

HOLY GHOST, GENOVA – Four Ways to the Cross 1: Mark (4.3.2020)

Suppose someone were to ask you "Which version of the Passion story do you know best?"; how would you reply? If you are a musician or singer, you might reply "St Matthew's" or, perhaps, "St John's". If you aren't a musician, you might well be stuck for an answer, because we don't usually think of "versions" of the Passion story. Most of us live, in our prayers and our worship, and our understanding of Christian discipleship, with *one* Passion story, a composite or "harmonized" version, taking incidents from different parts of the New Testament. That story will probably include Jesus washing the disciples' feet (in John's Gospel only), the Last Supper (including words from Matthew and Mark, and 1 Corinthians 11), the young man who ran away naked when Jesus was arrested (only in Mark), Pilate washing his hands (only in Matthew), Judas's suicide (also only in Matthew) and the Penitent Thief (only in Luke). And that traditional theme for meditation, "The Seven Last Words from the Cross", is a sort of collage of the things that Jesus said taken from all four Gospels, as is Stainer's "Crucifixion".

Now, you may be asking, does all this matter? In some respects, of course not. In others, it matters very much. The four Gospels contain very different accounts of Jesus' betrayal, trial, and execution. These accounts are saying very different things about Jesus. And they are aimed at different types of reader. The differences between them are well summed up in the saying that for Mark, the cross is a gallows; for Matthew, a judge's bench; for Luke, a pulpit; and for John, a throne. Here we shall be examining the story as it is told in Mark's Gospel.

When I was a curate in Watford back in the 1980s, there used to be an annual procession of witness on Good Friday from the Catholic Church on the other side of the North Orbital Road to the Baptist Church about a mile away. Each year the old parish priest from the Catholic Church would send us on our way with a pious meditation. And each year I would find myself listening with a holy expression and gritted teeth: because dear Fr Gerry would always lay on thickly the unique awfulness and horror of Jesus's sufferings. It was what he had been taught in the seminary forty-odd years before, and he was still churning it out.

My problem with listening to that sort of devotional chat was that I knew that, in one very important sense, it wasn't true. There is a horror about the crucifixion of Jesus. There is an awfulness in the realisation "That for a worm, a God should die". But for the people of Jesus' day there was nothing unique about crucifixion. It was the punishment dished out to runaway slaves, to rebels, to brigands and murderers. It was routine – ordinary – as well as being brutal and degrading, and it was carried out in public and prominent places, like a cross-roads, or a hill-top, as an awful warning to anyone else who might be tempted to defy the power of Rome. That has always seemed to me to be an important part of our understanding of the crucifixion, In Jesus, God shares human life and a human death – a death among the outcasts and the villains, a death which was both despised and feared, but not "extraordinary", And this appalling ordinariness of the suffering and death of Jesus is reflected in the passion according to Mark, which is the earliest detailed account of Jesus' suffering and death.

We can see this in the sheer aloneness, the isolation, which increasingly overwhelms Jesus. All those who have known serious illness, or a close bereavement, or who have been in trouble with the law, will tell you how much they have felt on their own at such times. Events seem to swirl around them while they are helpless in the centre. They have no control over what is going on. Things happen to them without any obvious pattern or meaning.

This is very noticeable in the closing chapters of Mark's Gospel. Jesus, who has been so dynamic and active, so busily doing the work of God, is suddenly the object of other people's activity. After restoring sight to Bartimaeus in chapter 10, he does no further work of healing. The only "miracle" is the cursing of the fig tree in chapter 11. The only activity is the cleansing of the temple, which is a kind of parallel to, and commentary on, the curse on the unfruitful tree. From the end of chapter 11, Jesus is increasingly in conflict with the leaders of the people, the chief priests, the teachers of the Law, the elders. The main political and religious parties try to trap him. By the beginning of chapter 14 they are "looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him". And the conflict begins to enter the circle of disciples.

There is the row about the woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany. The disciples "scolded her" says the NRSV in verse 5. Mark's Greek says they "snorted at her", they were so angry. There is Judas's decision to hand Jesus over to the chief priests, and Jesus' recognition that it is "one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me" (and remember how important table-fellowship was – still is – to the peoples of the Middle East), one of the twelve will violate all the ties of friendship and hospitality and will hand Jesus over to torture and death. It is in this setting of fear and suspicion and amid the beginnings of fragmentation that Jesus eats his last supper with the twelve. It is in this framework that the Lord's Supper begins, drawing together things, and people, that are breaking apart under the stress of fear and mutual suspicion and pointing them to a unity in him which will very soon be lost, despite the protestations of Peter and the rest.

In the garden the aloneness of Jesus becomes even more obvious. He takes Peter and James and John, the three who had shared the most important and the most intimate moments of his ministry. They had been present at the raising of Jairus's daughter: they had seen Jesus transfigured on the mountain: they had shared (along with Andrew) his warnings about the end-time. Jesus takes Peter and James and John, the inner circle of the twelve, apart from the rest. He asks them to share, so far as they can, in the coming trial. He asks them to watch in solidarity with him, as he prays for strength in the time of suffering that is about to begin.

And they fail. They fall asleep. Three times he returns from his agonized struggle to remain faithful and obedient, and finds them dozing. And then the crowd is upon him – and, after token resistance, the disciples flee, one of them casting all shame and modesty to the winds in his hurry to escape. This is one of the very few points at which Matthew, the Christianized scribe, the interpreter of Jewish Law, doesn't follow Mark. He leaves this episode out. Here we remember that nakedness was *not* part of Jewish culture. For one of the disciples to slip out of his clothes and run away naked was a very shameful thing and a sign of the abject panic which overtook them when the "rent-a-mob" sent out by the Jewish leaders arrived to arrest Jesus,

From this point Jesus is entirely on his own, Peter, it is true, follows at a distance, and gets as far as the courtyard of the high priest's house, but there he bottles out in the face of a challenge from one of the high priest's servant-girls. Mark very skilfully inter-cuts the story of Peter's denial with the story of Jesus' own affirmation, under interrogation, that he is "the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One". Here is the clearest revelation of Jesus' identity to come from Jesus' own lips. It suggests judgement and vindication, echoing the description, in the book of Daniel, of the "one like a son of man" who would vindicate the suffering people of God.

There are two points to notice about the hearing before the high priest. The first is that it was of doubtful legality for the Council of the chief priests and the elders to meet by night. This may be why, as Mark tells us, they hurriedly met early the next morning to finalize their plans. The second is the way in which Jesus's isolation is emphasised by the vote and the beating which followed, a beating in which the judges and the guards equally take part. Scholars in the earlier years of this century were inclined to dismiss such behaviour as improbable, but it would sound horribly familiar in our day to those who follow some of the cases taken up by human rights organizations such as Amnesty International.

So, too, would the next part of the story, where a judge lets himself be put under pressure. Pilate, of course, had much to feel pressured about. We know from other sources (primarily the pro-Roman Jewish historian Josephus) that Pilate had not been a good governor of Judaea. He had frequently been in trouble, both in Jerusalem and in Rome, for his insensitive, violent and over-bearing treatment of the Jewish people. He needed disturbances at Passover like the proverbial hole in the head. So Pilate tries to bargain with the crowd, to play off their support for the man who had entered the city in triumph a few days before against the obvious hostility of their leaders. But he gets it seriously wrong. The crowd outside "Government House" wasn't the crowd of Galilean pilgrims who had waved and cheered Jesus into the city a week before. Pilate was faced with the people of Jerusalem, worrying about Jesus' attacks on their privilege and his apparent hostility to the whole institution of the temple,

So Pilate's attempt to free Jesus by the back-door (so to speak) backfires badly, and he is publicly committed to releasing Barabbas, a member, apparently, of one of those groups of Jewish terrorists (or freedom fighters, depending on your point of view) which were determined to throw the Romans out of Palestine by force. And the nightmare continues. A glimpse of freedom appears for Jesus, only to vanish in almost the same instant, and he is instead handed over to the soldiers.

The soldiers behave much as we would expect. Anyone who knows what an army is capable of doing to its own by way of "initiation ceremonies" would hardly be surprised by their treatment of Jesus. Condemned prisoners have always been fair game. Crude, heavy-handed mockery and physical violence are scarcely unexpected. And after the "lads" in the garrison have had their bit of fun, the procession leaves the court-house for the place of execution.

On the way out, the prisoner and escort meet a stranger, Simon, from Cyrene in North Africa – a Jewish pilgrim, presumably, *and*, presumably, known (at least indirectly) to the community for whom Mark was writing – and the escort make use of their powers as soldiers of the occupying army to have some more fun at somebody else's expense. To have to carry the cross for a condemned criminal was a public humiliation. Incidentally, the cross which Jesus, and then Simon, carried will not have looked like the cross in traditional pictures of the "Via Dolorosa", or the African picture in the advertisement for these talks on our FB page. The upright was usually left fixed in the ground at the place of execution. What was given to the condemned man was the cross-beam, the patibulum, to which he would be nailed and then hoisted up onto the gibbet.

Again, Mark gives us all the routine details: the anaesthetic (wine mixed with myrrh) to dull the worst of the pain and perhaps hasten what could be a drawn-out process of dying (people were known to keep up the fight against death for days); the execution squad dividing up the condemned man's effects as part of their "perks" for the job; the charge sheet, probably hung round Jesus's neck as he was led out to execution, with the mocking claim that this human wreck is "King of the Jews". And again, in this routine killing, Jesus is on his own.

The crowd, the Jewish leaders, even the two bandits crucified alongside him (comrades-in-arms, possibly, of the released Barabbas), jeer at him in his helplessness. He is totally alone.

Totally. In the darkness that covers the land from midday until three in the afternoon, Jesus feels himself to be utterly abandoned – even by the God whom he had called by the loving and intimate title of "Abba". The last coherent words heard from the cross are words of reproach and desolation from Psalm 22, "Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani?" (Mark, by the way, uses the Aramaic form, which makes the crowd's response less easy to understand than the Hebrew version which Matthew gives). And then, with one last, loud cry, Jesus dies.

And it is at this point that the officer in charge of the execution squad makes the confession that Jesus is son of God.

This is the point to which the Gospel has been leading. It is the first *public* recognition of who Jesus is. Supernatural beings have known and proclaimed Jesus's identity and been silenced. Peter has had his moment of insight at Caesarea Philippi and been sworn to secrecy. Here, at the moment of death, totally alone, rejected by his people, abandoned by his friends, abandoned (so it seems) by the God on whom he had, quite literally, staked his life, Jesus is recognised as Son of God by an officer of the Roman army.

Here in the helplessness, in the total aloneness, in the complete reversal of all the activity of Jesus' ministry, God is made known. In Jesus, God has identified with humankind in life and in death. In him God has shared human suffering and death in all its stark horror and in all its routine ordinariness. In the suffering of Jesus God is mysteriously active, and all that we can do is look on in awe and wonder at this event and marvel at the revelation of Jesus' sacrificial obedience. He has taken into his being the worst that human beings can do to one another. Here, through the battered and bleeding corpse of one more victim of human self-centredness and cruelty, God opens for us a new way into his presence.