

SEVEN DAYS



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στην εύχαριστία

JESUS *called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said:*

'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'

Matthew 18: 2-4.

SEVEN DAYS

The narrative of the seven days from Palm Sunday to Easter Day is charged, fast moving, and shockingly inevitable.

This poem explores the events of these seven days from the perception of a child. The aim is to look at the actual events through fresh eyes, and what better than the eyes of a child who is seen and not heard, and more often not seen, yet a child who could move unobserved and observe undetected.

I am indebted to Dr Alan Acheson and Professor Roddy Cowie who read this poem in draft

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SEVEN DAYS

THE PROLOGUE

This is the story of a whole seven days
told through the eyes of a little boy;
events which were seismic and life changing
and filled his heart at once with pain and joy.
He noticed what others failed to see,
often what is plain before their eyes.
Hear again some childlike, common-sense wisdom
from the week when Jesus dies.

PALM SUNDAY

I am not the age to know the law,
but there are things which I have seen:
like when they took a very gentle man
and dressed him up like a king.
He, sat on a colt, but not a figure of fun,
and his eyes were full and bright;
and I was locked in his gentle charm
and I followed him day and night.
I don't have a family so sometimes I beg,
and I am ashamed of what I do to survive,
but I thought he made life beautiful
and it was so good to be alive.

The crowds, hosanna shouting,
loud and long and cheering
and no one, no one doubting
and no one, no one jeering.
That for this man,
this lovely man,
my city had a purpose
my city had a plan;
and in this plan, there may well be
just a little crumb of hope
for a little crumb like me.
I read people's faces,
I have never learned to read a book,
but I get all my answers,
where no one thinks to look.
I am jostled and shoved about,
and pushed about in the growing crowd,
I am trampled on and sometimes left bleeding,
unnoticed, bloodied and unbowed.

So I will wait some way off then follow,
the crowd will soon get bored,
but I like what I have seen
in this man they are calling the Lord.
They are stripping back the palm trees
wherever they are found,
and waving the palm branches,
they even throw them on the ground.
Then they take off coats and garments,
when no more branches could be had,
and throw them on the dusty pathways:
Jerusalem was having a party and everyone was glad.

After all the dancing, the singing and the fun,
I stayed and watched on quietly;
then I followed in the background
as Jesus left the city and went to Bethany.
Early next morning, he stopped and cursed a fruitless fig,
the very tree under which I had slept;
and when he caught sight of Jerusalem
he covered his face and wailed and wept.

THE TEMPLE

I followed this very gentle man Jesus
and listened as he talked;
although keeping at a distance
I followed everywhere he walked.
In the temple court he drew a crowd:
and the priests raised their quizzical eyes,
and they tipped off the temple guard,
and they briefed their priestly spies.
They were watching this gentle Jesus
and I knew it all along:
they were waiting for that moment
and for the foot he might put wrong.
The temple court was buzzing
like crowds at wedding feasts,
with traders exchanging temple coins
or selling birds and beasts.
The noise made my ears ring
and the smells hung heavy in the air,
and people traded and argued
in God's own house of prayer.
Those tears were in his eyes again
and the pain told on his face,
as he took a rope to whip the crowd
and started to clear the place.
The people ran for cover
as he scattered tables like leaves:
'God's house is a house of prayer' he said
'and you have made it a den for thieves.'
Then a gentler Jesus left the temple
watched by the priestly spies;
I thought to myself 'you've done it now',
and the tears bubbled up in my eyes.
I really cannot work out what this man has done,
and was it really so bad or wrong

the same people are not happy now
and they sing a different song.
The laughs have all turned nervous now,
there are no more friendly cheers;
they mock and jeer and shout at him
and his bright eyes fill again with tears.

PASSOVER MEAL

I squeezed between the rafters
into that upper room,
intruding but unobtrusive
hidden in the rafter gloom.
I perched myself upon a beam,
a secure secluded seat,
from where I watched him, towel on his knees,
stoop to wash each one's dusty feet.
I watched him keeping Passover
surrounded by some of his friends,
calling to mind God's faithful deliverance
and how in this remembering we are making amends.
I have never shared a Passover meal,
with no home, no family, or table or bread;
I have watched it often from a distance,
but there was something different in what he said.
He took the bread from the table,
he broke it and shared it around
he said; 'this is my body it is broken for you,
do this: you are honour bound.'
He lifted the cup sitting before him,
and as he invited them to take and drink
his words again were unusual,
making those who heard them sit up, attend, and think.
'I am making a new covenant with you
in this, this is the cup of my blood spilled;
and as often as you drink this cup
you remember my work finished and fulfilled.'

Judas seemed to catch my attention:
he seemed to change as he took the bread,
as though something headstrong and inevitable
filled his heart and ruled his head.

JUDAS & THE SANHEDRIN

You see, the Sanhedrin were busy plotting,
their spies had filed report,
and what was going to happen
was fully sanctioned by their court.
The Prince and Father of the Court
jostled and bustled and pushed me by,
but something about Judas, Jesus' friend,
suddenly caught my eye.
They were locked deep in conversations,
and I suddenly got the feeling
that this so-called disciple who cared about Jesus,
was clearly double-dealing.
I moved a little closer,
and I listened and I heard
that Judas would betray him:
I heard every single word.
I saw them give him money,
and they agreed that it would happen just like this:
he would identify the one they want to trap
with a gentle loving kiss.
Now Judas, everyone knows, is a hothead
and I've heard his name before;
he got his big bag of silver
but I guess he's looking something more.
He is a rabble-rouser
and willing to take a stand,
and maybe with his double-dealing
he aims to force someone else's hand.
Maybe, that's at the heart of all his dealing,
his cunning and his stealth;
I hope there is another explanation
and he's not just in it for himself.

THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE

Torch lit and shaking shadows
of Gethsemane in the night;
uncomfortable for well-fed sleepy disciples
who could not shake off the feeling something wasn't right.
They sat down; they lay back
and they briefly closed their eyes;
Jesus went off to pray alone
amidst tears, and groans and cries.
Like them, I tried to keep awake,
but my whole body ached and longed for sleeping;
and as I nodded, and drifted and jolted awake
I heard, at distance, Jesus praying through his weeping.
I woke with a start, by the disciples' voices,
Jesus asked them why did they stay:
why, when they could not watch one hour with him
when he begged them to watch and pray.
Fear now hung heavy in the air
Along with the fog of disturbed sleep;
One disciple came back while the others slept on,
Judas made a promise he meant to keep.

Torches, spears and cudgels
and a ready whipped-up crowd,
Jesus would be seized and tried
on this they were avowed.
The disciples awoke in a panic
and the noise and suddenness heightened their fear;
In the tussle and skirmish confusion
Peter cut off a temple guard's ear.
Jesus, wholly calm amid the chaos
told Peter to forswear his sword,
and turning to the wounded guard
with a healing touch and soothing word.

THE TRIAL OF JESUS

The trial of Jesus
was a show trial of the very best,
which was bound to unnerve the Roman Empire
and impress those who oppressed.
Jesus was bound and subdued like a wild man
by soldiers, one with dried blood around his ear;
then they brought him to the house of Annas,
goaded him on with sword and spear.
Annas determined a case to be answered,
on his recommendation, as if there was doubt;
Jesus was brought before Caiaphas,
high priest, high-minded, devious and devout.
Before Caiaphas and before the Sanhedrin,
he was guilty before the trial had begun;
the odds were heavily stacked against him
in this court of seventy-one to one.
Three times Caiaphas passed sentence
three times he condemned him to die
and there was no dissent amongst the Sanhedrin
as each one affirmed the party lie.
The high priest tore his clothes -
it was very dramatic but I doubt they were his best -
and those who saw it, Sanhedrin and paid witnesses,
could not fail but to be impressed.
I know what it is like to live life in rags,
I do not do it for dramatic effect,
my rags are not for spectators,
but the reality of a life of neglect.
The witnesses who witnessed nothing
have condemned Jesus to his death;
each one with their payment purse of silver
will hold their tongue and stop his breath.

Peter stood far off in the courtyard
as he tried to keep well out of sight,
then I saw the one I followed
through the smoke-filled dappled light.
Then a girl by the hissing brazier
looks Peter right in the eye:
'you know the man they've arrested',
he turned to her and started to deny.
'You follow him, I know you, I saw you,'
the flushed-faced servant girl chimes;
'I've seen him, heard him, don't know him,'
Peter said 'and I've told you how many times?'
Peter denies him and curses them all for good measure,
and they seem to back down at his warning.
Then the uneasy silence is shattered
as a cock crows to welcome the morning.
On the night when Peter denied him,
Judas realized that in life he could do nothing worse
than betray the one he had followed,
for ready-money and a priestly purse.
He returned with the silver to the temple
knowing then what he would go on to do
thirty pieces the price of betrayal
and the cost not of one life but two.

THE TRIAL BEFORE PILATE

In the court of Pontius Pilate
I saw this gentle friend,
I also saw again his paid accusers
and I knew how this all would end.
I saw a very reluctant Pilate
drawn into yet more local-driven strife,
and in an ante-room where he was summoned
I heard the pleading warning from his wife.
This lady was deeply agitated,
she could see through the plotting and plan,
and counselled her Governor-husband,
'have nothing to do with this man.'
Pilate was a seasoned politician,
wholly professional and yet a people pleaser,
who knew the game-playing and veiled threats
of those who claim to have no king but Caesar.
Three times Pilate said he was faultless,
three times he declared he should live;
but his accusers started to mutter sedition,
leaving the Governor no wriggle room or the will to forgive.

THE TRIAL BEFORE HEROD

Herod it is true is a shrewd old fox,
who knows how to play the game,
to spin injustice as justice served,
then let others take the blame.
Herod, they say, is a puppet king
and therefore afraid of other kings,
and like other puppet rulers
his hold is as fragile as his puppet strings.
He hates his Roman masters
and no matter what he says,
his words ring hollow in his mouth
as he flatters them with fulsome, faint-hearted praise.
Herod's fragile, fractured image -
this self-protecting puppet pleaser -
was tormented and terrified
by those who would have no king but Caesar.
True, these hollow honeyed words
had helped him both survive and progress;
but what if his kingdom starts believing
those supplanters, and they leave him no room for redress?
Herod mad with fear and jealousy
in his half-life of myth, fear and lie,
determined to turn the tables on Pilate
as he determined that Jesus would die.
The many bit players in this story -
And I can't help but think I am one -
swept up and along in the momentum
of something which is long since begun.

THE SECOND TRIAL BEFORE PILATE

They brought Jesus back before Pilate
and they brought him there for one reason:
knowing Pilate cared nothing of blasphemy
but could not turn a blind eye to treason.
They came and they brought more paid accusers'
unreliable testimony, more of the same kind,
to please the people-pleasing governor
and leave him with only one verdict in mind.
Pilate could find no crime in him
but knew such a judgement to be self-defeating;
So, to try to appease those who were out to make trouble
he said he would administer a beating.
The beating by the Romans inflicted
was not just a publicity-staged smack:
the flagellum, this scourge with razor-sharp claws,
lacerated, blow by blow, this gentle man's back.
The beating, I don't really remember it,
I think I fainted shortly after it began,
was one hundred blows with no mercy,
and not the Jewish forty lashes save one.
The flagellum was vicious in construction
(to inflict eighteen wounds with each blow) I recall;
I remember the flesh, bone and blood around it,
where it hung in the governor's court hall.
The soldiers cast lots for his clothing,
simple clothing of the artisan kind,
the type which I wear when found on the street;
which the dead and forgetful leave behind.
After this, long thorns were shaped like a crown,
pulled down on his head piercing his brow;
they made him a cloak, now with blood seeping through it,
creating a spectacle king before which no one would bow.
Pilate, in deference to the Passover custom,
considered pardoning him as the scourging began;

but the crowd called for the release of Barabbas
and cried, 'crucify him, crucify him, crucify this man'.
Pilate was losing patience with their bloodlust,
take him yourselves to crucify;
they pleaded their own law's prohibitions
in order to confront, control and defy.
Knowing that this man is innocent,
yet allowing that the wrong judgement stands,
Pilate, for dramatic effect, with no scruples
of his verdict publicly washed his hands.
His hands, at least in his eyes, but if others
were legally and ritually made clean,
but they drip with the blood of the innocent;
his actions, are cowardly, contrived and obscene.
Pilate gave in and ordered crucifixion,
and knowing it would confound their views,
ordered a sign to be hung up above him:
'Jesus of Nazareth the king of the Jews.'

THERE THEY CRUCIFIED HIM

I do not have any parents
to cover my eyes from the things I should not see,
and I stand mouth open as they nailed him down
then hoist him up on to the tree.
I once got a thorn right through my hand,
and there is the soldier who gently cut it out
now driving nails through Jesus' wrists and feet:
what, what is this really all about?
I followed him from that palm-strewn street,
by his smiles and touch he called me his friend;
now his loudest supporters are nowhere to be seen
but me, I am staying here to the end.
I have known this man for only a week
and already I am fearing his loss,
as I follow him to his inevitable death
on a Roman traitor's cross.

The weight of the heavy cross-beam,
and perhaps with that the weight of all glory,
caused him to stumble, stagger and fall
degraded, and bloodied and gory.
This now very-Roman spectacle,
their pageantry of this holy fool,
was timed for maximum effect
for those who question Roman rule.
Flogged and acquitted then murdered,
that was justice by injustice amended;
rendering him, his blasphemy and sedition,
an example: executed, threat ended.

SEVEN WORDS

His voice, now weak, as he fought for each breath,
and each strained whisper I struggled to hear,
but beyond the torment, effort and strain
he spoke with conviction, without anger or fear.
He spoke to his father but the carpenter was dead,
and he turned his eyes as he spoke towards heaven:
he pleaded the ignorance of those who sought his life,
and he begged his father that they would be forgiven.
He closed his eyes as he was talked across
by the men to his left and his right,
who had very different outlooks on things
as they faced their creator that night.
One was full of mocking bravado,
playing to the crowd and making a fuss;
he then turned to Jesus and berated him,
'why don't you save yourself and us'.
The other man spoke sharply, then,
'Lord, remember me when this day is done,
if there is room for me in your kingdom,
forgive me and bid this sorry thief come.'
'When you close your eyes to this skyline
and this world's lifetime of cunning and vice,
you will awaken renewed in my kingdom:
today you will be with me in paradise.'
I saw him look at a woman in grief,
then catching the eye of another
he said to her, 'behold your son',
and to his friend, 'behold your mother'.
The man put his cloak round her shoulders
and held her close to his side;
and together, the hold was unbroken
as her son, their saviour, died.

The enormous weight he carried
evident for the whole crowd to see,
to the one he knew would not abandon him
he cried, 'why have you forsaken me?'
My God, my God why have you forsaken me
his cry chilled me right to the bone,
and I picture God's heart torn open with sorrow
that he felt forsaken and, in this moment, alone.
'I thirst', he cried through his gasping,
'I thirst', but what could we give?
the guard offered a sponge, I think soaked in vinegar,
to ease his suffering as he struggled to live.
'It is finished', we knew that already
and those words choke me yet as I repeat;
in his cry his resolve was undiminished
as he wrestled victory from the mouth of defeat.
He spoke again to his father
clearly gasping as each death gasp demands,
my life in obedient surrender
'I commend my spirit into your hands.'
He died then, the centurion confirmed it,
then they brought him down from the cross.
As thunder and storm broke the silence
heaven mourning the incalculable loss.

DEATH & BURIAL

With my friends I have played funerals and weddings
with their familiar dirges and dance;
but this time, this one is different,
to child play and childish romance.
I have never been to a funeral like this,
In my world life is cheap on the street:
I've seen the bodies of my friends carried off
who have been murdered or died in their sleep.
Gethsemane where I sleep some nights,
I creep in through a hole by an uprooted tree;
of all the places I have ever slept
this is the place where I most want to be.
I want to be near to him
although his life now has ended,
but his grave is guarded and the stone is secured,
and the hole of the wall has been mended.
Who would want to steal the body
of this lovely, lovely man?
what would be their motivation,
never mind the outcome of such a plan?
I do not know the man Simon
the man who gave Jesus his grave,
but I am grateful that he has done so -
his actions were both beautiful and brave.
I have no parents' grave I can visit,
but this place there is no denying
seems to be made extra special,
by the life he lived and the manner of his dying.
Several times through the night
the guards approached me and said run along,
I can't believe I haven't slept yet
and it is already approaching the dawn.

THE WOMEN AND THE GARDENER

I heard the chattering voices
just as my eyes were closing,
I was constantly fighting sleep
and giving in to dozing.
The women wafting spices
arrived at the start of the day,
they had their rites to be doing
but the gravestone had been thrown away.
Half-crazed with grief and anger,
their chatter gave way to shouting
when face to face with the gardener,
seeing, and believing and doubting.
Where, where have you taken his body
this grave was given for his use?
to rob it and somehow discard the body
is obscene and compounding his abuse.
Her arms at this point flailing
and her face stained with a night-time of tears;
then the gardener softly spoke her name: Mary
at once ending her grief and her fears.
Master, she answered him, eyes wide open,
knowing him by the sound of his voice,
not seeing and believing but hearing and obeying
gave Mary real cause to rejoice.
The women had been collecting their items -
jars of nard are too costly to waste -
they ran off to tell all the others
leaving the unopened jar in their haste.

THE DISCIPLES

The disciples each thinking themselves loyal
and each of them now counting the cost,
each shook by this state sanctioned murder
and each of them now equally lost.
They needed each other's company
through their nightmare which overshot the night,
to talk, relive and ask questions,
in their world of right wronged by wronged right.

THOMAS

Thomas refused to believe the news -
he had not been with the others -
and desperately praying that it would be true
he would not be duped like his brothers.
It wasn't that Thomas was sceptical
and he didn't set out to deride,
but he wanted proof and certainty
such as the wounds on Jesus' hands and his side.
I find myself thinking back only days
to people with palm branches, cheering and shouting;
and despite their deserting and denying,
it is Thomas who is solely singled out for doubting.
Thomas face to face again with Jesus
found his proof tests would not be denied,
as Jesus invited him to come close and explore
the nail-wounds on his hands and spear-gash on his side.
Thomas did not need that proof
and he was both overjoyed and overawed,
face to face with the risen Jesus
he responded, 'my Lord and my God'.
I see Thomas from time to time
and I owe a lot to his so-called doubt,
because by his faith yet seeking understanding
he has helped this little doubter out.

THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

I have never walked the road to Emmaus,
I have never really felt the need,
but if I thought Jesus would come along with me
I would start off a great stampede.
Two disciples of Jesus, Cleopas?! (I'm not certain of names)
were journeying that day to that place;
they talked of events of the past seven days,
then a stranger suddenly joined them and kept pace.
They talked and he listened and asked questions,
about events of the week that was past,
and they recounted the events in Jerusalem
detailing them first to last.
They told of the plotting and scheming,
he told of God's purpose and plan,
they spoke of Israel's redemption,
he told how the prophets foretold this man.
This man - their travelling companion -
who listened and taught them on the way,
awaited their heartfelt invitation;
to come in, eat supper and stay.
The day was running on into evening -
with evening robbing the day of the light -
'why don't you stay with us and have supper
and if you want to you can stay here tonight?'
The stranger joined them to have supper,
and as he took, broke and blessed the bread,
their eyes at once seemed to spring open
to see Jesus now raised from the dead.
With eyes opened, the unbelievable believing -
they could not contain their delight -
when Jesus disappeared from their presence,
they returned to Jerusalem that night.

EPILOGUE

Pilate, I hear, is a much-changed man,
now wringing the hands that he washed,
unseen and unheard since his past verdict
over which Jesus' detractors rejoiced.
There are those too amongst the Sanhedrin
who rightly must share in the blame,
they are looking back now on their judgement,
and their actions then now fill them with shame.
The disciples are watching and praying
although Judas died by his own hand,
and the news that Jesus who died has now risen
is consuming, like wildfire, this land.
The accusers forgot one other witness
who knew the outcome despite all the plotting to come:
God, who sees and knows of each sparrow-fall,
judged their misjudgement, and raised up his son.
The palm branches, praises and singing
now seem such a long time ago,
when I first saw this comparative stranger;
but there is one thing which now I know.
The impression Jesus has made on me
has won my lasting love, devotion and praise,
offering a new story, new life and adventure
even more spectacular than these last seven days.

SEVEN DAYS

DEVOTIONAL AND LITURGICAL USE IN LENT, HOLY WEEK AND EASTER

The rule for using the poem seven days devotionally and liturgically is simple. What can be done individually can be done collectively and what can be done collectively can also be done individually.

I offer some possible uses for the poem as a liturgical and devotional tool, doubtless there are many more depending on context and resources available, whether two or three or two or three hundred gather together.

LITURGICAL USES IN LENT, HOLY WEEK AND EASTER

Using the poem liturgically during Holy Week can be as flexible as it needs to be. It could be read in its entirety as a reflective and devotional piece allowing pause after each section for reflection.

The poem can also be read sequentially throughout the services of Holy Week or it can be read selectively with certain parts used to preface a Scripture reading or as a stand-alone reflection.

Using the poem throughout Holy Week is simply a matter of reading each part on the corresponding day.

As the final section which focuses upon the resurrection is significantly longer it might be appropriate to read it all or in part on Easter Eve in the context of an Easter Vigil or Saturday evening service: given that the day begins at sunset then it is entirely appropriate to do this.

DEVOTIONAL USE THROUGH LENT, HOLY WEEK AND EASTER

Again, the use of the poem can be as flexible as it needs to be. It can be read along with a particular Lenten study book; it can be read as a story at the beginning of Lent or Holy Week as the overture of the events which will be explored in greater detail. Perhaps it could be read to children, older children, as a bedtime story or used in the context of family devotions. The poem is an imagining of the events of Holy Week and should be used however imagination takes you. Imagination embraces the entire world which began and is made new through the imagination of God.