

Friday, 15 April 2022
Good Friday Reflection
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'Where are you from?'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

I don't know about you but one of the questions I get quite a lot is 'where are you from?'. I find great comfort in knowing that Jesus was asked the same question, and so I don't need to feel that special. If I say, London, I get *no, where are you really from?* And if I say I grew up in North-West London, I hear some frustration creep into the voice: "Well, where are your parents originally from?" I pause and then reply, Nigeria. Because of course the answer would change the price of bread or bring down rising fuel and utilities bills, or give someone else some much needed relief from the hardness of their lives.

Where are you from? I wonder what answer refugees being shipped to Rwanda would have to that question. Surely the United Kingdom must have learnt by now that shipping peoples, whether by boat or by plane is not their God-given right, nor does it ever end well. New seeds of injustice are sown, and the crop is for another generation to harvest. As the UN High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR's assistant high commissioner for Protection, Gillian Triggs, said in a recent article, "people fleeing war, conflict and persecution deserve compassion and empathy. They should not be traded like commodities and transferred abroad for processing".¹

In the human-made suffering of our daily lives in which we find no respite from watching or reading the news, here in this passage from John 18, a man, both divine and *so human*, is immersed in attack after attack on his body and mind. When suffering happens, it is easy to blame a homogenised group that is anything but. *It's those people, they caused it.* As Christians we *must recognise* how much and how often in history this passage has been used to justify antisemitism and we must reject this usage with every fibre of our being.

We read that Jesus is humiliated. Flogged. Undressed and made to wear a purple robe. He is struck in the face. He suffers physically and mentally and all this in response to the question where are you from? "The alternation of the seven scenes is highly dramatic", one commentator writes, "the accusers are outside Pilate's headquarters and Jesus is inside but comes out in the end as the mocked King of the Jews". We also hear in the Gospel reading that:

When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/apr/14/uk-rwanda-plan-for-asylum-seekers-decried-as-inhumane-deadly-and-expensive>

answer. Pilate therefore said to him, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?”

We move from the question to silence to Pilate changing the question altogether. As one scholar writes “In v.9, Pilate’s lack of sincere enquiry deserves only silence in reply”. He therefore reformulates his question as one about power. Jesus discloses a paradox: Pilate who has his power from above thinks that he can exercise it over the one who comes from God.”²

In Carravagio’s painting *Ecce Homo*, Jesus is wearing a crown of thorns, almost naked, being presented to the crowds. Pilate looks ambivalent next to him, palm outstretched pointing to Jesus. Behind him a man is putting on the purple robe over Jesus’ shoulders. Jesus does not look at us, but we are transfixed on him.

The question ‘where are you from’ comes back to us. Where are we coming to Jesus from? What are we accusing him of in our lives? What do we think he has or has not done for us? Because on this day, we take it all to the cross. We bring all our anger, and resentment, and fear and anguish, and we lay it at his feet. We can spit out our pain and disappointment at Jesus. Because Jesus takes it to the cross for us and with us; Jesus takes it all to the cross for us to make our suffering known.

Amen.

² René Kieffer, ‘John’ in Barton, John and Muddiman John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.960-1000, p.994.