

JOURNEYING THROUGH HOLY WEEK TO EASTER WITH MARK'S GOSPEL

*This material can be prayed through in one session, or broken up into separate sections during the day. If not already used, the section in the Maundy Thursday material entitled **The Events of the Night: Betrayal, Arrest, Blasphemy and Denial** can be used today before what follows below.*

GOOD FRIDAY 02 April 2021

Focus your attention on God and become aware again of God's presence with you, and of joining with other worshippers (as in the Introduction to this series).

Thank God for bringing you safely to this day. Ask God to inspire you.

Then read these passages, paying attention to them as you do. What catches your imagination? What puzzles you? How do they make you feel?

CONDEMNATION

Mark 15:1-20 (NRSV)

¹As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ²Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' ³Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' ⁵But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

⁶Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' ¹⁰For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹²Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' ¹³They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' ¹⁴Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' ¹⁵So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

¹⁶Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. ¹⁷And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. ¹⁸And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' ¹⁹They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Reflection

The high priest and chief priests, the elders and the scribes have all declared that Jesus deserves to die for blasphemy and, presumably, for his challenge to the Temple and to their authority [14:64]. The question is, how are they actually going to achieve this? As day breaks and the cock has crowed three times the chief priests take the lead in discussing this with the elders and scribes.

Whether they could have executed him on their own authority or not, they decide to pass the matter to Pilate. Pilate was the Roman governor responsible for Judaea (his official title was 'prefect') from 26 to 36/7 AD. He was not normally resident in Jerusalem, but when he came there he resided either in the former palace of Herod the Great, or in the Fortress of Antonia which was by the Temple. We know from non-Christian sources that he was thought to be stubborn, inflexible, merciless and cruel. He would not be interested in disputes or power struggles between different religious groups. He would only be interested in preventing civil unrest, insurrection and threats to Roman power and rule (whose Emperors, for example, were often proclaimed as sons of gods). The Passover festival was always a potential focus for those threats, which is presumably why Pilate was in Jerusalem at this time.

In any event, when the Jewish authorities hand Jesus over to Pilate (the verb is the same as the one as Mark repeatedly uses for Jesus's statements about the Son of Man being handed over to suffering and death, and also for Judas's betrayal of him), what they say to Pilate leads to Pilate asking Jesus whether he is King of the Jews. If the answer is 'yes', Pilate will immediately condemn him for treason: after Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas, was removed as ruler in 6 AD Judaea had become a Roman province in which kings were not allowed. But whereas before the high priest Jesus had agreed that he was God's anointed agent (Messiah/Christ) and son of God [14:61-62], here he does not accept the terms of Pilate's question. He is not a kingly Messiah in any political or military sense that Pilate might recognise (see Mark 12:35-37 where Jesus rejects the idea that he is that sort of 'Son-of-David Messiah'). When the chief priests immediately start making other claims to justify their case, Jesus reverts to making no answer.

We do not have external evidence for a formal practice of releasing a prisoner each year at Passover time, but the pardoning of prisoners for political ends was presumably known as much then as it is now (the current American example would be the use of presidential pardons). Pilate asks the crowd whether they want him to release Jesus, whom he calls "the King of the Jews" (although the second time he refers to him in this way in 15: 12, he makes it plain that he believes that this is what the crowds call him, not what Jesus calls himself). The crowd ask for Jesus to be crucified, and for a political insurrectionist who has killed people to be released instead. His name is Barabbas, which means 'son of the father'. The irony is huge.

Presumably to avoid civil unrest, Pilate gives way. He has Jesus flogged, and then hands him over (the same verb again) to be crucified. Whatever the formal charge for which he has been condemned might be, the soldiers assume that it is to do with Jesus being the King of the Jews. They cruelly humiliate him, mock him and taunt him for it. Then they get him ready for execution in his own clothes.

DEATH

Mark 15:21-39 (NRSV)

(²⁰...Then they led him out to crucify him.) ²¹ They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. ²² Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

²⁵ It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' ²⁷ And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his

right and one on his left. ²⁹Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰save yourself, and come down from the cross!' ³¹In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³²Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' ³⁵When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' ³⁶And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' ³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Reflection

Things seem to have been becoming more and more urgent (the narrative in chapters 14 and 15 increasingly introduces sentences with "Then... Then...", "And... And..."). Now the actual crucifixion is set before us in a few broad brushstrokes, without much detail. We can if we wish make use of that fact to distance ourselves from the horrors of it all, reading on quickly or listening without making a film of what we are hearing in our minds. But people in the first century AD were much more used to letting the words create pictures in their minds, and to allowing themselves to enter into it all. They were also much more used to the idea of what crucifixion entailed, and so the briefest of details could bring up a picture of it all without everything being stated explicitly. Nevertheless, ever since the first century there has been a tradition of prayer and devotion in which people have paid attention to the story, tried to see it all in their imaginations, and then contemplated its meaning and effects (sometimes with the help of a symbolic cross, or crucifix, or a hymn such as "When I survey the wondrous cross..."). That is a practice that we perhaps need to revive.

They are taking Jesus to the execution site. It is aptly named Golgotha, presumably because its shape reminded people of a skull (which is what 'Golgotha' means in Aramaic). Normally, the prisoners carried the cross-beams of their own crosses to the site where the cross-beams would be attached to the uprights that were already there. For some reason that is not explained, Jesus is treated differently. Instead, a stranger on his way into the city is set on and forced to carry the cross-beam for Jesus. We are told that he was Simon of Cyrene. Presumably his sons, Alexander and Rufus, were members of or at least known to the early Christians; otherwise there would be no point in Mark mentioning their names. So far as we know, Simon was not (at least at this point) a disciple. So the irony is high again. Jesus had said that anyone who wanted to be his disciple had to follow his way and take up and carry a cross. Peter and the others had said that they would do so, but they have spectacularly failed. A stranger who has promised nothing actually does it; and does it not voluntarily but under duress.

Someone offers Jesus wine laced with myrrh, which would deaden the pain. It is not unknown for this to happen, but we cannot quite see who does it, or why. Was it on the orders of Pilate? Was it the executioners? Or was it people who sympathised with Jesus: perhaps the women who, we discover later, have been there watching [15:40]? In any event, we are perhaps surprised when Jesus refuses this attempt to ease his way a little. Then we might remember that Jesus has said at

his last supper that he would not drink wine again until he drinks new wine in the kingdom of God [14:25]. After that, he has prayed for this new wine not to be the cup of suffering, before finally committing himself to accepting the suffering if it be God's will that he do so [14:36]. So, when offered the painkiller, he refuses anything that will give him any sort of way out or weaken that commitment.

Then they crucify him. Crucifixion also happened in other parts of the ancient world, but the Romans inflicted it in particular on slaves and the worst kind of criminals – and, by the time of Jesus, on insurrectionists who threatened Roman rule. So Jesus was crucified between two such guerrillas or bandits; and labelled as “The King of the Jews”, whose only throne was a cross [15:26-27]. Ironically, whilst his disciples who wanted to sit at his right and left hand in glory have failed to drink the cup of suffering and take up the cross with him (which is what being in glory means for him – see Mark 10:35-40), it is the two bandits who unwittingly end up on his right and his left in it all [15:27].

They crucify him: a single, apparently simple and high-sounding term for a complex, barbaric act. It means they shame him by stripping him naked and dividing his clothes amongst them. You might be reminded of the humiliation of the psalmist in Psalm 22:16-18 as you watch. Then they fix him immobile to a cross where he hangs in agony until he dies. Sometimes that took days.

As he hangs there, he is mocked and taunted. If the “title” placed on his cross echoes the false charge that he claimed to be the King of the Jews, the taunts of the spectators passing by echo the false charge that he threatened the Temple. Mark has not told us what the actual temptations were when Jesus was tempted by Satan [1:12-13], other than that they were to be God's son but not in God's way (Matthew and Luke flesh out the details of this). Now those temptations are embodied in the actions of those who want him crucified. So when the people passing by challenge him to perform a miracle and get off the cross to save himself, Mark uses the verb “to blaspheme” to suggest that it is they who are committing the blasphemy for which he was condemned. You may not be able to see the chief priests and scribes amongst the spectators, but you just know that wherever they are they are gleefully saying the same thing amongst themselves. Then you hear those who are being crucified alongside him also joining in the taunting of him.

In those days, time is told by daylight being divided up into 12 hours beginning at sunrise and ending at sunset. Jesus is fixed to the cross at the third hour. Suddenly, and most unusually, in the middle of the day when the sun should be at its height, darkness falls and remains from the sixth to the ninth hour. In Genesis, the first thing that God creates is light, and now the light is fading. Jesus has been taunted by the crowds, rejected by the leaders, deserted and betrayed by his disciples. Now light and life itself are vanishing. He is utterly desolate, and plumbs the depths of what it can be like to be human. Not surprisingly, therefore, he ends up feeling as if he has been abandoned by God.

He expresses that sense of abandonment by echoing the opening words of Psalm 22, but says them in Aramaic, not in Hebrew. Since this was the everyday language, we are left wondering whether some of the crowd deliberately mishear his calling on God (“Eloi”) for calling on Elijah, whom some believed had been miraculously taken up to heaven before he died and would equally miraculously reappear to support righteous people in the times of tribulation connected with the coming of God's kingdom. They are mocking him again. Someone (we cannot see who) offers him wine again, but this time it is as if it has been adulterated and embittered. We might now remember that in Psalm 69:21 (particularly the Greek version of it) the enemies of God were said

to give God's representative poisoned, embittered wine to drink. In any event, this time he does not refuse it. He accepts the suffering, cries out again and dies. It is in and through his sufferings and death that the sovereignty of God (the kingdom) is made real.

Immediately something amazing happens. The temple veil or curtain is ripped apart from top to bottom. What are we to make of this? The Temple was one of the wonders of the ancient world. There was a curtain over the entrance into the Holy Place, into which only priests could go as representatives of the people who worshipped in the courts outside it. There was another curtain inside that Holy Place over the entry to the Holy of Holies, which was only entered on the annual day of atonement and then only by the High Priest. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing about the Jewish revolt and war with the Romans in 66 to 70 AD which ended with the destruction of the Temple at about the time that Mark's gospel was reaching its final form, says that the former curtain had on it a depiction of the heavenly bodies. So it is as if the tearing open of the heavens as Jesus was baptised [1:9-10] is now happening in these events on earth. Moreover, the voice from heaven which had declared Jesus to be God's son at his baptism and then again on the mount of transfiguration [1:11 and 9:7] is now heard through the voice of a human being on earth – and, irony of ironies, it is the voice of the centurion who has just overseen his crucifixion! More than Peter or any of the other disciples, that soldier sees who and what Jesus is.

We are perhaps left identifying with that centurion, just as Charles Wesley did in the hymn "God of unexampled grace" (see Hymns and Psalms 166):

*Never love nor sorrow was
like that my Saviour showed;
see him stretched on yonder cross,
and crushed beneath our load!
Now discern the Deity,
now his heavenly birth declare;
faith cries out: 'Tis he, 'tis he,
my God, that suffers there!*

BURIAL

Mark 15:40-47 (NRSV)

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

⁴² When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, ⁴³Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. ⁴⁷Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

Reflection

All his followers have deserted, denied or betrayed him. But wait a minute, that was just the male disciples. All the spot light has been on them throughout the story. Yet there have been women there throughout, following (Mark's word for being a disciple), supporting, and witnessing [15:41]. We suddenly notice that they have been there all the time, watching him suffer and die [15:40]. We are told the names of some of them, presumably names that Mark thought his earliest readers and hearers might recognise.

Jesus has died quickly, at the ninth hour. There are three hours left until sunset, when a new day will begin (days being counted from when the first star is seen after sunset). As this day is a Friday, the new day will be a Sabbath, when non-essential activity is prohibited: for example, a corpse can be washed but not moved. Moreover, Jewish Law said that when someone was executed and hung on a tree, that person is cursed by God and must be buried before night fall, or their body will defile and become a curse on the land [Deuteronomy 21:22-23].

So Jesus's body has to be dealt with quickly. At this point a man called Joseph of Arimathea plays a vital role. He may be a pious Jew who wishes to ensure that the Jewish law is fulfilled. He may be a sympathiser with or even a secret follower of Jesus. He may be a mixture of those things. We do not know. What we do know is that he is a respected member of the council (possibly the Sanhedrin) and has sufficient influence to be able to approach Pilate and ask for Jesus's body. Even so, he has to be bold in doing this [15:44]. The Roman practice was often to leave the bodies of crucified people on the crosses after they had died until they had decayed, as a warning to others. Sometimes, though, they were prepared to release the body as a concession to Jewish sensibilities. That is what Joseph hopes will happen in this case; and indeed, after checking that Jesus has indeed died very quickly, Pilate grants his request.

Joseph is wealthy and influential enough to have access to a rock-hewn tomb; to acquire or provide a linen shroud; and to transport the body – and all before the sabbath begins. There is not time, though, for all the burial preparations and rituals. The bare minimum is done to get the body in the tomb quickly, and a stone is rolled across the entrance way to seal it, at least temporarily.

Oh look – two of the named women have followed on from the execution site, and are watching here also!

Prayer

Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not up to joy
but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find it to be the way of life and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Methodist Worship Book p. 264

The Lord's Prayer