

Views from the Pews - St Peter's Weapon

The disciples are useful metaphors for human frailty; Judas the betrayer, Peter the denier. Nevertheless, we are surprised that they apparently armed themselves. The Garden of Gethsemane witnessed an extraordinary scene, from which it may be deduced that Jesus' followers were carrying personal weapons; Matthew and Mark write of a sword being drawn by 'one of those with Jesus', and Luke agrees – 'those who were about him' drew their weapons.

John reverts to the singular, but is specific;

'Simon Peter having a sword drew it' and cut off Malchus' ear with what seems to have been an unskilled, impetuous slashing movement.

From a purely human perspective, this is unsurprising; the disciples will have been warned in advance about the unruly and cowardly rentamob which had been tasked to arrest Jesus by stealth, cowards because they came by night for fear of the crowds that had gathered on Palm Sunday.

We should not be surprised that it was Peter – he had promised Jesus that he would never fall away. This was his human enactment of that promise, thoughtless though it was because he exposed himself as the one who would use force to protect the Messiah.

Jesus responded thus;

1. He mocked the cowards who had used the cover of darkness and who were over-armed against someone they knew was unarmed.
2. His peaceful surrender took the mob by surprise.
3. He rebuked Peter.
4. He restored Malchus' ear.

But the Gospels' evidence that the disciples were indeed armed raises all sorts of ethical questions which are just as valid today. Is it ever right to bear arms? What preparations (if any) should Christians allow when they know that their opponents are armed? What are the limits if we know that others (who are unarmed) are going to be subject to armed attack and/or wrongful arrest? What allowance – if any – should be made for impetuosity and the immature desire to prove your loyalty to others?

These may seem odd issues to raise at our Patronal Festival but they go straight to the question of humanity, straight to the question of frailty. St Peter learned from the events of Good Friday, and seems to have abandoned his sword that very night.

But the ethical questions around the possession of arms remain and we will return to those in August.

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