

Good Friday 2011

‘Hodie legimus in libro experientiae—Today we are reading in the book of experience.’ In this way almost 900 years ago did St Bernard begin his homilies on the Song of Songs (see *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 3.1). What Bernard said of the Song of Songs, would he not also say of John’s Gospel. *Nonne legimus hodie in libro experientiae?* Must we not still read in the book of experience today? For what we have just heard is not some story about Jesus. What we have heard so beautifully proclaimed was wonderfully written “so that [we] might come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God AND that through believing —so the Evangelist tells us—[we] might have *life* in his name.” (see John 20:31) What we have heard opens for us, not just the pages of some story, but it can—if we give it the chance—open for us the story of our lives.

Of the many pages of that book that the Evangelist puts before us today, there is one I want to spend some time with. John asks us to wonder where are: are we in the space around Jesus or are we in the space around his opponents. Where we want to be is not the problem! Asked whether we want to be in that space where Jesus is king or whether we want to be in the place where Caesar reigns, the answer is clear. It is, as builders and accountants used to say, ‘a no-brainer!’ There isn’t a person in this chapel who does not want to be with Jesus. But where we really are is another matter!

John puts before us two kingdoms, two rules—the rule of the Empire where there is “no king but Caesar” AND another rule, another kingdom which does not conform to the ways of this world (see John 18:36) and yet which makes a claim on those in this world.

If you want to see the Empire, that place where Caesar rules, you don’t have to go the Praetorium, the Empire is already in the garden. It seeks that which is expedient. It goes by results. It erupts in violence. It is not concerned with meeting, but knows how to do a showdown. Yes, in the Praetorium, it shows further its nastiness: it mocks, it degrades.

‘Let’s crown him!’

‘Let’s dress him up!’

‘Let’s do him homage!’ Yes, your majesty; No, your majesty!

And the Empire is wily: shall I crucify your king? (see John 19:15). Those who engage with it know its power, what it can execute ... and they have an acute sense of its weaknesses, its pressure points Oh yes! And they use them.

But there is another power in this story. There is another *IMPERIUM*. There is another rule. It is the rule around Jesus; the *imperium* within him.

It is a rule with meets and keeps on meeting one’s opponents: *who is it you are looking for?*

It is a rule in which one knows who one is: *I am he!*

It is a rule in which there is concern for others, especially for the little ones: *if I am the one you are looking for, let these others go free!*

It is a rule which demands accountability from all: *if I have spoken wrongly, tell me what I said, if not ... why do you strike me?*

It is a rule in which the truth is proclaimed and owned: *I have always spoken openly in the synagogues and in the temple ...*

It is a rule which demands partiality: *everybody who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.*

And it is a rule which is so strong that it can let itself be handed over to the power of the Empire ... because it knows the Empire can NEVER contain it: *You would have no power over me unless it were given you from above...*

It is into this drama that we are drawn. This is not just a story about Pilate and the High Priests, about Peter and a beloved disciple in the past. No, this is a story and always has been a story about Peter and some beloved disciple in the present.

We are like Peter, we are like the one who hangs around the door until someone brings him in ...

We are like Peter ... who does not know who or what he is ... 'I am not' ... 'I am not' ... 'I am not.'

We are like Peter ... still somewhere in the courtyard ... out in the cold, warming ourselves by that charcoal fire [*anthrakia*; see John 18:18] ... nervous, heads down, among people who might ask the wrong question ... while inside ... where we want to be is the one who speaks the truth, the one we sense we love, who does the truth ... who offers us life and life to the full (see John 8:20, 21:17, 3:21 and 10:10).

In this Liturgy in a few moments time, we will go in procession. A procession is a journey. We journey from where we are to where Christ is. We journey from where Peter is, in the *aula*, the courtyard of the High Priest—half in/half out—to where, as he is called in today's Second Reading, the High Priest is. We journey to the Cross.

As we move in mystery, we take a step away from the Empire of Caesar and towards the Rule of God. My sisters, my brothers, let us embrace the cross, let us embrace the way of God, so that some other morning, like Peter, an uninvited host, may cook fish for us at another charcoal fire. (see 21:9 which also reads *anthrakia*)

Come with me! Let us kiss the cross. Let us step away from Caesar and towards Christ. Let us pray for the world. Let us embrace all whom God loves.