

The Crown, The Cup and the Curtain

Series: Following Jesus: Studies in Mark's Gospel

Date: 15 April 2022; Good Friday

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Mark 15:1-39

I have to say that I find preaching on Good Friday an impossible task. Meditating on Mark's account of Jesus' passion I find myself overwhelmed. Even for the most sceptical reader, the accounts of Jesus suffering are moving. Then there is the significance of this event. The darkness suggests something cosmic and very deep is going on here. Jesus' cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!" takes us into the mystery of God's own life, the mystery of suffering - both Jesus' and our own, the mystery of what God is doing in this horrific event. We don't get to the bottom of these things. This is holy ground. And yet they are at the heart of the Christian faith, indeed the heart of all things, for the events of Good Friday and Easter day are the fulcrum upon which all things turn. You have, at least in some way, a sense of this. Otherwise you would not be here. Finally I confess my own weakness. This week, this season of Lent in fact, has been one where I have been reminded of my own sin, my own emptiness, my own spiritual poverty. What can I say about the passion of my Lord? Oh but I need him. I thirst for his life giving water. Give me strength, Lord, to speak, because I must not be silent!

In trembling and weakness I want to look at 3 pictures from Mark 15 through which we may taste the living water that Jesus offers in his Cross. These are The Crown, The Cup and The Curtain. If you've been with us at St George's this year you'll know we've been asking 3 questions as we've studied the Gospel of Mark together. Who is Jesus? What is the Kingdom of God? And How do we follow Jesus? We will see how they are answered in these pictures.

The Crown

If there is one thing that stands out in Mark 15 is that Jesus is the King. Jesus is named King of the Jews 6 times in this chapter. At his trial, Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replies.¹

Pilate asks the crowd, "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" knowing that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.² When the crowd asks for Barabbas, Pilate asks, "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?"³

"Crucify him!" they shout. "Crucify him!" And Pilate out of weakness and expediency hands Jesus over to them.

¹ 15.2

² 15.9-10

³ 15.12

The next scene is a brutal parody of a coronation. Jesus is led to the palace. The soldiers put a purple robe on him and set a crown on his head. But it is a crown of thorns, and they do this only to mock him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" Kings have sceptres, but they strike him on the head with a staff. They spit on him. They fall on their knees in mock homage to him. It's a scene full of irony, because Jesus really is the king of the Jews. Right from the start of the Gospel Mark has told us that he is the Christ, God's anointed king. The soldiers mock him, but their words are true. This really is his coronation. The written notice of the charge on his cross - The King of the Jews is true. The cross is his throne.

When it comes to kings we expect power and glory. But this is not Jesus' way. He comes in weakness and humility. Back in Mark 10 James and John had asked "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you're asking. Can you drink the cup I drink?" He continued,

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **43** Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. **45** 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.

This, it turns out, is how Jesus exercises his kingship, his divine authority: in humble service. Giving his life as a ransom, for his own who rejected him; for those who mocked him and hurled insults; for those who deserted him; even for you and for me. His humiliation is his glory. His throne is the cross. Those on his right and left in glory are criminals. The cross was the cup that he drank. That brings us to point 2.

The Cup

Jesus asked James and John whether they could drink the cup he would drink. Then in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays,

"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

What is this cup? Here, as so often, we only understand Jesus' words if we look to the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Psalm 75.7-8 reads

It is God who judges:

He brings one down, he exalts another.

In the hand of the Lord is a cup

full of foaming wine mixed with spices;

he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth

drink it down to its very dregs.

Or, from the prophet Jeremiah,

15 This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.”⁴

God is the one who judges. The cup is the cup of his wrath, his righteous anger, against all the wickedness of people.

The wrath of God is something we shy away from. Isn't God a God of love? How could he have such anger? When it comes to our own anger we know it so often goes wrong. It is such a powerful emotion. We can lash out and hurt others. And yet, we also recognise there are times when anger is the right response to a situation. We get angry when someone we love is threatened. We get angry at oppression, when the innocent suffer unjustly. Anger moves us to defend, to protect, to seek justice. How much more so for God, who loves the creation that he has made; who infinitely loves the people that he has made. It is not anger, but indifference that is the opposite of love.

And yet what do we do? Despoil his creation and degrade and destroy each other. Oh yes, we're capable of great good. But, if we are honest, evil lurks within our hearts that all too often spills out. It is too easy to point the finger at those people over there who do evil things. All too easy to exclude them from the company of human beings and exclude ourselves from the company of sinners. But we only need to look at the crucifixion to see that everyone is implicated. The sacred and secular authorities, the criminals and Jesus own disciples. Betrayal, lies, fear, desertion, expediency, corruption, injustice, group think, manipulation, cruelty, bullying, mockery, violence, murder. Are we not also guilty of these in our thoughts if not our actions. The cross exposes our depravity. Just as Mark makes it clear that Jesus is the king, so it is also clear that the wickedness of the human actors springs from the fact that they, and we, do not recognise and bow to Jesus as king. Sin, human wickedness, it is not just the bad things that we do, it is rebellion against God. A defiant “No!”, instead of “Yes, Lord.”

And yet where does Jesus' hang? Between two guilty rebels. In our place and with us. The Father's will is that he drink the cup, the cup of wrath, the cup of righteous judgement upon your sin and mine and the sins of the whole world. He willingly takes the cup and he drains it to its very dregs. This is the Father and Son, one in will and purpose and action. Why? That brings us to point 3, the Curtain.

The Curtain - the way to the Father

After 3 hours of darkness Jesus cries out and breathes his last. Mark 15.38 records that “the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom.” What was this curtain and what did this signify? The temple in Jerusalem was the place where the Creator God was meant to live among

⁴ Jeremiah 25.15

his people. It was the place of God's particular presence on earth, a gateway into his heavenly dwelling. But you couldn't just walk right into the centre of the temple. Access was restricted. You first entered the temple in the court of the nations. If you weren't Jewish, this was as far as you could go. Next there was the court of women. Then there was the court for ritually clean Jewish men. Then the court of the priests. Then you came to the sanctuary itself, in which were the holy place, and then at the centre of the temple, the Holy of Holies. Here only the high priest went. And only once a year. And then only after he had made a sacrifice of atonement for his own sins and for the sins of all the people. All of this told you that God was holy. You could not come near him, except through your representative, the priest, and only then after sins had been atoned for.

There was a curtain at the entrance to the sanctuary visible from the court of priests and the court of the Israelites. And then, there was a second curtain which separated the holy place from the holy of holies. It's not clear which of these curtains was torn when Jesus' died. Either way, the significance is clear. Through Jesus' death the way to God has been opened. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus represents us before God as our great high priest. And on the cross he offered his own body as the final and complete sacrifice for sin. Now we can freely and with confidence enter in the presence of God.⁵ Paul says in Ephesians, that through him we have access to the Father by one Spirit.⁶ This is why he drank the cup of God's wrath: to open the way to God. Notice too, the curtain is torn from top to bottom. We do not open the way to God. In the person of his Son, God opens the way for us. St Paul elsewhere puts it like this: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." Why? Because he loves us and he wants us, you and me, to come in and be with him and he with us.

How should we respond to this great mystery? To Christ who wears the crown of thorns, who drinks the cup for us, who has opened the curtain so we may come into the very presence of God? Mark gives us some clues that those caught up in the events of Good Friday were radically changed. Simon of Cyrene, we read, carried the cross. Mark notes that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Why this extra detail? Because they were well known in the early church to whom Mark was writing. Simon may have been forced to carry the cross, but this was for his whole family the start of their walk with Jesus. Looking back his boys could say that it was their father's greatest privilege and honour to carry that cross and to follow Jesus. Is it your honour to take up your cross and follow Jesus, even as he calls you to? To say to him "Yes, Lord" each day? He, who wore the crown and drank the cup for you.

Second, we can join with the centurion, gazing up from the foot of the cross. He and we have seen how Jesus has died, in all that that means. And we can say in wonder and praise - surely he is the Son of God!

⁵ Hebrews 10.19-22

⁶ Ephesians 2.18