

The Passion according to St Mark

A Meditation for Good Friday

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

6th April, 2012

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St Bartholomew's Church
The Passion according to St Mark
A Meditation for Good Friday – April 2012

Hymn 549 When I survey the wondrous cross

Opening Prayer

Almighty Father
look with mercy on this your family
for which our Lord Jesus Christ
was content to be betrayed
and given up into the hands of wicked men
and to suffer death upon the cross
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
one God now and for ever
Amen

Then we say together **Holy God**
 holy and strong
 holy and immortal
 have mercy on us

Before each meditation is said the following

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People ***because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world***

- | | | |
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Closing prayer

Most merciful God
 who by the death and resurrection of your son Jesus Christ
 delivered and saved mankind:
 grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
 we may triumph in the power of his victory
 through Jesus Christ our Lord
 Amen

Hymn 499 There is a green hill far away

Blessing

Most merciful God
 who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
 delivered and saved mankind:
 grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
 we may triumph in the power of his victory
 through Jesu Christ our Lord.
 Amen



1 A certain young man was following him . . .

Mark 14 v51

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

A certain young man was following him . . .

Who was this lad ? Unnamed but not unknown, he was there with the twelve disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane when one of the twelve, Judas Iscariot, betrayed his friend, Jesus, to the Jewish authorities by bringing their men to arrest Jesus in the dark of night. But who was this young man ?

He may have been John Mark, cousin of Barnabas, co-worker with him and Paul in the church at Antioch, companion on the First Missionary Journey, parting company with them at Perga and returning to Jerusalem.

He may have been the Mark who wrote down the first gospel, informed by the words and experience of Peter, imprisoned in Rome. Just as John never mentions himself by name in the gospel named after him – appearing perhaps as ‘the beloved disciple’ – so too Mark, in his gospel, may be this unnamed youngman.

But why was he there ? According to tradition, the Last Supper was held in the large Upper Room of the substantial Jerusalem home of John Mark’s

mother. If this were the case and Mark was there that night, then it might have been easy enough for him to tag along when Jesus and his disciples left.

Dressed only in a loose-fitting, linen garment, when he was grabbed by the one of the Temple guards, it would have been easy enough for the terrified boy to give the soldier the slip by wriggling out of his clothes and running away naked into the night.

Afraid, Mark runs away from Jesus. As such, he prepares us what Peter does next.



2 *I do not know this man you are talking about.*

Mark 14 v71

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

I do not know this man you are talking about.

Peter is in a dark place.

He's standing in the courtyard of the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest, where Jesus has been taken after his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. It's the middle of the night. It's cold. It's dark. And Peter is drawn by the light and warmth of a charcoal fire to stand on the edge of a circle of people, hanging around for something to happen.

Peter is in a dark place.

He's promised Jesus never to run away, to leave him alone, to desert his teacher, his friend, the Messiah, his Lord. Even if everyone else does, he won't. He is, after all, Peter the rock. He's solid, reliable, a man of his word.

Peter is in a dark place.

He's cold with fear. He's badly scared by what is happening. A man of action, he's uncomfortable doing nothing. A Galilean fisherman, he's out of his depth here in Jerusalem. And Peter's accent, the way he speaks and how he looks, has given him away.

Peter is in a dark place.

Twice to these people he's denied he knows Jesus. A third time, when challenged, he swears he doesn't know the man. And the cock crows for a second time and it dawns on Peter what he has done.

Peter is in a dark place.



3 *Are you the King of the Jews ?*

Mark 15 v2

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

Are you the King of the Jews ?

Pilate's question is good. His question goes to the heart of the matter. The question expresses precisely the charge against Jesus – of being the King of the Jews.

To the Jewish authorities, Jesus is clearly not. If he were and they thought he was, then they would be wilfully perjured, devoid of moral worth, the bankrupt guardians of the covenant sworn between God and His Chosen People.

To Pilate, Jesus is clearly not. If Jesus were, then he would be another potential threat to the Pax Romana which Pilate had sworn to uphold here in Judea and he would need to be neutralised.

To the crowd in the courtyard who will later shout for his death, he is clearly not. Why else would they want him to be crucified ?

To his disciples and the crowd who had welcomed his entry into Jerusalem with such enthusiasm by waving palm branches and shouting 'Hosanna to the Son of David', he clearly is. He is their Messiah, the Christ, their King.

To Jesus, the truth is known. We can only speculate when he first knew who he was and what he was but here, standing before Pilate, there could be little doubt and he awaits the inevitable outcome.

Jesus does not answer his question. He simply says, 'You say so' thereby neither confirming nor denying the truth. It is up to Pilate, up to each one of us, to answer the question for ourselves.

'Are you the King of the Jews ?'



4 *Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews ?*

Mark 15 v9

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews ?

Pilate is a politician. A pragmatist, he does not believe in Absolutes but in getting things done. For Pilate, there is no absolute justice, only being just in the circumstances. For him, the end justifies the means. For him, it is possible to do good by doing something bad – just so long as the outcome is ultimately what you want to achieve.

So Pilate asks the people this question: ‘Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews ?’

It is a politician’s question. What would you like me to do for you ? It is a politician’s question because by what he says, by how he frames the question, he’s shifting the responsibility to the people. It is a politician’s question because it’s loaded. There is a choice of two: Jesus Barabbas or Jesus from Nazareth. Pilate only mentions the latter by his title, suggesting, implying, that he is the one they should choose to free.

Whatever the outcome, Pilate will get what he wants. Peace and quiet.

Either the Jewish leaders will be snubbed because the people prefer Jesus to them or Jesus will die because he's not such a popular guy after all.

Whatever the outcome Pilate is in the process of washing his hands of the case.



5 *Crucify him !*

Mark 15 v13

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

Crucify him

Not good. The people don't want to release Jesus. They want him dead.

The people who are standing shouting are individuals, each a person in their own right, each a person with individual responsibility for their thoughts, words and deeds. They think they want Jesus to die; their words say so; the deed to be done by another.

The people who are standing shouting are a crowd. It can be good to be part of a crowd: standing at the Last Night of the Proms singing 'Land of Hope and Glory', 'Rule Britannia'; standing on the terraces for a football match shouting for your team to score. Being part of a crowd can mean that mixed up with whatever's going on, you take on a group mentality. You can go with the flow, intoxicated by a sense of being part of, being lost in something bigger than yourselves.

I don't know who made up that crowd that day: possibly a mix of ordinary folk and the High Priest's men. Once someone got them going, perhaps a

rabble rouser planted in the crowd, then things were going to get nasty, out-of-hand. Scenting blood, this crowd can shout for blood. On a high, this crowd can decide whether someone lives or dies !

Not nice but sadly true.



GJR 28 12 11

6 *What evil has he done ?*

Mark 15 v14

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

What evil has he done ?

Again Pilate's question is good. To be found guilty, surely there has to be a crime ? So what was Jesus' fault ? What evil had he done ?

Interesting one this. Christians believe Jesus by definition to be without sin. Essentially, in him there can be no evil because God is good and as the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, sharing the character of God, Jesus cannot be, in any sense of the word, evil.

So why has he seriously angered the Jewish Leaders in Jerusalem, upset them to such an extent that they want him permanently removed ? It's simply a question of authority and power. By what he says and by what he does, Jesus is calling into question their authority and challenging their power base. An outsider from Galilee, this wandering Rabbi is claiming to speak for God, to teach them what's right and to correct them where they are wrong ! As such, it would be easy for them to level a charge of blasphemy against him. At this time in this place, the penalty for blasphemy is death.

It seems ironic that someone who preaches the principles of love, of love of God, of love of neighbour, of love of self, should be judged to be evil.

If good is evil then we really do have a problem.



GJR 28 12 11

7 *Hail King of the Jews !*

Mark 15 v21

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

Hail King of the Jews

Soldiers are not necessarily nice.

Given the remarkable success of the charity Help for Heroes, the resurgence in the popularity of Remembrance Sunday, and the designation of the title Royal to the village of Wotton Bassett, then as a society we clearly respect those who fight and die on our behalf.

Violence is necessarily a part of what a soldier does. Physically fit, he needs to fight. Quick and strong, he needs to wound, to disable, to kill the enemy. Living with danger and the possibility of injury and death, it comes as no surprise when soldiers are less than gentle with those they guard.

Now we have rules of engagement and the Geneva Convention by which to judge their actions. Then no such niceties existed. In first century Judea, Roman soldiers were an army of occupation keeping a foreign land in order as an integral part of their Empire. If the powers that be had condemned this man, then if they treat him badly who would care ?

So they do and they enjoy doing it. They verbally and physically abuse Jesus. They have fun being nasty to someone who is not one of them but one of them. It's easy to mistreat an outsider.

Hail King of the Jews!



GJR 28 12 11

8 *They compelled a passer-by . . . to carry his cross.*

Mark 15 v21

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

They compelled a passer-by . . . to carry his cross.

A passer-by. Someone in the wrong place at the wrong time ? Bad luck or a bit of luck ? Depends on what you think.

Simon has come to Jerusalem from Cyrene. Not odd that – it's Passover and faithful Jews would try to be there for Pesach or one of the other two pilgrim festivals. Cyrene is part of the Roman Empire so Simon would be used to Roman soldiers making unreasonable demands on folk. And here and now he's being told, forced, to carry a stranger's cross for him.

At the time, who knows what Simon must have felt ? It's probably hot. He's possibly fit. But he's already had a long journey to get here. He has things to do. Somewhere else to be. He doesn't really want to be doing this. But then the man whose cross he has to carry is clearly in no fit state to do so himself. So perhaps Simon pities his pain and the excruciatingly painful death that awaits him.

Later, when Simon knows who he has helped, he may feel the warm glow that comes from having done something really good. Simon's sons, Alexander and Rufus, are well enough known to the Church for Mark to mention them by name. So it well may be that Simon himself became a Christian, a follower of the Way. If he did, on reflection, he may be glad that he was there then to help carry the burden of the one who came to carry the burden we all bear – the weight of our past wrong-doing.



9 *They divided his clothes among them casting lots to decide which
each should take.*

Mark 15 v24

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

*They divided his clothes among them casting lots to decide what each should
take.*

It used to be said that clothes make the man. We are what we wear. Take
away our clothes and you take away something that gives us shape, identity,
dignity in public.

Tradition has it that Jesus is covered by a loin cloth as he hangs on the cross.
Truth is he wasn't. He was naked.

Why ? Because for a Jew to be seen naked in public was shameful, degrading.
And though the Renaissance re-established the acceptability in art of the
nude, it is still considered improper, lacking proper respect, to depict Jesus
as such.

To expose Jesus to the scornful gaze and mockery of the onlookers was a
deliberate act of contempt on the part of the Roman soldiers: contempt for

normal decency and contempt for Jesus as a human being. His physical pain is made worse by the humiliation of being stripped and left naked in public. To emphasise the fact that Jesus is beyond the pale and to fulfil an Old Testament prophecy, the soldiers divide his clothes up among themselves, throwing dice to see who gets what. A curious bonus for them – dirty second-hand clothes !

But then, Jesus won't be needing them from now on, will he ?



10 *With him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.*

Mark 15 v27

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

With him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.

All four gospels agree that Jesus was crucified in the company of two other men, thieves or bandits, criminals of some sort who like him had been sentenced to death. The only difference is in their case they were guilty of the crime they had committed.

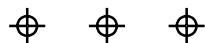
One is on the left; one is on the right – a nice balance for artists to represent in the years to come. Deliberate? Probably in that these worthless types are another sarcastic comment on that status of Jesus as King of the Jews. His subjects, enthroned at his right and at his left hand, enjoy the same fate as their king. If they had known, would James and John really want what, in their innocence, they had asked Jesus for?

Of the four gospels, John is silent beyond the fact that there were two of them there with Jesus. Matthew follows Mark in having both of them join in the mockery of Jesus. Luke alone has the encouraging defence of Jesus by

one of them who is rewarded for his trouble by the words – ‘today you will be with me in Paradise’.

But here in Mark both join in the mockery. Perhaps there is some relief for their pain in being horrible to someone else. People have always needed scapegoats. It helps to think that there is someone even worse off than us.

I love Mark’s gospel but here I’d like to run with Luke, with his account of the thief who stood up for Jesus.



11 He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of the Jews come down from the cross now so that we may see and believe

Mark 15 v31 – 32

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of the Jews come down from the cross now so that we may see and believe .

Abuse. Verbal abuse. To use words to cut and hurt the hearer. Bad words to make someone feel bad about themselves.

Jesus is helpless; unable to move out of ear-shot; vulnerable to verbal darts thrown by those who taunt him; exposed to their scorn as slowly, in front of their critical eyes, he hangs there – dying.

There is an art to being nasty to and about someone. It's taking what they hold dear and making fun of it; cheapening what they cherish; blackening their name; belittling what they stand for. And as his name clearly tells us, Jesus means 'God saves' !

So passers-by deride his claim to rebuild the Temple in three days – hardly possible given that he can't even manage to come down from his cross and save himself.

So priests and scribes similarly mock his claim to save others when he can't even save himself.

They're right of course: Jesus can't, or rather won't, save himself. But they're wrong too. It's by not coming down from the cross alive that Jesus will ultimately save us and possibly them.



12 Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani

Mark 15 v34

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani

This is it. This is the moment for which Jesus came into the world. This cry marks his act of atonement.

Atonement, at - one - ment, the state of being 'at-one-with-God'. Never has there been a time when Jesus was not so, at one with God. Jesus did not begin with his birth. The Son of God, like God the Father and God the Holy Spirit was there at the beginning. For each of them, for all of them, there's no beginning: they always are. God says as much when Moses asks his name and from the burning bush replies, ' I AM '. GOD IS; God is the eternal present.

Atonement is an act of love. To love someone who loves you so much that you want always to be with them, constantly want to share with them what is important to you both. There was never a time when Jesus was not so, never a time when he was not an integral part of God. Jesus was never apart from God till now.

Atonement is an act of love. By taking on himself the cost of our sin, then Jesus puts himself in the wrong and by separating himself from himself, he allows us to be restored to our intended place in the presence of God.

So here and now, for the first time, under the weight of our wrong-doing, Jesus is separated from God our Father. For the first time, Jesus is alone, abandoned, on his own. He has, in this moment in time, lost his perfect eternal communion as God with God.

No wonder, then, he cries in black despair, 'Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani!'



13 *Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.*

Mark 15 v37 – 38

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two .

At last it's over. The last thing Jesus does before he dies is to utter an inarticulate cry. The Word of God reduced to a wordless cry.

Jesus is slumped, unmoving, hanging from a wooden cross on a hill outside Jerusalem. On another hill, inside Jerusalem, on the Temple Mount stands the Temple built by Herod. There in the Holy of Holies, in the Sanctum Sanctorum, in the heart of this sacred place, is a curtain behind which rests the Ark of the Covenant. Sacred space is divided from the people by a curtain.

When Jesus gives up the ghost and dies, that curtain in the Temple which divides God from Man is torn in two. Man by the loving-kindness of a man, an act of God, is restored to God. There is no need any longer for a curtain to separate us from him. We two are now at one, a sign of which is one is torn in two.

It is finished. Jesus has achieved what he set out to do – through love to bind Man back to God.

‘Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.’



14 Truly this was God's Son !

Mark 15 v39

Priest *We adore you O Christ and we bless you*

People *because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world*

Truly this was God's Son !

Mark and Matthew both record this extraordinary declaration by a Roman centurion who has just supervised the crucifixion, 'Truly this was God's Son !'

John's account makes no mention of the officer. Luke puts different words in his mouth, 'Certainly this man was innocent'. Innocent or righteous, as the King James Bible translates the Greek word δικαίος (dikaios), is a strong word. Not only does it mean 'innocent' as the NRSV's translation suggests but 'dikaios' has the added meaning implied in the word righteous, i.e. a good Jew who lives a life informed by the Law of God; a true Bar Mitzvah, a Son of the Law.

But Matthew and Mark take what the centurion is said to have said a step further. Jesus is not simply innocent or righteous, Jesus is the Son of God. Extraordinary ! Wonderful ! From the mouth of a Roman soldier, a Gentile, an outsider, has come a statement of belief that completes Mark's Gospel. You may recall that Mark begins his gospel with a simple statement: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Now we have

come full circle with a foreigner seeing for himself the truth of which Mark writes.

And the challenge to us is the same challenge that Jesus made to his original Jewish audience – ‘Believe’. Believe in me and through me in the One who sent me, even God the Father of us all. An end can be a beginning for us all.

In truth, here is God’s Son !

