

Nobody was taking notes when Jesus died on the Roman cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. So it's not surprising that the memorial accounts of his death differ among the gospels.

All four gospels agree that a group of women who had followed Jesus and his disciples from Galilee stayed there, watching the brutal killing to the end.

Nothing could be done on Saturday (that was both the Jewish Sabbath and the day of the Passover festival), so they came back as soon as they could, early on Sunday morning. John and Matthew say they returned simply to inspect the tomb. Mark says that on the evening of the Saturday, three of them—Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Salome— had gone to buy spices, so that they could prepare the body properly, according to Jewish custom. They arrived early on Sunday morning to meet an opened tomb and a 'young man clothed all in white.' His message sent them running off (with their spices), in such 'fear and excitement' that they told nobody. Luke substantially agrees: he remarks that they had 'rested on the Sabbath day' (ie Saturday) in accordance with the Jewish law; on Sunday morning his group of women run off and do tell the male disciples what has happened.

John is alone in suggesting that two followers of Jesus, the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea, and the Sadducee Nicodemus, not only secretly went to Pilate on Friday night and secured the governor's permission to take down the body from the cross; they also gave it proper burial rites themselves, wrapping the body in strips of cloth and applying herbs and spices. In so doing, they challenged Roman practice, which was to leave the crucified body on its cross until natural decay or the crows destroyed it. They also broke Jewish law by handling the body themselves, making themselves 'unclean' for seven days, and usurping the normal task of the family and close friends. But they would have seen what they were doing as urgent and necessary: the law said that a corpse must be buried on the day of death, or the whole community risked defilement.

In short, Jesus' followers were determined that his body should be treated with respect, after all the appalling things done to it. They were also determined that Jesus should take his place among the dead, fittingly, respectfully, and according to immemorial custom and practice. There would have been no question of carrying the broken body all the way back to Nazareth on Friday night or Sunday—and one wonders what the community reaction would have been, anyway.

I want to draw our attention to that behaviour as a beacon of civilised and loving concern in the middle of all the darkness and horror.

And I also want to draw our attention to that constant, loyal group of women watching Jesus' death through to the end, and beyond the end.

Coming back to the place of burial (no doubt fearfully), when all the men had run off in panic and dismay. Perhaps hoping to perform the loving and respectful rites surrounding the dead body of the man they had grown to love. Perhaps drawn to his final resting place, just as in these days relatives visit the distant cemeteries where their own dead are buried. I recall seeing and being profoundly moved by the sight of American fathers and mothers finding and

touching the names of their dead children, inscribed on the huge wall-monument at Washington to those who died in the Vietnam War.

In our world, often as cruel as ancient times and sometimes crueller, the barbarous abuse of the helpless human body goes on. We may no longer put heads on spikes, or impale, or crucify our enemies as the conquerors and generals of the past once did. But, as Amnesty can testify, the torture and humiliation of prisoners goes on in the hidden prisons and prison camps of the great powers of our world—and the lesser ones. Terrorists blow apart buildings and destroy their inhabitants without regard to their age, gender or civilian status. In the seclusion of family homes, and in too many state and church institutions, women and children are bashed, subjected to sexual assault and sometimes killed—our own New Zealand government has just instituted an official enquiry into historic abuse in its own borstals and orphanages—and the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church have asked for their own religious institutions to be included, following the revelations of what has gone on in countries like America, Ireland and Australia. The hatred stirred up in civil war has led to the corpses of fighters and civilians alike being left to rot in the ruined streets. Can you remember the lime-pit mass burials of victims in World War II, or the awful piles of skulls in Cambodia under Pol Pot, or the sights of horror at Auschwitz and Belsen? And savage bullying as well as physical violence has become a plague on our social media—especially among children and young adults.

In all these circumstances (and many more), the holiness of life preached by the all religions of the world and the values of sheer human decency and civilised behaviour have been ignored and trampled on. In that respect our little march around our own community is a protest against the callous violence that ravages our own world; a call (largely ignored) to do away with the causes for and the actions of the violent, on our streets, in our homes, at our schools, in some of our most respected professions and institutions (medicine and law) in our communities.

But I call on you to salvage from this commemoration of corruption and cruelty, that constitutes what we are pleased to call Good Friday, the few signs of human goodness, compassion, pity and steadfast love we can find in the gospel accounts of the death of Jesus.

Two men risked the anger and rejection of their own privileged communities, let alone the possible hostility of the Roman governor, to rescue that torn body and give it decent burial.

A group of women risked social disapproval and worse, to attend a very public execution, and to demonstrate their willingness to give proper and loving funeral rites to a criminal officially condemned by the Roman state and the Jewish religious establishment—that is, by the most powerful males in their world.

Let us all take courage from their courage. And it *will* take courage to declare our faith in the slain Jesus to an indifferent or even a hostile world, preoccupied with pop singers and personal gain. Let us honour their love, their loyalty and their faith in the way we live our own lives. **Amen**

COLIN GIBSON'S REFLECTION ON GOOD FRIDAY