

The Crucifixion

Mark 15:21-41 - Littlebourne, Sunday 10th April 2022

Palm Sunday is usually a fairly jubilant affair - we sing Hosanna, we emulate those that were praising Jesus as he enters Jerusalem, as we read about way back in November, when we were at chapter 11. Now, less than a week later in the narrative, but a whole five chapters and for us, five months of sermons, we turn from jubilation to something much more somber.

We've come to the climax of the gospel of Mark - this is what has been hinted by Jesus many chapters before, what the past chapter has made imminent and what we now reach - the crucifixion. We pick the story up again as Jesus has been condemned to death by Pilate, at the request of the crowds and the Jewish authorities.

Jesus is sent to be crucified. Roman executions of this style would start with a flogging, as we see in verse 15. This would, for weaker victims, be enough to kill them. The whole process is designed to be as painful as possible, prolonging the agony for as long as possible.

To Romans, crucifixion was the worst of deaths - Cicero writes that crucifixion was the grossest, cruelest, or most hideous manner of execution. He said that Roman citizens shouldn't think about even the possibility of it for themselves and indeed Rome considered it far too cruel for its own citizens.

v21-22

21 And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. 22 And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull).

Typically, the condemned would carry the crossbeam of their own cross, which would weigh thirty to forty pounds. Jesus at this stage was already too weakened to carry his own cross, so someone else was compelled to carry it for him.

As they travel to the site of execution, the route would typically be through the busiest route possible, as intimidation for the populace. Many would have seen Jesus on his way.

We don't know for certain where Golgotha is. The name suggests it might be a place common to executions.

v23

23 And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

The ancient world understood that Myrrh can act as an analgesic. This verse records the only merciful aspect of the ordeal. But even this small mercy is not carried through - Jesus doesn't take it, he endures the full measure of the cross.

v24-25

24 And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. 25 And it was the third hour when they crucified him.

Roman legality was such that the executioners were entitled to the minor possessions of the executed man - his personal effects. They would not have realised that they were fulfilling the words of Psalm 22. Starting from verse 16:

*16 For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
17 I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
18 they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots*

Crucifixion was not a part of Jewish law. More common was stoning. For those that were stoned to death for idolatry or blasphemy, the hanging from a tree after death was a form of public exposure, to brand the executed person as one cursed by God. Deuteronomy 21:23 "for he is cursed of God that hangs on a tree". Jesus likewise was branded as cursed by God by his death on a wooden cross. When the chief priests and the crowds demand death by crucifixion, they express the conviction that he is to die as 'one cursed by God'.

v26

26 And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews."

Every condemned man would be required to carry a sign to indicate the crime he committed. They would wear this as they were led through the streets and finally this would be affixed to the cross. John's gospel tells us that Jesus' sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek, for all to understand.

Jesus here, is charged with the truth. He really is the rightful King of the Jews, but the truth is used to condemn him.

v27-28

27 And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.

The word used here can mean robbers, but can also mean insurrectionists, or more generally violent criminals. Since robbery alone wasn't typically punishable by crucifixion, it's likely that these are more than just petty criminals.

Jesus gets associated with those that really are guilty. Verse 28, which is missing in the oldest copies of Mark, says:

28 And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "He was numbered with the transgressors"

This refers to Isaiah 53:12:

*Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.*

v29-32

29 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, 30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

Jesus may well have had the power to save himself from this death, but he accepts it willingly, he endures their mockery. Those that pass by, seeing his suffering mock him. The chief priests mock him. Even those that were alongside him, suffering like him, mock him. They don't realise that for Jesus to save himself from the suffering of the cross, would have been to doom humanity. Paradoxically, these words that were meant sarcastically, were the truth. The true King of Israel appears to them to be a characture of sovereignty, but in his actions he is cementing his kingdom.

We saw a few weeks ago that the Jewish religious authorities broke all their own rules when trying Jesus. Now, they further insult God, by being beside the cross, neglecting their passover duties in the Temple. The day prior to the special sabbath of passover was one where the priesthood, especially the chief priests, should be extremely busy, but they find time to come mock the perfect sacrifice of Christ instead of offering sacrifice to God in the temple as they are commanded.

v33-34

33 And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. 34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Ancient accounts of crucifixions describe victims that would scream in rage and pain. Jesus cries out not in rage, but in sorrow. He is quoting from Psalm 22 - the first line of that Psalm that we referenced earlier. Psalm 22 records the cry of the righteous sufferer and here Jesus is living out this Psalm on the cross.

Part of the punishment for sin is in separation from God - in being cast out from his presence. Isaiah 59 verse 2:

but your iniquities have made a separation between you and God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

We see in the darkness, for three hours beginning at midday, that covered the land a picture of this separation - the light, symbolic of God's presence is taken away. The three hours of darkness before Jesus' death echo the three days of darkness before the first passover. God's wrath fell on the firstborn of Egypt, as it now does on the Son of God.

This is also prophesied elsewhere in the Old Testament - Amos 8:9-10 for example:

*9 "And on that day," declares the Lord God,
"I will make the sun go down at noon
and darken the earth in broad daylight.
10 I will turn your feasts into mourning
and all your songs into lamentation;
I will bring sackcloth on every waist
and baldness on every head;
I will make it like the mourning for an only son
and the end of it like a bitter day.*

v35-36

35 And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." 36 And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."

Those Jewish people standing around would likely have known what Jesus was really saying. The chief priests who knew the Psalms intimately, would have recognised his words immediately. Maybe some misunderstood Jesus, or maybe this is yet more mockery.

Then the sour wine offered to Jesus - apparently, the sort of drink referred to here was popular among soldiers and labourers, because it quenched thirst effectively and was inexpensive. But the intention was not to help Jesus, but was meant to keep Jesus conscious for as long as possible, to prolong his suffering.

v37

37 And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.

From the third hour to the ninth hour, Jesus has been hanging on the cross. Jesus wasn't spared the suffering by any final time of unconsciousness - he suffered until the very end, to his last breath. Now at last, it is finished.

The most tragic story possible

Jesus has gone through the most horrific suffering imaginable.

- There was no form of death more painful.
- Jesus knew what was coming for him before it happened.
- He was betrayed by one of his closest companions.
- He was abandoned by his friends.
- His trial was a sham, unfair in every respect.
- He is condemned for what is actually good and true.
- The one who eventually grants his execution knows that he is innocent and still condemns him.
- In condemning him, a truly guilty man gets to go free.
- Everyone involved refuses to take responsibility.
- He is counted among real criminals, despite being nothing like them.
- He is mocked relentlessly throughout.
- What little he physically has is taken from him and gambled for.
- He is still young and his life has been one of nothing but perfection.
- Those he came to save are those that are murdering him.

You couldn't write a more tragic story. It covers everything. Carl Jung describes it as a 'limit' story, an archetype of tragedy. You can't make it worse, it reaches the limitation of how bad something can be. But of course from a Christian perspective, the worst part, the best part, the part that the secular cannot understand, is that Jesus bears the weight of our sin. His suffering is not just physical, but he takes the punishment for the sins of each one of us.

Our sin

Whilst we have seen that throughout Mark, Jesus knows his coming death and goes to it willingly, we must also recognise that our own actions are at fault. It is our own sin that is placed on Jesus, we contribute to his suffering. Each and every sin we commit makes us culpable for Jesus' death - we are like those in the crowd, who by our actions, thoughts and attitudes, if not explicitly, cry out "Crucify him". There is a real sense in which we all bear responsibility for what we have read about today.

But God uses the sin of humanity, in its worst moment, the moment it murders the Son of God, to reconcile us to Himself and free us from sin.

Christ takes all our sin - every last bit - and bears it on the cross. 1 Peter 2:24:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

Galatians 3:13:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...

2 Corinthians 5:21:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Go to the cross and find forgiveness

Maybe some of us feel the weight of sin. We should feel the weight of sin. We know we have done wrong, we know that we are not worthy to know God. If that is the case, we should trust in him, trust in the cross.

Even Jerusalem, who suffered what must be the biggest fall from grace imaginable - God's chosen city, where he dwelt in the temple, that then murdered God and turned from God completely - even Jerusalem will be redeemed, as we all dwell in the New Jerusalem, like it's written about in Revelation. There is hope for all of us, no matter what we have done.

Trust in Christ, who took all your sins on the cross. For he went more willingly to the cross to suffer for us, than we go to Him for forgiveness.