

4TH SCRIPTURAL STATION - PETER DENIES JESUS
by Fr Robbie Low

(Mt 26 v 69-75. Mk 14 v 66-72. Lk. 22 v 55-62. Jn. 18 v 16-18, 25-27)

Rome 66 AD

They call this place 'The Mamertine', a holding bay for the condemned.

The walls of dank and dribbling water into which we were lowered surround the helpless and the hopeless who await their dismal fate.

We were rounded up in the first swoop. As the city lay, large parts in ruin, smouldering wreckage of infernal fires that raged for days sweeping history before it, culprits had to be found, scapegoats interned.

Rumours that the mad godless Emperor had set the capital ablaze ran through the streets as fast as the wildfire itself. Other targets were required in haste. And so we fit the bill.

I had written of co-operation with the state – a letter that could be evidenced to exonerate us all from treasonable intent. But I had also written of 'the End' when all would be consumed by fire so hot the very elements would melt.

I sit and wait. Paul has been taken elsewhere. The privilege of citizenship may yet spare him the Cross and commute his sentence to the noble option of beheading.

The Via Appia has been, I hear, decorated at night by our people, crucified, tarred and set alight like torches in some grim parade, some demonic festival.

So I wait. The years roll back to the calm hills of the Galilee, the simple fishing life, the olive groves, the daily rhythm of our lives before He came.

The days dissolve homeward to when we heard the call and set out on the Gospel Road, no turning back. The years of travel, strange hotels, nights under the stars, His enigmatic words, His miracles of light, the healings and the exorcisms, the Heavenly vision on the Mountain of the Metamorphosis when all Salvation's History came together and the purposes of God seemed to co-inhere in that one Man.

The hours tick by, Jerusalem in view, the new Exodus promised but where the Lamb of Passover?

The triumphal entry to the Holy City – this must surely be the time.

The hollering crowd, the adulation and recognition.

The moment we had all been waiting for.

The final night. The early supper, the Last, the First, the One that will go on forever. The misunderstandings, the instructions.

The one who left, the one who went out into the night.

Our dereliction in the Garden, our failure to watch and wait and pray.

Our ignorance of what He asked and why.

Our flight into the darkness of the day.

I would have struggled, fought. He stopped me. Told me to put my sword away. Why did He choose me if I got it wrong so often?

I did not want that it should come to this.

He allowed Himself to be taken. We, confused, merged back into night.

And later, standing in the courtyard, the questions came.

Huddled by the fire, they asked me. Was I with Him? What should I answer?

I ask simply what you'd have said, my friends?

I ask for no excuse or pity. Upon this answer may my life depend.

NO, NO and NO I railed to each enquiry.

Whom did I deceive? Only myself.

The woman smelt the fear. The men picked up my yokel north country burr.

Across the distant hills of dawn the cockerel crew.

How had He been so sure my promises would so quickly fold?

Across the courtyard, as He was dragged through, I caught His momentary gaze. Where was my mountaintop Messiah? Where was the blazing light of a thousand suns? Reduced to this, grubby, shambling, beaten stranger off to a rendezvous with death.

But this is what He told me years ago when, at Caesarea Philippi I had acknowledged His sovereignty and then rebuffed His kingly command and been bracketed with the 'Opposer', the ancient enemy of Man.

Here I watched His word being fulfilled. Here, once again, my following had failed, my understanding undermined, my love undaunted but, by the mysterious avenues of God, confused.

The cock crew. He looked up. I turned and left the piteous scene of my betrayals. And wept.

Those tears are what separates me from Judas.

Those tears alone made the days of wonder possible. Those tears of sorrow for my sins made reconciliation on the shoreline of the Galilee a reality.

Do you love me? I love you

Do you love me more than these? I love you, Lord

Do you love me? You wound me with remembrance. You know everything, Lord, you know I love you.

To the farthest bounds of Empire I will now and ever tend your sheep.

In the darkest places of the world to its highest heights, I will feed your sheep.

I wait in the Mamertine. I wait the walk to the Vatican Hill.

I am not worthy of a death like yours. You who turned my world upside down – I shall ask to be on the Cross hanging towards the earth from which you made me. And ask your final absolution.

In death I shall not betray you, my Lord.