

Matthew 27:32-66 – Good Friday?

On Wednesday of this past week, the church we go to ran their regular Messy Church to which we take our grandchildren. The focus of all the craft activities was the Easter story. On the following day, when our daughter and her husband came to tea with the grandchildren, the older of the two, Emi, who is aged seven, asked us, "Why is Good Friday called Good Friday?" It's an excellent question. Why should we call "good" the day on which Jesus was nailed on a cross to die in agony? I explained to her again why the death of Jesus is so important to us and reminded her of the things she had heard at Messy Church: Jesus did not stay dead, he is risen and alive. When my wife asked her later why Good Friday is called "Good Friday", she answered that Jesus sacrificed himself for us. For a seven year old, that was a good beginning to understand the significance of the events in our reading this evening – events which it is hard for any of us to understand in all their fullness.

Today is "Palm Sunday". Perhaps you remembered this morning those events that took place just a few days before those recorded in this evening's passage. Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey to the acclaim not only of his disciples but also to the gathered crowds. They believed that this man, who had healed the sick and raised the dead and who had spoken with an authority unlike that of any of their Jewish leaders might perhaps be their promised Messiah. Now, at this Passover time, as they celebrated how God had rescued their ancestors from slavery, they probably hoped that Jesus would rescue them from the oppressive power of Rome.

How utterly had things changed in just a few days. Far from defeating the Romans, Jesus had been handed over to the Roman authorities who had flogged him and, with a crown of thorns and a purple robe, had mocked his claim to be King of the Jews. And now the Roman soldiers are leading Jesus out of Jerusalem to be crucified.

It was common practice for the Romans to force those being led out to crucifixion to carry on their back the cross-beam on which they were to be nailed. But it seems that Jesus was so weakened by the scourging he had received that he was unable to carry his cross all the way up the hill. A man named Simon from Cyrene (in North Africa) was seized by the Romans and forced to carry it for him.

Let me stop there for a moment. This man is named by Matthew along with where he came from. Mark tells us also that he was the father of Rufus and Alexander (Mark 15:21). How is it that we have all these personal details of this man when so many others often go unnamed in the Gospels? It is fairly safe to conclude that this man and/or his sons became Christians and were well known in the early Christian community. This Simon may have been the same man who is identified as Simeon called Niger (i.e. a man from Africa) in Acts 13:1. He was a leader in the church at Antioch along with Paul and Barnabas (the cousin of Mark). This family, then, was perhaps known to Mark and had provided some of the details of the things that happened on that awful and unforgettable day. Lives were changed by what happened on that day – the life of Simon from Cyrene was changed, the life of a centurion was changed, and who knows how many more.

As Jesus was nailed to the cross the mockery continues. The Roman authorities and soldiers mocked him by nailing the accusation above his head "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Soldiers were recruited from many parts of the Roman Empire and these were serving for a while in Judea and Jerusalem. The Roman soldiers hated the Jews with their claim to worship a special God and to be his special people. They hated the fact that they refused to be assimilated into the Roman Empire. They resented the fact that the Jews hated them and that some took every opportunity to kill them.

And so they now take out all their anger against this whole perverse nation and its beliefs by mocking the one who claimed to be their king. So much now for his claims! So much now for the pride of this nation and its broken hopes!

But it was not just the Romans who mocked Jesus. Matthew tells us "Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!'" (Matthew 27:39-40). Perhaps some of those who only a few days earlier were welcoming him into Jerusalem with palm branches cut off the roadside trees and shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David" were now mocking him. He had not lived up to their expectations and their welcome had turned to scornful rejection.

It's all too easy for us to point the finger at those who mocked Jesus but where would we have been and what would we have been doing on that day? Would we, like the other disciples, have abandoned him and fled? Would we have joined the mockery of the crowds? Can we not identify with the words of Stuart Townend in his song, *How deep the Father's love for us*:

Behold the man upon a cross
My sin upon His shoulders
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers

Perhaps these passers-by were incited by the Jewish leaders for we read that "the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, "I am the Son of God.'" And even the thieves or rebels who were crucified either side of Jesus joined in this mockery.

None of those who mocked him seemed to see the irony in their own words; it was because he was determined to save others that he would not save himself. He could have summoned legions of angels to come to his aid. He could have stepped down from the cross and destroyed all those who were mocking him. But in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing the horror of his death, he had submitted to the will of the Father saying, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (Matthew 26:42). So, to save us, he would not save himself and come down. It was *because he was the Son of God* that he hung there.

Was it the nails, O Saviour,
That bound Thee to the tree?
Nay, 'twas Thine everlasting love,
Thy love for me, for me.

Oh, make me understand it,
Help me to take it in,
What it meant to Thee, the Holy One,
To bear away my sin.

There were thousands of crucifixions in Judea in the first century, but there was never one like this one. The sun refused to shine at mid-day and there was darkness over the land all afternoon as Jesus hung there dying; the sun darkened as a sign that the day of judgment had arrived. It was as if the

created world was losing its vitality as the one through whom all things were made and by whom all things are sustained is dying.

And then, Jesus "cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')." (Matthew 27:46). Jesus feels himself to be forsaken, abandoned by God, for he feels himself to be under the judgment of God. Our sin had separated Jesus, the holy one of God, from his holy Father. At the cross, God himself shares in the brokenness of a broken world that it might be healed.

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

Jesus suffered in our place. He bore the weight of our iniquity and was pierced for our transgressions. He suffered the punishment which our sins deserved; he felt himself to be "punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted." He refused to be anaesthetised to the pain, but suffered it to the full. It is our iniquity that separated Jesus from the Father and that caused him to feel forsaken. He endured all of this for us that we might never be forsaken; that we might be reconciled to God. He was broken that we might be healed.

O Christ, what burdens bow'd Thy head!
Our load was laid on Thee;
Thou stoodest in the sinner's stead,
Didst bear all ill for me.
A victim led; Thy blood was shed;
Now there's no load for me.

Death and the curse were in our cup,
O Christ, 'twas full for Thee!
But Thou hast drained the last dark drop—
'Tis empty now for me.
That bitter cup—love drank it up;
Now blessings' draught for me.

Jehovah lifted up His rod,
O Christ, it fell on Thee!
Thou wast sore stricken of Thy God;
There's not one stroke for me.
Thy tears, Thy blood, beneath it flowed;
Thy bruising healeth me.

After this dreadful cry of dereliction, Matthew records, "When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit" (27:50). It often took days for those hung on a cross to die. Death was slow and painful and usually due to asphyxiation as the victim became so exhausted through pain and loss of blood that he could no longer lift himself upright to breathe. It could take painful days to die.

But this was the eve of the Jewish Passover and the Jewish authorities – and the Romans – were keen to have the bodies taken down before Passover began. So the soldiers were ordered to break the legs of those hanging there to speed their deaths. But Jesus was already dead. Jesus did not merely hang there until he was dead – a victim of Roman "justice"; he "gave up his spirit." Jesus remained in control of what was happening, even on the cross. Jesus spoken of himself as the Good Shepherd who was going to *lay down his life* for his sheep. He said, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." (John 10:17-18). Jesus gave up his spirit, he voluntarily laid down his life before any could take it from him. He laid it down for you and for me, and he laid it down that he might take it up again.

As Jesus died, the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Those who had come along to see him die had mocked him saying, "You who are going to *destroy the temple* and build it in three days, save yourself!" His death is not *his* destruction, but it is the destruction of the temple. The curtain was the one which separated the dwelling place of God in the holy of holies from the parts of the temple where the worshipers would meet. Jesus' separation from the Father meant that this curtain of separation was ripped open from top to bottom. It was as if God himself burst out of the confines of the most holy place to embrace a world of people who had been far away from him – to embrace not only the Jewish worshipers within the temple area but Gentiles also who could only stand far off, outside. The centurion, standing at the foot of the cross exclaims, "Surely he was the Son of God." Through this one last sacrifice for sin God and sinful human beings are reconciled; nothing can ever again separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And as Jesus breathes his last even the earth itself is broken and groans in an earthquake. Already some of those who followed him but who had died and been buried were raised to life – an anticipation of Jesus own resurrection and of ours at his return. In his death, death itself is destroyed.

Jesus' death is not his defeat. It is not the demonstration that all his claims concerning himself were empty bravado and that he was a fraud. The cross is the ultimate demonstration of the extent of God's love: God the Father so loved us that he gave his one and only Son up to death for us, so that we might not perish but have eternal life. God the Son loved us and gave himself for us. The cross may seem to display the weakness of God but it displays his saving power. Death could not defeat the Lord Jesus. They could wrap him tightly in grave clothes and seal him in a rock hewn tomb. They could place guards on the tomb to ensure that no-one could get past that massive stone. But death could not hold him. "He died for our sins and was raised for our justification."

Why is the death of Jesus celebrated on a day we call, "Good Friday"? It was a day when evil seemed to triumph but it was Jesus, the Son of God who had the last word. "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Hebrews 1:3). And he

did it all for us, to bring us also to glory. Christ triumphed over all the powers of darkness at the cross (Colossians 2:15). It was a good day, the very best of days.

What difference does that day make to you?

If God loved us like that, we must love him in return – love him extravagantly and with all our being.

If Jesus gave himself for us then we must give ourselves to him and to one another. "Christ's love compels us," writes Paul, "because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Half-hearted discipleship is no discipleship at all; it has failed to understand the meaning of the cross. Jesus calls us to follow him – to take up our cross and follow him. To follow him though others may mock, jeer and make all manner of accusation against us. He calls us to die to all that nailed him to the cross and to live utterly for him and by his power.

Jesus calls us, "Follow me!" How do you respond to him?

Peter Misselbrook, Marshfield 25/3/18