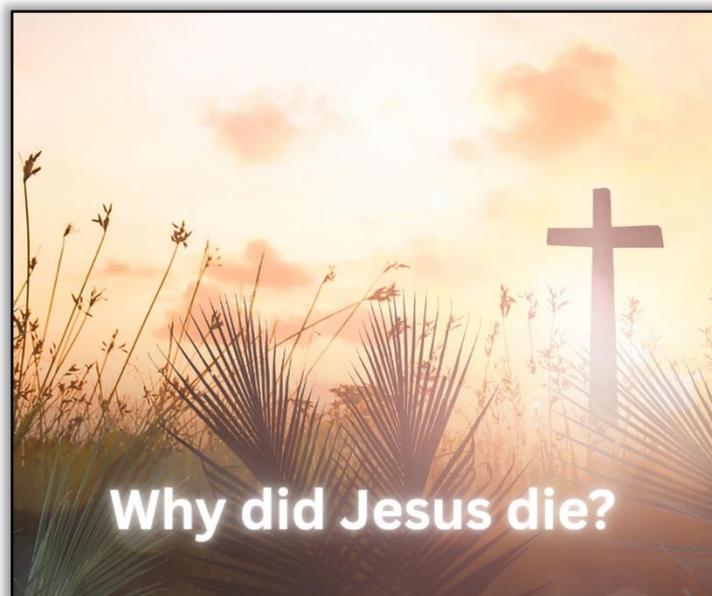


Sermon on Sunday 22 March 2026

by Rev. Bill Church

Readings: Leviticus 16. 20-22 & Matthew 20. 17-19

Passion Sunday



Today is Passion Sunday when we begin the most solemn and significant season of the Christian Year.

All the Gospels tell at length of that period.

Mark devotes more or less one third of his whole Gospel to the last eight days of Jesus' life. It deserves our attention.

I have seen a pamphlet – I think it was an invitation to an Alpha or similar course – with the title, "Why did Jesus have to die?", but I would like to look at a similar question: "Why did Jesus die?" What were the causes of his death? I hope this will not seem too mechanical an approach to a deeply spiritual and emotional subject.

Was the cause diabolical?

In Luke's Gospel, at the end of Jesus' temptations, we are told the devil left him "until an opportune time".

John's Gospel tells us that the devil put it into the mind of Judas to betray Jesus. If that was the devil's plan, it backfired disastrously.

So, I wonder if the "opportune time" was in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus asked for the cup to pass from him – in other words that he could be spared the death that was facing him. And thus undo the whole of God's plan for salvation. I think we need to look elsewhere.

Was the cause political?

The crucifixion was carried out by Roman soldiers so it may be tempting to frame it as the Empire disposing of a freedom fighter, but that would miss the mark.

Jesus never preached against Roman rule. He was aware of it.

He referred to the Galileans gratuitously killed by Pilate but only as an example of bad things happening to innocent people.

He carefully avoided those who tried "to make him king".

He even praised the faith of a Centurion at Capernaum – the officer in charge of the local Roman garrison.

There is no evidence that the Roman authorities were even aware of him until his eventual appearance before Pilate.

Pilate, who was not a good man or a good Governor, only agreed to crucify Jesus because he feared a riot would cause him trouble and further blot his copybook.

He was callous and indifferent, yes (and can we claim we are always that much better?) but he was not the moving cause.

Another lot who might be in the frame are the Pharisees.

They and Jesus debated often and exchanged insults, and they and the early church were mutually hostile, but (except for a

passing reference in John) the Gospels do not name them as among those who plotted against Jesus in the final conflict.

So, we must look elsewhere.

All the Gospels name as the main actors throughout the "Chief Priests" "elders" and "doctors of the law".

John names "the Jews" which means much the same, and not Jews as a whole.

They planned, they paid Judas, they arrested Jesus, they tried him, they argued for Pilate to crucify him and they mocked him on the cross. What about the view of the ordinary people, the attitude of the crowd?

There is well versed story that the crowd who welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday bayed for his death on Good Friday.

One of our eucharistic prayers reflects that and the great hymn by Samuel Crossman includes the words:

"Sometime they strew his way and his sweet praises sing resounding all the day hosannas to their king; then "crucify" is all their breath and for his death they thirst and cry."

That is stark warning of the dangers of adulation and of the fickleness of a crowd.

But hosannas were resounding during the daytime from a crowd including pilgrims up for the festival, while "Crucify" was shouted in the early dawn at Pilate's headquarters by a crowd, likely of insiders drummed up by the Chief Priests.

Certainly, earlier, the Chief Priests had been wary of popular opinion, not wanting to arrest Jesus openly in case it provoked a riot.

So, I think we can acquit "the crowd".

We should accept that the High Priest was genuinely shocked by Jesus' claims, but we have to see that Jesus was a threat to

the priestly monopoly over Temple worship, which for them was a source of power and very much was a source of income.

They cannot have been delighted when Jesus drove the moneychangers from the Temple.

And the theological reason?

From earliest times up to Jesus' day, Jewish worship had included animal sacrifice.

They were familiar with idea, which is foreign to us, that an animal, which had to be a perfect specimen of the right sort of creature, could be offered in thanks or in expiation of sin.

The wretched goat in Leviticus (and there is a painting by Holman Hunt of him looking really wretched), the scapegoat, could also be used to carry away the sins of the people.

That may seem odd to us, but the custom of sin-eating survived in Wales and western England nearly into the 20th century. The sin-eater was paid to take a crust of bread from the chest of a corpse, take it away and eat it, thus taking on themselves any unpurged sin of the dead.

The sin-eater was not perfect, often they came from among social outcasts, and they profited rather than suffered from their trade, but there was the same idea of one taking away the sin of another. Jesus was perfect and did suffer and his action has given us the way to move from sin to salvation.

This was not a wrathful father demanding the suffering of his son but a loving son who embodied the father in his own person, who through his own suffering and death, willingly endured, made by himself and with himself a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for all time and opened for us the gate of heaven.

I wish you a blessed and thoughtful Passiontide.