

The Cross, The Cry And The Closure

Mark 15:21-47

Introduction

The cross is at the heart of the Christian faith. The importance of the cross for Christians is demonstrated by most church buildings having a cross somewhere on display. Many Christians, as well as some non-Christians, wear a cross around their neck or on their ears. This is interesting because, while there are some teenagers, or particularly morbid individuals, who would think that it's cool to wear a noose around their necks or dangle little electric chairs from their ears, most people don't like the idea of decorating themselves or their important buildings with images of execution.

With Evangeline's love of history I wasn't surprised on the occasion of her crashing through a plate glass door by her saying, "Wow, it's a good thing I bounced backwards and the glass only cut my hand. If I had have fallen forwards I would have been reenacting the French Revolution." While a history buff like Evangeline may make such connections most people don't have a guillotine image on their doorways or a firing squad motif for their walls.

Why is it that the cross has such an important, and indeed positive, significance for Christians? I don't have time in one sermon to do this topic justice but we're going to take an overview of the topic as we look at this section of Mark's Gospel. We're taking these twenty seven verses together because they line up with critical phrase in the Christian tradition. Last week we read the Apostles' Creed together to show that, despite Pilate making the decision to condemn Jesus probably with a desire to simply get rid of this problem and for it to be forgotten, Christians have continued to remind the world that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate." The very next line reads, "was crucified, died, and was buried." This line of the Creed has given us the title and focus of this message, "The Cross, The Cry [which Jesus made as he was dying] And The Closure [which is how people felt at the time, seeing Jesus' dead body consigned to the grave]."

Mark's account here is typically brief and unadorned but it provides us with a number of little details which help us to see that Mark is getting his information from an eyewitness. Indeed, Mark's record is so brief that if it wasn't for the rest of his Gospel and the regular references to the Old Testament we would struggle to comprehend the record of Jesus' death on the cross as anything more than a brutal example of imperial power and cruel injustice.

This morning I want to highlight certain points which help us understand the significance of the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus and I want to do that from this section of Mark with occasional references to other sections in Mark's Gospel and to Psalm 22 which Jesus calls out from the cross. I want to do this because The Gospels were written to help people believe in Jesus and what he's done for us and so surely each Gospel has enough information to understand the significance of Jesus execution.

The Cross (vv.21-32)

So then, it is to the cross that we look. The first thing I note is verse 23, "Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it." We're not told explicitly who 'they' are but this appears to have been a common activity of pious Jewish women showing care to condemned men. Myrrh has certain narcotic effects which would ease the suffering of those who were about to experience a horrendous death. And dying on a cross truly is horrendous. There is a reason why the word 'excruciating' comes from the Latin word for 'cross.' Jesus though refuses to receive this drink. Jesus chooses to experience fully the pain that he is to face.

In the next verse we read, "And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get." It's interesting that Mark doesn't make explicit that this activity of the soldiers was a fulfilment of what is found in the same Psalm which Jesus later cries out. Psalm 22:18 reads, "They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment." This little reference helps to remind us that the promises and

activity of God recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures forms the backdrop and provides understanding of what Jesus is going through. This is why Jesus wouldn't take the wine laced with myrrh, Jesus was consciously fulfilling what was prophesied about him and was enduring this with full awareness.

My final point on the cross concerns what the cross symbolised for Jewish people and this is connected with what the people standing around were calling out to Jesus. We're told that "The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS." And perhaps it was seeing this title, which they felt was so patently absurd, that some Jews mocked Jesus. Starting from verse 29 we read, Those 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, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In 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! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe."

For the Jews the cross was a particularly insulting method of execution. Not only was it a painful reminder that they were under Roman rule (and so didn't truly have their own king) but for someone to be hung on a cross was an indicator that the person was cursed by God. This helps to explain why the Jewish leaders were calling out to Jesus, but Mark wants his readers to recognise the irony of these words.

Here we need to remember some of what we've already read in Mark's Gospel. Mark started his Gospel by stating that it was "the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." Mark goes on to repeatedly describe how Jesus rejected being the political and military Messiah that the Jews were hoping for and instead presented himself as the Suffering Servant Messiah. Mark wants his readers to recognise that although the Jewish leaders were calling upon Jesus to show himself to be some sort of super-hero messiah by coming down from the cross, Jesus had to stay on the cross to be the Messiah that he knew he was called and prophesied to be. By Jesus refusing to come down from the cross and save himself, he is actually saving others and thus showing himself to truly be the Messiah. Jesus is fulfilling what he said early

in chapter 10, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

We reflected on this issue last week, looking at the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, but when we combine this with what else we learn from these verses in Mark we see that Jesus went to the cross willingly and fully aware of what he would experience, doing this because he was consciously fulfilling the prophecies that were made about him in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) and the cross reminds us that Jesus suffered this death as the Messiah that the people needed even if so many of them were rejecting it.

The Cry (vv.33-41)

We now turn our attention to Jesus’ cry on the cross and the time of his death. Verses 33 to 41 provide us with details which help us to understand better what was going on. We’re told that the crowd wondered if Jesus was calling on Elijah, whom it was believed would come in connection with the Messiah, and we’re also told that this time when wine, which had not been laced with myrrh, was offered to Jesus that Jesus accepted it. Presumably Jesus received the wine to help him cry out the loud final cry he made as he surrendered his life. Finally, while Mark doesn’t record the change of heart which one of the prisoners being executed with Jesus had, he does record that one of the executioners, a Gentile, made a confession of faith upon seeing the way Jesus died.

While those facts, and others I haven’t mentioned, are interesting, I particularly want to focus on Jesus cry, quoting Psalm 22.

At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And 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?”).

What are we to make of this painful cry and it’s close association with the death of Jesus? For some people these verses indicate Jesus giving up all hope and realising that he is mistaken in his desire to see God rescue Israel and so he feels

utterly betrayed and abandoned. On the other hand there are people who point out that to call out the first line of a Psalm was a way of referencing the whole Psalm and so we need to read the whole of Psalm 22 which concludes very positively and so Jesus isn't struggling here but simply wants people to look at Psalm 22 and realise how he has fulfilled it.

The difficulty of seeing Jesus' cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" as demonstrating Jesus feeling completely betrayed and abandoned is that there are other verses in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly in Lamentations, which are equally despairing and don't have the confident note of trust in Yahweh or optimism which Psalm 22 has.

However, to only focus on the positive elements of Psalm 22 and ignore the desperation that we hear in "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" appears to be avoiding a painful and challenging statement of Jesus.

Please allow me to share with you a suggestion in reading these verses. Note that the paragraph says, "At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And 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?")." It would appear that the reference to the darkness coming over the land is a reference to the wrath and judgement of God against sin being poured out upon Jesus. Jesus knew that this would happen and indeed had desired to avoid it, as we heard in his prayer at Gethsemane, but only if he could avoid it while still fulfilling his Father's will. Jesus' cry is indeed a cry of despair and anguish because he has experienced something which he has never experienced before in eternity past and that is the displeasure and judgement of God the Father. In the light of such suffering Jesus' cry is genuine and real. However, Jesus specifically chose a Psalm, Psalm 22 which was read to us earlier, which both expresses the genuineness of his pain while also looking to a hope beyond it. A hope expressed in words like this:

I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you.

You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honour him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.

Jesus' next cry appears to be a cry of victorious conclusion as he breathed his last. John's Gospel tells us that Jesus' final cry was "It is finished!" but we don't need to know the exact words to recognise that this is different to the way most people died who were crucified, which was death by exhaustion or blood loss. Jesus' loud cry is also accompanied by the divine affirmation of the effectiveness of Jesus' death: "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." Jesus has opened the way for people to have direct access to Yahweh without need for any other intermediary or sacrifice except Jesus himself.

Perhaps it was Jesus' climactic and victorious shout which prompted the centurion's reaction, "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" This is certainly the response which Mark is seeking to illicit from his readers too.

The Closure (vv.42-47)

Jesus has been crucified, has died and is now to be buried. The burial could also warrant much being said about it but I only want to highlight two key points.

First, there is clear confirmation that Jesus is dead.

Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph.

Not only does the enquiry of Pilate affirm that Jesus really is dead, so does the length of time that Jesus is in the grave. Three days was significant for Jews to believe that the soul had departed the body and so Jesus being in the tomb three days confirms that Jesus really has died. It's interesting that this issue continues to

raise its head today with some people wondering if Jesus just fainted on the cross only to revive in the cool of the tomb. We can be thankful that Mark has recorded this information to confirm the painful (and what they thought at the time, final) reality of Jesus' death.

The second key point from the account of the burial of Jesus is to note that Mark bracketed his account with two lists of women who were present. Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

[and in verse 47]

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

The presence of the women is significant because Mark records the women as witnesses, even though they do not have standing in a Jewish court of law. That Mark chooses to list witnesses who did not have legal standing means that there was no other reason to acknowledge their presence other than the fact that they really were there. Mark wants to assure his readers of the reality of Jesus' death and burial even if it wasn't verified legally as this will prepare the way for the declaring reality of Jesus' resurrection. Of course, having just recorded the experience of Jesus in both Jewish and Roman courts of law there could be a little irony in Mark's reporting here, "No, this won't stand up in court but when do courts care about the truth anyway?"

More personally we also note that the presence of the women also served as an example to Mark's readers of people who were faithful disciples to the (apparent) very end, something which Jesus' male disciples had failed to be.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope and pray that looking at this section of Mark's Gospel helps us to see why the cross is indeed so important to Christians and why we affirm in the creeds that Jesus "was crucified, died, and was buried."

We've seen that Jesus went to the cross willingly and fully aware of what he would experience, and he did this because he was consciously fulfilling the prophecies that were made about him being the Messiah that the people needed.

We've also seen that in Jesus' cry on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we have a great cry of despair as Jesus endures God's wrath and punishment of human sin and yet this cry is also a pointer to a confidence and hope. Just as Psalm 22 contains both the cry as well as the message of hope. Jesus' death was effective in opening the way for people to come to Yahweh freely and the very way Jesus died brought a Roman centurion, a Gentile, to declare his recognition of Jesus' status.

We finished by seeing that Jesus' death was genuine and, in the eyes of the people at the time, final. People could accept this to be true by the presence of faithful female disciples even if their evidence wouldn't be considered in a court of law.

I'm conscious that I haven't given a specific application for us this week. May I suggest that we take some extra time to reflect and simply feel the weight of what Jesus has done and accomplished when he was crucified, died and was buried. We can start doing this now by remaining seated as we sing and reflect on the words of this next song, "How Deep The Father's Love For Us."