

TEACHING NOTES

'The Colours of Good Friday' - 10 April 2020

Isaiah 52:13-53:12, John: 19:1-16

Easter occurs in Autumn in our part of the world. There's still the warmth of summer during the day but mornings and evenings can be chilly. The shadows lengthen, sap slows in the trees and the leaves turn the most incredible mix of colours: orange, gold, and red. Summer is passing and winter beckons. Our seasons are well defined and the colours of autumn are very special.

In Scripture colours have deep spiritual significance. The colours associated with the persecution and crucifixion of Jesus Christ on Good Friday include purple, red, and black, and each has meaning rooted in the history of God's people, the Israelites. Purple is associated with royalty and authority, e.g. Gideon, Israel's fifth judge, enjoyed pendants, ornaments and a purple garment, but sadly became lured by an accumulation of wealth (**Judges 8:26**). In Esther's time, (**1:6**) the Persian king Xerxes loved to flaunt his wealth with purple hangings and marble pillars and later in that story (**8:15**), Mordecai exposed an assassination plot against the king and was elevated in status and robed in a gold and purple garment. Similarly, Nebuchadnezzar promised to clothe Daniel in a purple and a gold chain if he could read the writing on the wall (**Daniel 5:16**).

Even in modern times, at Queen Elizabeth's Coronation at Westminster Abbey in June 1953, the new monarch wore a purple robe of velvet covered in golden embroidery.

Purple is a mix of red and blue, and blue is sometimes associated with the law or commandments of God, and red, with blood.

Red symbolizes seduction, violence, danger, anger, and adventure. For the ancient Greeks red symbolised super-human heroism and it's also the colour associated with the crucifixion.

For the Israelites red represented the shedding of blood. In **Hebrews 9:22** it says, 'In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.' The Temple rituals involved elaborate cleansing and purification, and once a year the high priest would enter the sacred enclosure known as 'The Holy of Holies' to offer animal sacrifices and burnt offerings. This atoned for sin but it had to be repeated. One way to think about ancient sacrifices is as "gifts" given to God. When performing a sacrifice, the Israelites gave to God some of what they believed had been given to them, expressing their close relationship and seeking to deepen their fellowship bond with Yahweh. We read in **Leviticus 1:13** that God received the *smoke* of the burning sacrifice as a "pleasing aroma" and this provided a fellowship meal with human beings in God's dwelling on earth – the Temple. That seems remote, distant, and hard for us to identify with; cruel even. But it was a sacrifice in a culture where animals were both expendable and prized. They were often associated with one's livelihood and for the healthiest and most valued animal to be offered was indeed a sacrifice.

This brings us to our third colour: black, which symbolises judgement, mourning, evil, and death. Black can't be seen on our spectrum of colour and represents a complete absence of light. It is the only colour to absorb light (a black object in direct sunlight warms more quickly than one painted white). There are many places in the Old Testament that refer to the spiritual significance of black, Job, for example, understood that the dead went to a joyless, dark place, which black readily helps us imagine. (e.g. **Job 10:21-22; 30:28, Jeremiah 14:2, Lamentations 5:10**).

Considering these three colours is one way of approaching and understanding Good Friday and the crucifixion.

On Palm Sunday the palm fronds, and shouts of 'Hosanna!' were indeed, fit for a king, and in the week that followed, Jesus was acknowledged as the 'King of the Jews' and given a purple robe to wear. This was a mocking gesture by the Romans, but nevertheless, it was still true. Jesus' robe is described as purple in Mark and John (**Mark 15:17, 20; John 19:2, 5**) but scarlet in Matthew's gospel (**Matthew 27:28, 31**). In poor lighting, the difference would be less apparent since the colours would appear darker.

The purple robe and the mocking reflect the ambivalence many people, even today, have towards Jesus. They see him as a good man and maybe even, a prophet, or king of the Jews, and certainly curious. Maybe he is who he said he was, but who cares? His person and authority are partly acknowledged - and only at a distance. He is not king of kings, prince of peace, or Lord of lords; just an historical curiosity. Many in the Palm Sunday crowd were like this; interested to a point and certainly keen on a spectacle, but ignorant of the identity and authority of Jesus. And so, the whole sham trial proceeded with increasing persecution, humiliation and eventually, death; death on a cross.

Blood and water: red and clear; sacrifice and cleansing. The blackness of that Friday became the once-for-all sacrifice for humanity's sins. Repeated temple rituals were no longer required. God's wrath against the sin of the world was satisfied. To truly understand the crucifixion we need to know about the Old Testament temple, grasp the power of sin and death, and begin to see God's plan for redemption. New life comes from death and death comes from life: it's one of those paradoxes of existence.

If the Easter story ended there, it would be bleak indeed. All the persecutors, doubters, and accusers would be vindicated. No messiah, or king of the Jews. Jesus died. Period. But, *it's Friday and Sunday's coming!* Can you see a glimmer of hope and light in the darkness? Can you see Sunday coming?

A question to ponder

How might you explain the resurrection to someone inquiring?