

The King is Dead – Good Friday 2023

Date: 7 April 2023, Easter Day

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Matthew's Passion

Texts: Matthew 27:32-56; Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

We live in a world of many voices – media, family, politicians, our tribes.

It can be hard to know which voices to listen to, especially when it's unclear where the voice of hope is.

And especially on Good Friday when the depravity and failure of humanity is on full display, will we find hope? What comfort is there to find on a day like today? It's my hope today that we will find hope and comfort and love in the words of Jesus, even as other voices of the world shout louder and more triumphantly and defiantly.

We pick up the narrative after Jesus' horrible treatment at the hands of the governor's soldiers. That's who 'they' refers to in v32. At this point Jesus would have been in an awful state; he hasn't slept, he had been physically assaulted by the Jewish leaders, whipped after his trial, and then the guards took Jesus into the praetorium and mocked and assaulted him again, and then they led him out.

The way we suspect crucifixion worked was the upright portions of a cross were kept in place, while the cross beam was carried by the guilty party to their place of execution. I'm sure carrying it wouldn't have been a walk in the park, it had to be large enough for his full arm-span after all, but this carpenter's son would have done his fair share of carrying timber in his youth, it's not like he wouldn't have had the muscle.

But as we see in verse 32, Jesus simply wasn't physically up to the task. If he could have carried it, he would have, the soldiers would make sure of that. But he had been so abused, reached his humanly weakest point, that he just wasn't in any state to manage it. The soldiers sure weren't going to lower themselves to carry it for him, so to get this crucifixion rolling, they pressed a passer-by into service instead. Poor Simon was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

They proceeded to Golgotha, the place he's to be crucified, and there Jesus is offered bitter wine – maybe for dulling the senses, more likely just another cruel joke – but in any case, he refuses to enter into the game.

And it really will have felt like a game to them – here they are, a Roman centurion and his charges, given the task of putting to death a self-deluded rebel who thought he could claim a Jewish throne. What a spectacle, crucifying such an obvious failure. This failure was written up in 3 languages and placed above his head 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews'. Part of the perks of being on crucifixion duty was getting the criminals clothing. A part of the game. The guards needed to keep watch just in case someone tried to come take Jesus down, and as they sat there to pass the time, they gambled for his tunic right in front of him. It's like that experience when you were a kid in school having your bag tossed to-and-fro between the bullies, and being absolutely powerless to get it back because no-one ever dared come to your aid, and you're left cruelly to try retrieve it from on top of the school roof once everyone had cleared out.

Everyone had definitely cleared out on Jesus. Where were Jesus' kingly subjects? His devotees? Where was his army to defend him against these ruling Jewish enemies? He had absolutely no power to end his torture. This so-called king was so weak he couldn't even carry a plank of wood, and not one follower was there to help him out. He'd been entirely rejected, apart from a select few women who stood at a distance. His disciples had fled into hiding, the crowds who followed him for his miracles, who only a week earlier had celebrated his arrival into Jerusalem had no more interest in him. Some king this is.

In many ways, once we get to the core of the crucifixion, it's not the physical pain that Matthew focusses on (although he has made that abundantly clear), but the emotional and spiritual pain Jesus endures, and the remarkable irony in the words the people speak.

From verse 39 onwards, the people on the scene revisit what they consider to be Jesus' greatest hits, and everyone gets involved in the slander.

The passers-by were probably made up of those from the crowd calling 'crucify him' and they were obviously aware of Jesus' claim about the temple. They taunt Jesus in verse 40 "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself!" The idea of destroying and rebuilding the temple would have been so preposterous, that saving himself from the cross might've seemed much simpler. "Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" they cry – but of course, it's ironic that it is precisely because he is the son of God that he must stay there, and it's because he himself is the temple, the meeting place between God and humanity, that he must be destroyed.

The chief priests, teachers of the law and elders also mocked him, but they don't even address Jesus. Earlier they wielded their influence in amongst the crowd, but now after so much plotting and scheming in secret and fear of public outcry they finally speak openly, emboldened by Jesus' helplessness on the cross. It almost reads like a public announcement, the kind in films where amidst a merry gathering, the drunkest person in the room calls for attention because they have something important to say, but they haven't the faculties to read the room. Or maybe more akin to this situation, when the hero of a story is at their most vulnerable and visible the antagonist sets off on a monologue to declare just how superior they are. v42 gives this sort of vibe, drunk not on wine but on hubris, 'Everyone. Everyone. Look at this man. Behold your messiah. He saved others, but he can't save himself. He's the "king of Israel!'. Give him a cheer. Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.'

Of course, the irony is that Jesus did something far more spectacular than come down from the cross, and instead of believing in him, Matthew tells us in the next chapter that the chief priests were worried of what might happen if the governor hears this, and they needed to pay hush money to the guards of the tomb to spread a story.

Even those crucified alongside Jesus joined in the verbal bashing, so ridiculous seemed his claims. But they might've had a further bone to pick with Jesus – if they were part of the rebellion, themselves seeking to overthrow the Roman rule, they might've hoped Jesus would step up and contribute to their cause. That's what many including his disciples were expecting, but Jesus didn't come through. What good is a King who doesn't even go down fighting?

Jesus was being insulted and rejected from all directions, but this was just a foretaste - the worst was yet to come. As a darkness came over the land, and as the darkness of human sin and depravity overcame Jesus, he cries out the only words that Matthew records on his lips since his trial "Eli, eli, lema sabachthani?". We read in the prophet Isaiah, chapter 53:

He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.

I don't think it's an accident that Matthew omits the phrases other gospels include. His narrative reflection on Jesus' last hours really magnifies this rejection of Jesus, and the way that Jesus willingly accepts this injustice. As the moment reaches its climax, I think we're supposed to focus in on these words, as Jesus experiences the ultimate abandonment.

"Eli, eli, lema sabachthani?"

For a number of years, I've really wrestled with this idea that Jesus, as a divine member of the trinity, himself one with the Father and the Spirit, can cry out "My God, why have you forsaken me?" But we need to remember that Jesus is the eternal AND incarnate son of God. He willingly entered into our world, took on human nature in its fullness. He took on bones and skin, he felt hungry and thirsty, he experienced our limitations in our senses, our grief, our desires and wrestled in our temptations. Again, from Isaiah:

"Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering, -- That is, experienced the fullness of human nature
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,"

At the crucifixion he was crushed, he took on more than just human flesh and blood, but in this moment, he also bore the depth of our failures and depravity. Like an earthquake shattering a building and razing it to the ground, Jesus was buried under the rubble of human pride, envy, malice, greed, every sin that you and I have ever committed, and will ever commit ... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all ... We just can't know what happened at this point, Jesus' words and the reality of his death have a mystery to them, but certainly God wasn't split, Jesus wasn't separated from the trinity, but in his despair his human nature was absolutely overcome by the weight of our sin, and God wilfully poured out judgement upon himself. Losing sight of the Father amongst the manifold shards of human failure, he cries out in this way "God, where are you? Where am I?"

And it's right here, in this moment of Jesus' excruciating discomfort, that we this Good Friday find our true comfort.

Jesus cries out in anguish so that we don't have to. He experiences the ultimate depth of judgement and despair so that we don't have to. He dies a criminals death in shame and without dignity so that we don't have to.

This is why it is Good Friday. What better news is there than you have been spared the judgement of God, because Jesus willingly stood in your place. You don't need to live a life trying to make up for your failures and shortcomings, because Jesus has already paid that price. What we couldn't atone for ourselves, Jesus has done perfectly in our place.

Good Friday has always been a time where I've spent time reflecting on my part in Jesus' death, and this is true and a good to do, but Good Friday also affords us an opportunity to look beyond our failures. It doesn't leave us there, we can't stay there, because Jesus' death is bigger than this.

We might be shown in a bad light on good Friday, but that's the point – we're revealed as unable to save ourselves from the foolishness of sin that entraps us. Its true., and so as awful as we look, Jesus still rescues us.

While we were still sinners, Romans 5:8-9: But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

The cross is a cross of salvation. So are we put to shame by the cross? In a sense yes – and Victor helped us see how humanity is on trial in Jesus' trial a number of weeks ago – but although it's our shame, how much more is the cross of Christ also our victory?

In the crucifixion, Jesus defeats Satan.

In the crucifixion Jesus defeats sin.

In the crucifixion Jesus defeats death.

As perpetrators we ought to repent yes, but as victims of Christ's enemies, we have been freed. We are freed from Satan and his accusations, we are freed from the clutches of sin and we are freed from eternal death.

So as we reflect today on the remarkable death of Jesus, don't be overcome with despair, as the world around us loses sight of the truth and so often adopts the posture of the guards the chief priests and the criminals crucified beside Jesus, don't turn there for hope, but instead listen to the voice of Jesus and be comforted in this good news: because he has cried out 'My God why have you forsaken me', so we can cry out 'My God, how much you have loved me.'