

Sermon, Palm Sunday,

24th March, 2024, Quairading, Beverley, Brookton and York (Text: Mark 14:1 – 15:47)

How quickly things change: the anticipation and jubilation with themes of victory, grandeur, and joy at the beginning of the week become overshadowed by themes of gloom, suffering and death. That's just how it was on that very first holy week. The crowds that lined the streets cheering Jesus and acknowledging him as the source of blessing with the words: "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" and calling out for his rescue with shouts of "Hosanna" seemed worlds away, that day that Jesus stood before Pilate and a spiteful crowd viciously shouted: "Crucify him!"

It was a mockery of justice and a fair trial. Mark tells us that it all began very early in the morning, when the chief priests, the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. Notice it's *their* plans—the Jewish authorities manoeuvre the situation, determined to do away with Jesus. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to the Roman Governor Pilate. The hated Romans are now suddenly in favour with the Jewish ruling authorities. They need them on side. Under Roman rule, the Sanhedrin could still exercise civil jurisdiction according to Jewish law, and even a degree of criminal jurisdiction. Under certain circumstances it could even pronounce a death sentence but could not carry it out. For that to happen, they had to hand over their prisoner to the Romans, who would then administer the death penalty.

The problem for the Sanhedrin was that their charge against Jesus – blasphemy - wasn't a crime punishable under Roman law. However, what if the charge was that Jesus was to be found guilty of setting himself up as a rival to Roman rule, resisting and even opposing Caesar as the King of the Jews? If the Sanhedrin could just convince the Roman Governor Pilate of this, then they could "nail" Jesus once and for all - literally.

There's a little hiccup, though - Pilate seems to have a conscience. Although he doesn't really know who Jesus is, he knows that Jesus is not really guilty. Amazed that Jesus remains silent, Pilate urges Jesus to defend himself. This is not the scenario the Chief Priests planned so they turn to the power of crowd influence and human emotion, stirring up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead of Jesus.

"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. Really—how can this be? Barabbas is the insurrectionist! He's the rebel, the danger to the public and threat to the government. Isn't he the one deserving of punishment?

Yet the crowd shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” Pilate’s concern for justice for Jesus changes to concern for his self-preservation - wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate releases Barabbas and Jesus is a “dead man walking”, as the soldiers lead the Prince of Peace away. They mock Jesus by clothing him with a purple robe and crown of thorns, imitating the purple robe and gilded wreath of leaves worn by Roman emperors. They ridicule Jesus by saluting “Hail king of the Jews” corresponding to the formal Roman acclamation: “Hail Caesar!” while bending their knees before Jesus in parody.

Jesus is crucified in the middle of two criminals, one on his right and one on his left. The innocent Son of God in the company of lawbreakers, now treated as one himself. If the physical torture wasn’t enough, the emotional pain continues, for those passing 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.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. The hurling and heaping of verbal abuse is ferocious and it’s coming from everywhere. In his final moments, as Jesus hung dehydrating on the cross, he was mocked further; kings in the Roman world would enjoy the finest of wines at their banquet table, the equivalent of Grange Hermitage today. Desperately thirsty, the King of kings who turned water into the choicest of wine at the wedding banquet is offered cheap and nasty vinegar on a sponge, held up to him on a staff. “Now leave him alone” they said.

“Now leave him alone.” Harrowing words. Jesus does know what it’s like to be left alone, even if he is actually surrounded by crowds, and crucified between criminals. No one comes to his aid, not even God his Father. Then the One who breathed the breath of God into Adam to give life to humankind at creation, breathed his last.

It’s easy at times to feel all alone, as if no one really knows us or cares about us or can help us. We hear and see ridicule, abuse, injustice, exploitation, violence, selfish greed, political self-interest, and people so broken that they rejoice in the suffering and harm of others. We have probably all experienced this to a greater or lesser degree in our lives. We might lament: “What’s the world coming to?” In today’s text, we see the problem that we lament has always been there because of a human nature that desires self-rule and expresses itself in the form of verbal abuse, mockery, violence, hatred, spite, injustice, terrorism, and rejoicing over evil and suffering.

God didn't want to leave us alone in all that. The centurion's statement shows us: "Surely this man was the Son of God." There on the Cross was not a criminal or someone who deserved to die. It was not even just a 'good' person. It was the sinless Son of God, who bore the sins of the world upon his shoulders, taking all our evil, pain, suffering, wickedness, mockery and insults for us.

When he breathed his last, the curtain of the temple was torn in two. This was not any ordinary curtain. It divided the Holy Place of the Temple, from the Most Holy Place where God was present. The curtain was about a hand thickness and prevented people from entering the Most Holy Place and being consumed by God's holiness lest they defile it. Only the High Priest was consecrated to enter the Most Holy Place, and on only one day a year - the Day of Atonement - when he made payment for the sins of all Israel with the blood of an animal sacrifice.

When Jesus died, He made payment for the sins of the whole world with his very own holy and precious blood. The Temple curtain was torn in two, because access to God's gracious presence has been made a reality by Christ, for all people. He has fulfilled the sacrificial system for us with his own death. Now it is not only the high priest who can enter the Most Holy place one day a year, but because of Christ, access to God which our sin and un-holiness once denied us, is now available for free, for all, and for ever.

Through faith in Jesus, we have access to all of God's favour, mercy, grace and blessings from the heavenly sanctuary, which are delivered to us in the sanctuary here. The gap you see in the sanctuary rail is not just functional, but deeply significant. There is no longer a barrier between us and God. As we approach God, he is already waiting for us to come. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! The one who was crucified for all our sins is the source of all divine blessing and he is here with his saving help for us, as he serves us his own body that was lifted high on the cross, and his precious blood that was poured out there, to bring us forgiveness life and salvation. This is how we know that we will never be abandoned by God, no matter what has happened in the past, no matter what we have witnessed this week on the news, no matter how we have been hurt or insulted or abused, no matter what our fears are for the future, even the fears that we might not matter to anyone, or have anyone we can depend on to help us. Because of Christ we have *confidence* to enter the Most Holy Place - to come into the presence of God himself - not because of anything we have done, but through Jesus who has opened up a new and living way for each of us through his body offered on the Cross.