

The Jewish rulers and the crowd. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 14 November 2012.

The date today is the 14th of November, and it is 43 years to the day since, on the 14th of November in 1969, the Apollo 12 spacecraft, the second manned mission to the moon, was launched from Cape Canaveral in the United States. And that day, the then-President, Richard Nixon, was the first US President to attend the lift-off of any manned space flight. And this reminds me of the occasion about four months before – on the 24th of July 1969 – when, following the safe return to earth of Apollo 11, Richard Nixon had greeted three astronauts, two of whom, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin,¹ had just three days before put the first human footprints on the surface of the moon.

In Richard Nixon's own words at the time, 'When I talked with them through the window of their quarantine chamber, it was hard to contain my enthusiasm or my awe at the thought that the three men on the other side of the glass had just returned from the moon. I said impulsively, "This is the greatest week in the history of the world since Creation". This statement earned the President a gentle word of rebuke from his long-time friend Billy Graham – 'Mr President, I know exactly how you felt, and I understand exactly what you meant, but, even so, I think you may have been a little excessive'.

And we know this morning that the events of the first 'Passion Week' made it, not, as Richard Nixon said, 'the greatest week in the history of the world since Creation', but, indeed, the greatest week ever.

And, as most of you know, week by week, we have been considering characters who played some role in Passion Week, in the crucifixion and death of our Lord Jesus. Last week, Mervyn spoke to us about the soldiers, and it falls to me this week to look with you at the Jewish rulers and the crowd of passers-by. And my Bible reading comes from a merging of the accounts given by two of the gospel writers – Matthew and Luke² ...

When they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him. And those who passed by reviled Him, wagging their heads and saying, 'You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, *save yourself!* If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross'. Likewise the rulers also sneered, saying, 'He saved others; *let Him save Himself* if He is the Christ, the chosen of God. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him'. The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, *save yourself*. And one of the malefactors (one of the criminals) hanging there railed at Him, saying, 'Aren't you the Christ? *Save yourself and us*'.

And I want to think with you of two taunts which were flung in our Lord's teeth by both the Jewish leaders (the chief priests, scribes and elders, as they were known) and by those who 'passed by' at the time. Nor should we be surprised at the constant stream of spectators who walked past. For it's evident that, consistent with the Roman practice of siting crucifixions in public places as a deterrent to any would-be criminals, the place of our Lord's crucifixion was situated beside one of the main roads into Jerusalem. Many pilgrims on their way into the city for the Passover feast would therefore have travelled that way.

I referred to *two* taunts flung in the Saviour's face. *First*, there was the repeated chorus – which you could hardly have missed – 'save yourself' – hurled at Him from every direction. The crowd, we read 'reviled' Him. As they looked across at Him they saw Him only as a failure, a loser. Pausing on their way therefore to wag their heads in a gesture of contempt – as if to say, 'so that's what it all came to in the end!' – they poured scorn on something He *had* once said, but which they had entirely misunderstood ... 'You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself!'

For their part, the Jewish leaders had come simply to gloat and to scoff.³ Unwilling to lower themselves to address our Lord directly, they spoke 'to one another', calling out sarcastically in a stage whisper meant for His ears, 'He saved others ('ha, ha'); let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God'.⁴

'Save yourself' ... 'let Him save Himself' ... the idea soon caught on, and within minutes the soldiers who were there to guard Him (of whom Mervyn spoke last week) – 'approaching Him' – lifted their drinking vessels tantalisingly near His parched lips, only to snatch them away again – and then, in all likelihood pointing up to the inscription above His head (which read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews') they (the soldiers) called out cynically, 'If you *are* the king of Jews (as that placard says), save yourself'. And then one of the malefactors added his pennies worth ... taking up the very same refrain, 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself' – but adding his own distinctive twist, 'save yourself *and us*'.

And so it was that from every quarter Jesus was bombarded by the same challenge – 'Save yourself ... save yourself ... save yourself'. And how those words must have stung Him, because He knew what those who voiced them didn't – that, in one sense at least, He could have done just that! Had He not earlier informed Peter that over 72,000 angels hovered no further than a prayer away. But no ... in spite of anything

which either the rulers or the crowd ... or any others ... might say, He would not 'save Himself' – rather, as the apostle Paul once wrote, He 'gave Himself' – and He did it out of love for us, the unlovely.

But I said that I wanted to think with you of *two* taunts flung in our Lord's teeth by those who 'passed by' and by the Jewish rulers. For these two very different groups united, if I might change the picture, to throw down a second gauntlet at His feet.

'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross' was the challenge issued by the crowd ... on the back of which the rulers quickly sneered in effect, 'Yes indeed ... if He is the King of Israel ('King of Israel ... who are you kidding!'), let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him'.

'Come down from the cross' ... 'come down from the cross' was their united demand. But, no, He didn't – no, He wouldn't – come down. And we all know why. In one sense, the Jewish rulers hit the nail on the head, when, among the insults with which they pelted Him, they sneered, 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save'.⁵ For that was the very choice He faced – to come down from the cross and so to save Himself, or to remain there that He might save others. They (the rulers) never realised it, but it wasn't the strength of the nails ... it wasn't the might of Rome ... which held Him there ... they never knew that it took a far greater power to hold Him *on* the cross than it ever would to have brought Him down *from* it. And the only power which could keep Him there was His love ... His fathomless love for each one of us.

Many of us will ponder afresh, God willing, in a few weeks' time, the fact that He had, some thirty years previously, willingly come down from His heaven. And *some* wonder that was! But *the wonder of wonders* is that He, who then willingly came down from His heaven, now refused to come down from His cross.⁶

At the outset, I made the claim that the events of that first Passion Week made it the greatest week ever. But it was this only because, in spite of the taunts flung in His teeth by both the rulers and the crowd, He neither saved Himself nor came down from the cross. Now, if that isn't love ...

Let us pray.

Footnotes

¹ The third astronaut was Michael Collins.

² Matthew 27. 39-43; Luke 23. 33-39.

³ Luke 23. 35.

⁴ Mark 15. 31.

⁵ Matt. 27. 42.

⁶ Almost two years ago to the day, I had occasion to refer to a short novel by a nineteenth century Danish author ... translated into English – or it would have been Double Dutch to me! I didn't have time to fill in the details, but the storyline centred around a plague in the town of Bergamo in Italy. The novel climaxes with a scene in a long-abandoned Cathedral, where an unruly mob led by the local butcher came to ridicule a group of visiting worshippers who had gone there to pray. The mob 'felt', the writer said, 'satisfaction in knowing that each of their blasphemies was a sting in the hearts' of these worshippers.

'Then one from among' the worshippers, he wrote, 'a young monk, rose up and ... preached concerning' God's law, 'that every transgression of which they were guilty would be counted against them "But", our author put into the monk's mouth, "you will say, Christ died for our sins ... But I say to you, hell will not be cheated of a single one of you ... you build upon the cross of Golgotha! Come and look at it!'

Then, having briefly described the actual crucifying of Jesus, the monk continued, 'He on the cross looked down on the soldiers, who were casting lots for His unstitched garment, and on the ... turbulent mob, for whose sake He suffered that they might be saved Those below ... called out to Him', the monk added, "' ... If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross'".

'Then', the monk cried, 'He, the only begotten Son of God was filled with anger, and seeing that they were not worthy of salvation He tore His feet free ... clenched His hands round the nails and tore them out ... He leaped down ... and snatched up His garment, flung it round His shoulders ... and ascended into heaven. The cross', the monk declared, 'stood empty, and the great work of redemption was never completed. There is', the monk concluded, 'no mediator between God and us; there is no Jesus who died for us on the cross!' ... As he uttered these last words', the novel continued, 'a groan of agony went through the church ... in the corners they began to weep. Then the butcher pushed forward ... pale as a corpse, and shouted: "Monk, monk, you must nail Him on the cross again!"'

But that is all fiction, you say. And of course it is. But what if ... what if the Lord Jesus had, as our author imagined the monk claiming, based His work of salvation on whether we were worthy or not? Imagine the nightmare facing us if He had come down from the cross!