. In the mockery, we may hear the words of Psalm 22 being fulfilled once more, this time verses 7 and 8. The soldiers mockery also fulfills Psalm 69, verse 21. This is a truly startling claim in the context.

There is a division brought about between the two criminals here. One is raised up, and the other faces an even greater judgement, which might invite comparisons between Jesus and Joseph, who is also associated with two criminals with differing fates. However, whereas Joseph asked the cup bearer to remember him when he was elevated, the criminal here asked Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom.

This is a truly startling claim in the context. All of the appearances are against this condemned, seeming false messiah entering into any kingdom whatsoever. However, by the work of the spirit, the criminal recognises Jesus.

Jesus' grace towards others is also seen in these very last moments of his life. The penitent criminal is an example of the divisions emerging in the responses to the death of Jesus. There is darkness from the sixth to the ninth hour, like the penultimate plague on Egypt.

All that remains is the death of the firstborn. These are also akin to the signs of Christ's coming and judgement. They are signs of decreation.

The curtain of the temple is torn in two. A division is removed, and a way into God's presence is opened up. Jesus alludes to the Psalms in a number of his sayings on the cross recorded in the Gospels.

Verse 46 alludes to Psalm 31, verse 5. Into your hand I commit my spirit. You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God. In the crucifixion accounts, the words of the Psalms are prominent on Jesus' lips.

Reading the words of the wider context of the Psalms that Jesus quotes is illuminating. These are not the words of someone in the grip of despair, but the words of someone confident in the Lord, even in the severest distress. These words anticipate resurrection.

Our passage ends with the description of three different witnesses. The centurion, the assembled crowds, and his acquaintances with the women who had followed him from Galilee, who were watching at a distance. The reactions of the first two witnesses, when they saw what had taken place, is described.

The centurion declares the innocence of Christ. Herod, Pilate, and the centurion who carried out the sentence all concur in recognising Jesus' innocence. However, the centurion goes further.

He praises God. He recognises the hand of God in Jesus' death. The hand of God in the crucifixion of Christ is seen in the signs that accompany it.

The assembled crowds also react to what they have seen. They react in mourning and probably contrition for what has happened. They beat their breasts and returned.

Already we see a sign of remorse paving the way for Pentecost. The death of Jesus is immediately followed by new signs of life. Finally, Jesus' acquaintances with the women are at a greater distance.

Perhaps we should hear Psalm 38 verse 11 in the background here. My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off. The role of the women as witnesses will prove important in the rest of the narrative that follows.

A question to consider. Why is it the words of the Psalms that are most prominent in the context of the crucifixion, especially on Jesus' lips? What can we learn from this?