

Maundy Thursday Communion

Mark 15:21-39
Jesus' Crucifixion

We read today from Mark 15:21-39.

[Read Mark 15:21-39]

21A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. 22They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means 'the place of the skull'). 23Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. 24And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

25It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. 26The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.

27They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. 29Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30come down from the cross and save yourself!' 31In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! 32Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.' Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

33At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 34And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?').

35When some of those standing near heard this, they said, 'Listen, he's calling Elijah.'

36Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. 'Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down,' he said.

37With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

38The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'

[Pray]

52:14... There were many who were appalled at him –
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being
and his form marred beyond human likeness ...

53:3b... Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

(Isaiah 52:14, 53:3b)

1My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish? ...

7All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

8'He trusts in the LORD,' they say,
'let the LORD rescue him ...'

14I am poured out like water,
 and all my bones are out of joint.
 My heart has turned to wax;
 it has melted within me.
15My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
 and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
 you lay me in the dust of death ...
17All my bones are on display;
 people stare and gloat over me.
 (Psalm 22:1,7-8a,14-15, 17)

Perhaps the people of Ukraine might have some idea, or the people of Syria, or those tortured by Boko Haram in Nigeria. But I have no reference point from which to begin to appreciate the violent pain, the excruciating suffering that Jesus experienced leading up to and on that cross. From the flogging that preceded crucifixion, through the carrying of one's own cross beam through the city streets, to the ordeal of crucifixion itself, this punishment was designed to be utter torture. A terrible, slow, drawn-out, agonising, and humiliating death; so bad that a Roman citizen was almost never subjected to it. Cicero described it as "that cruel and disgusting penalty" and the "worst extreme of tortures." He added that "the very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears."

Jesus was offered a tiny amount of relief. Yet the motive may have been no more than a desire to prolong his agony. Simon from Cyrene was forced to carry his cross for him, when he was (presumably) too weak to carry it himself. (Interestingly, the fact that Simon's children were clearly known to the Church, may suggest that he subsequently became a follower of Jesus.) Then, there was the wine mixed with myrrh that was offered to Jesus to drink – a concoction that may have numbed the senses a little, but which Jesus refused, perhaps because he needed full control over himself, or perhaps because he had to experience the cup of suffering completely. Lastly, there was the wine vinegar offered to him at 3 o'clock, perhaps more genuinely to quench his thirst or keep him going until Elijah could come to his aid, which he did drink.

But these were tiny reliefs in a deluge of constant agony. Yet, despite some Old Testament prophecies containing some slightly more graphic descriptions of his pain, the Gospel writers gave very little attention to Jesus' physical suffering. Rather their priorities were: firstly, to record the key factual events; secondly, to highlight the reactions of those around Jesus; thirdly, to record the holy moments of Jesus' interactions with his Father; and lastly, and most importantly of all, to demonstrate the significance of his death and what it achieved.

Indeed, that may why Mark recorded the strange darkness which engulfed the land for three hours. This was more than just a few clouds blocking the sun, or it wouldn't have been so noteworthy. Nor was it a solar eclipse, since Passover happens at the time of the full moon. Luke states that "the sun stopped shining" (Luke 23:45), and whilst that may not be scientifically true, we have to allow that that is how it *felt* – this was something unique, indeed supernatural, that must have caused great fear. But why did it happen?

We are so used to the lyrics in our songs, "the Father turned his face away," that we may assume that to be a biblical explanation: God turned away, unable to watch the suffering of his Son. But, whilst we *could infer* that from Jesus' desperate cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", the Bible nowhere actually states

that God *did* turn his face away. In some Old Testament passages, like at Mount Sinai, darkness was actually associated with God's *presence*, though Jesus' cry rules out that possibility here. But darkness is also often associated with God's judgement, which *is* a viable explanation.

For instance, in Amos 8:9-10, God says:

*9'In that day,' declares the Sovereign LORD,
 'I will make the sun go down at noon
 and darken the earth in broad daylight.
 10I will turn your religious festivals into mourning
 and all your singing into weeping.
 I will make all of you wear sackcloth
 and shave your heads.
 I will make that time like mourning for an only son
 and the end of it like a bitter day.*

Likewise, in Isaiah 13:9-11, we read:

*9See, the day of the LORD is coming
 – a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger –
 to make the land desolate
 and destroy the sinners within it.
 10The stars of heaven and their constellations
 will not show their light.
 The rising sun will be darkened
 and the moon will not give its light.
 11I will punish the world for its evil,
 the wicked for their sins.*

These predicted judgements also foreshadow the final judgement to come, when Jesus returns to earth at the end of time. Joel wrote: "The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Joel 2:31). Though both Jesus and Peter quoted this prophecy primarily in connection with events in their own time or the near future (Mark 13:24-25; Acts 2:20), yet we cannot hear the words "great and dreadful day of the LORD" and not at least hear an echo of the coming final judgement too.

Now, it makes perfect sense if the darkness at Jesus' crucifixion was indicative of God's judgement, for that was exactly what was taking place. God was judging all human sin. In Jesus' cross we see the true horror of sin, both in the brutality and injustice of the actual event, and in what it cost God to forgive it. Nothing less than Jesus' blood could wash us clean of our sins! Because sin is that abhorrent to God! So, all God's judgement against all sin was concentrated on Jesus at that moment. He bore it all, indeed he *became* sin for the first time, and thus experienced the fullness of God's wrath against this absolute abomination. Think of how sick we feel when we hear of rapes and executions on our TV screens. Jesus received God's punishment for *those* sins as though *he* had committed them, and that is only the tiny tip of the iceberg. And he was judged by *God* who is absolute unpolluted moral purity and so hates sin with an undiluted passion. Would it not make sense if, by experiencing that judgement, Jesus felt forsaken by his Father? I'm not sure that Jesus' real problem was that the Father turned *away*, **which is why, a while ago, I changed the lyric in my song to a**

question. I wonder if his *real* problem was that the Father turned squarely *towards* him with the full force of his holy wrath, as signalled by the strange three-hour darkness. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Then with one last loud cry, Jesus gave up his life to death. Mark doesn’t elaborate on what that cry was. John, standing at the foot of the cross heard Jesus cry out “It is finished” (John 19:30). The Jewish cry at the conclusion of a transaction. “It is finished. The deal is complete. The price has been paid in full. There is nothing more to pay.” Luke records different words: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Personally, I can well imagine that Jesus said both. Perhaps the jubilant victory cry, followed by the quiet expression of trust in his Father as he gave up his life.

But Mark shifts his focus quickly onto the immediate effects of his death, the first of which was of the utmost importance for Jesus’ fellow Jewish people: “The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” There is much debate as to which temple curtain was torn in two, and even more as to what it signified. It was clearly another supernatural event, since the curtain was far too thick for a man to rip, and it was ripped from top to bottom. It would also have been witnessed by many, since it occurred at 3pm, when the evening sacrifices would be made. It must have been deeply shocking. But what was the significance of this supernatural event? Was it another prophecy of coming judgement – a foreshadowing of the destruction of the temple itself in AD70? Possibly.

But, if we take seriously the words of Hebrews 9:8, then there is an even greater meaning, either instead or as well. In a passage which discusses the temple veils or curtains and the barriers they created between God and sinful humans, the writer states, “The Holy Spirit was showing by this that *the way into the Most Holy Place* had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning.” The argument, then, is that this ripping of the temple curtain signified that with Christ’s death, that all changed; since sin has been dealt with completely, humans can now enjoy the closest of fellowship with our Father God. That’s why I believe, with many, that it was in fact the four-inch thick, thirty-foot high, double curtain into the *Most Holy Place* that was torn in two, signifying that there is now no barrier to accessing God’s very near presence. The barrier has been removed because Christ’s death makes us holy in a way that the Jewish animal sacrifices never truly could. Isn’t that good news?

But there was one last immediate effect of Jesus’ death, which Mark records – an individual and personal one. The Gentile Roman centurion, quite possibly one of those who had joined in the gleeful mocking of Jesus earlier, was so struck by the events of Jesus’ crucifixion and the way that he died, that his opinion of Jesus completely changed. Thus, he declared, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” We cannot know if he meant by that term something as strong as Mark meant by it at the start of his Gospel when he introduced Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of God.” But, even if he did not understand the full theological significance of the term he used, it is undeniable that this centurion was awestruck by the revelation of Jesus’ greatness. I believe, it was the Holy Spirit of God himself, who revealed this truth to him, and caused him to confess it.

And, as we gaze at Jesus’ cross ourselves, we are called to do the same. Sure, Sunday is coming. But let’s rest a while with the wonder of Good Friday, of God sacrificing himself and becoming sin for us, of God the Son enduring his Father’s wrath at all human sin and the terrible isolation that that caused, so we could be made holy and permitted access into God’s very near presence any time we like. Let’s be quiet and reflect upon these truths for a little while as we approach communion together.

[Pray]