

Lord God, thank for your Son Jesus, for all that he did with us and for us. By your Spirit help us to live with him and for him, today. Amen.

- Prepositions are important. Just one little word can change the whole meaning of a sentence.
- I want to look at two prepositions today, which occur in the reading of the Passion we've just engaged in and see if we can tease out what difference they make. The word 'for' and the word 'with'.
- It is a brave man who chooses clothes for his wife. Which, I hasten to add says is purely a comment about the dress sense of the male. On the other hand, choosing clothes with his wife involves long hours sitting outside a changing room before saying 'very nice dear.' ... So I'm told!
- If you hear a woman saying she eating with two, it conjures up a picture of a cozy meal for three people, where as if she says she's eating for two, it means she's pregnant.
- And if the Passion reading is read for us, it involves two long chapters of John's Gospel, sitting on hard pews, and if you're anything like me it hard to keep focused on the powerful story your listening to. Whereas if the Passion reading is read with us, it is much easier to stay engaged, because we involved and joining in. Which is the main reason we do it this way.
- The word 'for' occurs twelve times in the Passion reading we've just heard. It implies doing something for someone rather than including them in it. It implies purpose rather than sharing. 'For whom are you looking?' 'For this I was born, and for this I came into the world', 'you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' These have a very different meaning from 'With whom are you looking?' 'With this I was born, and with this I came into the world', 'you have a custom that I release someone with you at the Passover. Do you want me to release with you the King of the Jews?' Pilate is not imagining that the baying crowd to whom he is speaking are imprisoned! But are they?
- The word 'with' occurs fifteen times in the same reading. It brings connotations of doing something together, sharing rather than spearheading on your own. It can still include direction and purpose but it's definitely inclusive. For instance 'Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden' still has direction and purpose, but they went together rather than just Jesus. 'Jesus often met there with his disciples' 'Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police', 'Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them', 'Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest', 'Did I not see you in the garden with him?', 'the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him.' These are all about being together. Some are about direction and purpose, doing things, and some less so.
- We commonly talk about Jesus dying for you and me. For instance Caiaphas, the High Priest 'was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.' He meant that it was better to sacrifice one Jew in order to keep the Romans at bay than to allow him to become the leader of a movement that would start a tinpot rebellion provoking the Romans into revengeful massacre and the death of lots of Jews.
- When we speak of Jesus dying for us, what we usually mean is that he is taking the burden of our sins, the greed, the lust, the self-centred selfishness and carrying it on his shoulders. It was the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, the cowardice of the disciples, the fickleness of the crowd, the scheming of the High Priests, the cynical cruelty of the Romans and the sin of you and me that killed him. He dies for us, in place of us, as a sacrifice to God, to win forgiveness for us, to put us right with God, so that we are fit to enter the Kingdom of heaven.
 - That's the traditional view of a sacrifice. Giving something valuable to show we are doing what we can to put things right with God. And what, and who could be more valuable to God the Father than the sinless Son of God?
- The cynical might say that Jesus dying for me takes the responsibility away from me. He's done it for me so I don't have to. Much as the same as people often say to me, 'Say one for me, vicar., as they see me going into

church. The implication is that I'll vicariously pray for them so that they don't have to! However high a pedestal they put me on, I don't deserve it and I am not their Saviour!

- So if Jesus dies for me, then all I have to do is complete my shopping list of sins and email it through the heavenly server and it's all taken care of by the crucified Son of God!
 - But what happens if I don't press 'send'? What happens if I don't give Jesus my sins to carry on his back to Calvary? What happens to Uncle Fred who was a good man and loved his children and spent years raising money for the hospice but quite obviously never believed in God?
 - Well, accordingly to this line of thinking, he probably never got forgiven. And where is he now? The same place as Judas, and the impenitent thief who mocked Jesus and Caiaphas the High Priest, and the Pharisees and most of the cynical Romans, I suppose. Suddenly the victory won for us by Jesus doesn't seem so complete!
- And if Jesus died for me and the sacrifice effected my forgiveness because I have the immense good fortune to have grown up in a Christian household and have given my life to Christ, then it rather takes the need for the resurrection away. Easter Day is an afterthought rather than a dramatic conclusion!
- And human beings are still terrified of death. People still die, even those who have turned to Christ. And our sin is still killing creation, even if we are forgiven as the traffic fumes mount, the plastic in the ocean disperses around the whole world and disposable masks mount in increasing numbers on the road verges. Sin kills. And it keeps on killing!
- But look at another verse from the Passion. *'There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.'* Jesus died with the two thieves. In many ways we are in the same plight as the thieves; poor, lost sinners needing a friend. What does it mean to say instead of Jesus dying for us, that he died with us?
- Well, it's more realistic, because we all die. And if Jesus dies with us, we do not die alone. It might still be frightening but at least we have someone to compassionately hold our hand and share it with us! Somehow it seems to take death, the one certainty of human life, more seriously.
- And if Jesus shared our burdens, rather than removed them, it still leaves us with some responsibility about how we live today we cannot just hand the whole burden over to Jesus, wash our hands and shrug our shoulders. We are still left with direction and purpose.
- 'Say one with me vicar', has a very different meaning to 'say one for me vicar'!
- Jesus died with a thief on either side. He shared their suffering. One acknowledged him and the other didn't, but he died with them both. If Jesus died with us, it makes his death so much more far reaching. He died with Judas when Judas hung from the tree, he died with Caiaphas when he died in his bed at a ripe old age. He died with the Roman soldier slain in battle. He died with the Covid-ridden atheist as much as with the pious monk. He died in the prisons and the hospitals of Britain and the refugee camps of Lebanon. We all die, and Jesus dies with us.
- He dies with the rising temperatures of the Siberian tundra and the dried up salt beds of Africa. He dies in the floods of low lying islands in the Pacific and the erosion of the coral reefs in Australia. He dies in the over-intensively farmed soils of Britain as well as with the Mexicans pouring across the borders of the United States. He dies in the continually neglected savage conflict in Yemen as well as in the Rohingya Muslim enclaves in Myanmar.
- And the resurrection becomes essential! For it provides hope. It provides meaning and the entrance of the cave is a space in which to look out at the future with hope rather than despair. God has beaten death. He has beaten sin and he will save the world!
- We are part of that world that he will save. He will save it with us not for us. We cannot do it on our own, but if we want to live with Jesus today, to claim the reassurance, the compassionate love, the sharing in the certainty of death and the sure hope that Jesus has won the victory, then focus on the cross. Jesus dying with the thieves. Jesus dying with us, the immense personal sacrifice that he made to do this, and ponder how you are going to go on living with Jesus tomorrow. What sacrifice are you prepared to make to live with him?