

“THE END? (Mark 56)”
Mark 15:21-47

Well, we're nearly there. This is the penultimate sermon on Mark's gospel – next week we should finish this series, which we began nearly three years ago. But this morning we take up very much where we left off last time. The humiliation and torture of Jesus continue. We began to see last time the horrors of the trial and punishment that Jesus had to go through – and it proved a bit too much for some people. This is an appalling end for someone in whom so much hope had been placed, someone who had promised so much, who had given to a world full of hurt and dysfunction so many bright glimpses of the possibilities of the Kingdom of God..

And now, as Jesus finally meets his destiny, as he prepares to tread the last section of his earthly journey, that distress goes on. He is taken out of the Praetorium where Pilate has tried him and the soldiers have flogged him, and starts to walk the road to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Only now he is so weak that he cannot even carry the cross. He arrives at the hill of execution – almost certainly situated within what are now the city precincts – and his raw and ravaged back is laid on the rough wood of the cross for the Roman soldiers to hammer home the great iron nails which will hold him to it until he dies. For the soldiers it's just another day's work – they've done it hundreds of times before – but for each victim it is necessarily a one-off experience.

The pain would have been immense – I came across a detailed description of crucifixion when I was preparing for this, but I'll spare you the details this morning. And Jesus hung there, his muscles in spasm and his breathing becoming ever more difficult, for six hours (actually quiet a bit less than it usually took to die on the cross). As he hung there he was harangued and abused by the passers-by and by the religious leaders who had come to see the end results of their scheming and conniving. On top of the pain and the verbal abuse, there was the shame of hanging there naked, with no control of his body and its functions and no way of hiding his vulnerability.

But for Jesus there was the added trauma of being abandoned by his Father God. His great cry of desolation drives home the point that he had no comfort in his moment of extremity. If you read the stories of those who have been tortured or executed for the sake of the gospel, you'll discover that they often find strength and comfort in their dying moments through the presence of God. Jesus had none of that. And his final resting place was a borrowed tomb as Joseph of Arimathea took the body away to give it as decent a burial as he could. What an end!

Just notice, though, the way in which Mark carefully notes the witnesses to all that happened. These people – Simon, Alexander, Rufus, Joseph, the two Marys and Salome – would very likely still have been alive when Mark's gospel was first circulated. Anyone could have checked with them the veracity of Mark's story, could have confirmed that Jesus was actually dead when he was put in the tomb. There's no hint here that Jesus didn't really die, that his place on the cross was taken by someone else. And that will be very important when it comes to the final instalment of this story.

But this is a story full of paradox. Just as there are all kinds of things in our Christian faith generally which need to be kept in balance, in tension, so here there are things which make this episode remarkable. This whole story is testimony to the awesome sovereignty and amazing love of God.

As we have followed Mark's story of Jesus' ministry we have been given a picture of a man who has wielded tremendous power and authority. Jesus has calmed storms, has shouted down the elemental forces of nature and brought them under his control. He has confronted the dark powers of evil and sent demons shrieking from the twisted minds and bodies of their victims. His strength of character and the authority of his word have been unrivalled. And now we find the vanquisher of demons and the calmer of storms too weak to carry his own cross. We find the creator of the world nailed to a tree he made, buried in a hole in the rock he formed from the primeval chaos. Has it really come to this?

And the chief priests and teachers of the law (v31) find ammunition for their mockery and abuse in these very paradoxes. “*He saved others*” they shout gleefully, “*but he can’t save himself.*” And there, surely, is one of the most ironic comments in the Bible – indeed, in all of history. Of course, he could have saved himself. Of course, Jesus could have climbed down from the cross. Of course, he could have summoned armies of angels – all the hosts of heaven – and not only saved himself, but vaporised the bystanders, the hill and the city. He could have reduced to a dusty footnote in the history books the entire Roman Empire. But he did not. Because if he had, we could not have been saved. It was God’s will that this should happen and through this cosmic event, all people should be saved.

The priests and lawyers, the soldiers and the scoffers want Jesus to get down from the cross in order that it might be a sign for them, “*that we might see and believe*” (v32). Jesus has already ruled out that kind of thing in 8:11,12. Anyway, if they aren’t going to believe after all the other miracles they’ve seen, all the other demonstrations of Jesus’ power, they’re not going to now. But Jesus’ refusal to give a sign, to submit to the pressure of their haranguing, to concede to the unspeakable pain in his dying body, now becomes the greatest sign of all. The cross of Golgotha, the death of Jesus becomes the defining moment in all history. His desperate perseverance against all the odds becomes the sign by which we are saved. The cross turns out to be the greatest sign of all and the very core of the belief of the hundreds of millions of his followers down through the centuries.

And as Jesus hangs there gasping, the life draining from his shattered body, he reaches that place which takes him beyond the worst that any human being could ever experience – even God abandons him (v34). By this stage a victim of crucifixion usually does not even have the strength to whisper, but Jesus yells out “*My God, where have you gone? Why are you doing this to me?*” At that moment, as he bears the sin of the entire world (2 Corinthians 5:21), he becomes too much for the holy God to look upon – as the prophet Habakkuk writes, “*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil*”. Jesus is the lightning rod for all the evil in the cosmos and his Father just cannot bear to see it. For once he turns his face away and Jesus is left alone, more completely alone than anyone has ever been before or since.

That happened – Jesus was abandoned by God – precisely so that we might not be. Jesus was left alone by God so that we could know relationship with God. This was the seal on the promise that God had made to his people in *Deuteronomy 31:6*, which the writer to the Hebrews quotes in *Hebrews 13:3* – “*God has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’.*” It needed God to forsake Jesus for those few minutes to convince us that he will never leave us for all eternity. And as Jesus shrieked his final eerie cry, back in the city the great veil which stood between the people and the holiest part of the Temple was ripped from the top to the bottom. The way to God was re-opened. His glory was now to be evident to all. The relationship which had been so distorted and perverted by the sin of Adam and Eve was renewed and restored.

For Jesus it was the end. For humanity it was a new beginning. The life went from his body in a last shout. And we can know life in our bodies only because of the awesome sacrifice that Jesus made. His death means our life. His end means our beginning. His condemnation means our salvation. His humiliation allows us to lift our heads high and share in the glory of God.

And there, really, is the great question which we are left with in the face of religious pluralism and moral relativism. Again and again we hear the assertion that there is more than one way to God, that Jesus is just one manifestation of the Supreme Being’s attempts to communicate with us. If that’s the case, if there are other ways to God, if there are other means of salvation and wholeness, then why on earth did Jesus die? He could have got out of it. He could have avoided the humiliation, the agony, the shame, the desolation of the cross. If there are other ways to God, why did he go through with it? If there are other ways to God, then the trial, flogging, execution and death of Jesus ends up as the most futile act of all history. I’m not interested in a God who makes empty gestures. I believe he died for me, that there was and is no alternative. And I praise God from the very core of my being.

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The humiliation and torture of Jesus continue in these verses, which are at the very heart of our Christian faith – indeed, without this episode there is no Christian faith.

There is

- the long walk he cannot even carry the cross
- the crucifixion – abuse, pain and shame
- the abandonment of Jesus by God the Father
- the burial in a borrowed tomb

Mark carefully notes the various witnesses to it all, people who would still have been alive when his book was circulated – Simon, Rufus, Alexander, Joseph, the women. There was no doubt that this happened – and no doubt that Jesus actually died.

But it is a story full of paradox.

- The vanquisher of demons and calmer of storms who was too weak to carry his own cross.
- The creator of the world buried in a borrowed tomb.
- Jesus could have saved himself but he didn't. If he had we would not be saved (*v31*).
- Jesus refused to give a sign (cf. *8:11,12*), but the cross has become the greatest sign of all (*v32*).
- Jesus is abandoned by God (cf. *Habakkuk 1:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21*) so that we might come closer to God (cf. *Hebrews 13:5*), symbolised by the tearing of the Temple curtain (*v34*).
- The end for Jesus is the beginning for us (*v37*)

It is an appalling death in every way. Jesus could have avoided it. If there are other ways to God, why on earth did he bother to go through with it?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you ever reflect on the physical realities of Jesus' crucifixion? Is it helpful to do that?
2. Jesus could have got down from the cross. He could have done it and it would have been a great confirmation of his power. Why didn't he?
3. Was Jesus really abandoned by God? Why?
4. Why do you think the centurion responded as he did?
5. If there really are other ways to God, then Jesus' death was an utterly futile gesture. How do you respond to that?
6. Do you have any new insights into this passage you'd like to share with others in the group?