

## SOLITUDE SHORTS *from* HODDER FAITH

ESSAYS IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

*Solitude Shorts* is a series of essays from Hodder & Stoughton, provided free of charge for Christian reflection during the Covid-19 pandemic. Isolation may well be the word of the moment, but perhaps we might rather reframe this time as one set apart for solitude, something Christians have sought throughout the ages. For we are never isolated from God, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves, in the words of St Augustine. As the title suggests, the essays are all brief, taking approximately only five minutes to read. Please distribute them to whomever you feel might gain some encouragement. If you would like to receive these essays directly on publication, please [fill in your details here](#) to be added to our newsletter. With particular resonance, perhaps, for the current pandemic, today we reflect on two deaths that happen to people in isolation: our saviour Jesus, but also Judas, who betrayed him. We know now, of course, death did not ultimately triumph, but for Jesus and his disciples, victory did not, on this day, seem within their grasp. All seemed bleak. Nick Pages offers thoughts from his book *The Longest Week*.

### The Longest Week: Good Friday

*by*

Nick Page

#### *The Death of Judas*

There are two accounts of the death of Judas. The only thing they have in common is a place – Akeldama, or the field of blood. According to Luke, Judas bought the field with the money he had earned for betraying Jesus. In the field he seems to have exploded: ‘...he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out’ (Acts 1:18). Matthew’s account is less dramatic, though no less shocking. He depicts Judas as bitterly regretting what he had done. When he saw Jesus condemned, he threw the money back into the Temple and went and hanged himself. For Matthew it was the chief priests who bought the field on the grounds the money was now impure, so could not be returned to the Temple.

How are we to reconcile these two accounts? I’m not sure that we can. What they indicate, it seems to me, are that different traditions about the death of Judas circulated in the early Church. But they knew he died, in a violent manner, and close to the time of Christ’s death. The horror of what Judas had done would not have been lost on Jewish readers: ‘Cursed is anyone who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person,’ it says in the Torah (Deuteronomy 27:25). It’s a curse that doesn’t seem to affect the Temple aristocracy, whose response can be paraphrased as ‘not our problem’. To Judas, their response is like a slap in the face. He casts the money down and leaves. To ancient readers, Judas’s remorseful suicide may well have been seen as an additional sign of disgrace, rather than viewed with compassion. Jewish attitudes to suicide were harsher than in our day, and one did not mourn openly. The body was not buried, but exposed until sunset.

This is what links the two stories. Akeldama was also a burial ground for ‘strangers’. The traditional site is outside the present walls in the Wadi Kidron. In Old Testament times this was the burial ground of the common people (2 Kings 23:6; Jeremiah 26:23), where objects or people rejected by the kings of Israel were cast down. In the times of the Temple it was where the water that rinsed away the blood from the sacrifices was supposed to flow.

At the Last Supper, in Matthew’s account, Jesus gave three predictions about his future, all of which have come to pass. Peter has denied him (Matthew 26:69–75) and the disciples have fled (26:56). The third prophecy was that someone at the table would betray him. And for that person there was to be the feeling common to so many who despair: better to have never been born (Matthew 26:24).

## The Death of Jesus

According to Mark, at 3.00 p.m., Jesus gave a 'loud cry'. The Greek indicates that this was a scream of urgency, a cry for help: a prayer, in fact. The translation of *phone megale* is literal, but cannot possibly capture the intensity of a man screaming out from the cross. Mark says that Jesus screamed out a verse from a psalm in Aramaic: *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?* which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). The quotation comes from Psalm 22, and is the only statement uttered by Jesus on the cross that Mark records. It is a cry of utter isolation, and is almost certainly authentic. One cannot imagine a later writer, a follower of a triumphant Christ, making up a cry of such utter despair. There is something touching about the language. One of Jesus' most characteristic habits was the use of the familiar Aramaic word *abba*. Here, too, he lapses back into his mother tongue. At this moment, though, 'abba' seems almost incomprehensibly distant. The people standing by mistake the words, thinking that the Aramaic *Eloi* is the same as the Hebrew word for Elijah. It has been questioned whether Roman soldiers would have understood about Elijah; but this is one more indication that the auxiliaries were local. Roman legionaries would not have known about Elijah, but Samaritan recruits would have spoken Aramaic. Was it a cry of failure, or a cry of recognition? Traditional theology argues that this was the point of abandonment, when Jesus was suffering for all humankind, but we should remember that it was a prayer, and prayer always implies the hope that someone, despite appearances, is listening. And Psalm 22 ends with vindication and restoration.

All the Gospels record Jesus being offered sour wine, or wine mixed with vinegar. Luke places it earlier in his narrative, John and the Synoptics just before the end, but there's no reason to think that he was offered it only once during the ordeal. John's account is the most detailed. Jesus says, 'I am thirsty' and someone puts a sponge on a branch of hyssop, dips it in sour wine and holds it to Jesus' lips. The use of a branch does not indicate that Jesus was out of reach, it was merely a tool for transferring some of the liquid from the jar to Jesus, without using a cup. The offer of sour wine may have been a continuation of the mockery, although by now I think mockery would have been a bit pointless. The wine that was standing there in a jar (John 19:29) was simply the commonest sort of drink, the red peasant wine drunk by the ordinary soldier. Immediately after taking a drink, Jesus dies. In Matthew and Mark he gives a loud cry; in John he says 'It is finished'; in Luke he says 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46). And with that, it was finished. Just another death of a failed revolutionary; just another ritual killing on this day of ritual killings; just another daily sacrifice for the well-being of the Empire.

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