

Double Vision of the King - Matthew 27

Series: Following the King
Date: 3rd April 2026, Good Friday
Location: St George's Battery Point
Texts: Matthew 27:11-54, Psalm 22

When I was a kid I loved those pictures that were optical illusions. Is this a picture of a duck or a rabbit? Is this an old woman or a young woman? They are an illustration of the fact of perspective. Two people can look at the same thing and see two very different things. It's not that one is true and one is false, it's just that there is often more going on than what we see with our own eyes. It's a classic technique in comedy, that we call dramatic irony, to have a situation where the audience sees more of what is going on than the characters in the drama, and we wait to see when they will find out the full picture.

When we come to look at the crucifixion of Jesus, that same phenomena is at play. Matthew's account of the suffering and death of Jesus we see an innocent man unjustly condemned for political expediency. We see him mocked and abused. We see him die in humiliation and weakness. And yet, there are all sorts of clues in Matthew's account of these events that there is another way of seeing that gives a very different perspective on what happened that Good Friday.

In his letter to the early Christian community in the city of Corinth, the apostle Paul writes, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."¹ Here Paul says that to the watching world Jesus' death looked like weakness and foolishness, but in fact it is nothing less than the strength and wisdom of God. It looked like defeat and death, but it was actually victory and life, and this for us.

This morning we're going to attempt that double seeing: Looking at the all too human view of Jesus' death, and seeing what God is at work to accomplish for us in Jesus' death. We will look at three scenes - the Crown, the Cross and the Curtain.

Scene one - the Crown.

One of the big themes in Matthew's Gospel has been that Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed king. This is the charge that Pilate lays before Jesus, "are you the king of the Jews?" It's the charge placed above Jesus' head on the cross.

I love the ceremony and theatre of royalty, and so several years ago I was glued to the TV watching the coronation of king Charles. When they came to the heart of the ceremony, the

¹ 1 Corinthians 1.18, 22-23

anointing, they erected a screen. Out of the public eye, the king was stripped of his robes of state and anointed by the archbishop, consecrating him for his service as king. After this the screens were removed, and then a royal golden coat was placed on his shoulders. He was given various different pieces of symbolic kit, including a sceptre and then at last a crown was placed on his head. Then all those in Westminster Abbey shouted, "God Save the King!" And finally the archbishop and the Prince of Wales knelt in homage to the king, and all were invited to pledge fealty to him.

In verses 27-31 we see the soldiers gather around Jesus' mocking him in a grotesque parody of a coronation. They stripped him of his robe. They put a scarlet robe on him. They twist a crown of thorns and press it down on his head. They put a staff in his hand, a makeshift sceptre. They knelt before him and cried, "Hail, king of the Jews". They spat on him. They took the staff and struck him on the head, again and again.

It's an awful scene. Soldiers having their sport with a man condemned for treason against the Roman state. And yet, their mocking is in fact truly Jesus' coronation. He really is the Messiah, anointed at his baptism not with oil, but by the Holy Spirit himself. He really is crowned as king. This coronation is more widely known and celebrated than any other. And in fact all coronations now echo this coronation. When we see Charles given a robe and sceptre, when the crown is placed upon his head, we cannot help but think of Jesus. He is the template for all earthly kings, and by which they are judged. Indeed, at the beginning of his coronation Charles was welcomed by a child who said, "Your Majesty, as children of the Kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of Kings," to which the king replied, "In his name, and after his example, I come not to be served but to serve."

Scene two - the Cross.

After they mocked him, the soldiers led Jesus away to be crucified.

Jesus has said that to be his disciple is to take up your cross and follow him. On the way to Golgotha Simon of Cyrene literally does this, carrying Jesus' cross. Mark records that Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus. Why include the names of these two sons. In his book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham makes the compelling argument that Mark includes their names because they were known to his first readers. That is, Simon and his boy Alexander and Rufus had in fact become followers of Jesus. And what a singular honour to carry the cross for our Lord and Saviour! We may not carry the wooden beam, but we too can hear Jesus' call to discipleship, shoulder the cross and follow him.

Anyway, that was just a little aside. Matthew's account echoes so much of our Old Testament reading, Psalm 22. The Roman dogs surround Jesus. They pierce his hands and feet as they nail him to the cross. They divide his clothes by casting lots. In his film, *The Passion of the*

Christ, Mel Gibson imagines Psalm 22.17 as the gruesome result of Jesus' flogging, "All my bones are on display".

Ancient king David had written,
All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.
8 'He trusts in the LORD,' they say,
'let the LORD rescue him.
Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him.' (22.7-8)

In verses 38-44 Matthew sees these words fulfilled.

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads **40** and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!' **41** In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. **42** 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. **43** He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, "I am the Son of God."'

Again, here we see a dramatic irony at play. Jesus is the Son of God! Twice, at his baptism, and at the transfiguration, the heavens have opened and God himself has said, "This is my Son whom I love." Jesus has said back when he was arrested in Gethsemane that he could have called to his Father who would have given him 12 legions of angels. He had the power to come down. "But," he continues, "how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?"² And that's the rub. To save himself would mean he would not save others. It would mean he would not save us. In the garden he had prayed, "My Father, if possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." This was the cup of the Father's wrath against sin. And so he trusted the Father, and obeyed his will, and drank the cup of wrath for your sake and for my sake.

And the temple that he was talking about was his body. Temples were where heaven and earth, God and man meet. They were where the gods lived on earth. Jesus was God dwelling among us, in the flesh. In the crucifixion, in all its physical horror, Jesus' body was destroyed. It was broken, for you and for me. His blood was shed for our forgiveness. But those words hurled at him hang in the air, "build it in three days".

Scene three - the Curtain

And so we come to scene three, the Curtain.

So far in his account of Jesus' death, Matthew has focussed our attention on Jesus. In verse 50 Matthew writes, "And when Jesus had cried out in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit."

² Matthew 26.53-54

Now Matthew brings before our eyes 3 things that give us a window into just what God has accomplished through the death of his Son.

The first is the curtain, verse 51. “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in tow from top to bottom”. That curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. Inside the Holy of Holies was symbolically God’s throne on earth. Only the high priest could go inside behind the curtain, and only once a year. And only after he had made a sacrifice to atone for his own sins and the sins of the whole people. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is our high priest who represents us before God. And he is the final and perfect sacrifice for sin. No more sacrifices are needed. The torn curtain shows that the way to God is open to all. That the curtain was torn from top to bottom shows that, in Jesus’ death, it is God himself who has opened the way. Now we can freely and with confidence enter in the presence of God.³ Paul says in Ephesians, that through him we have access to the Father by one Spirit.⁴ Jesus is the way to God. Will you come to him? Will you trust him to take you to the Father?

Second, the tombs broke open. Matthew continues, “The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.” This is perhaps one of the most strange moments in the whole Gospel. What is going on? If Jesus is God come in the flesh, then when he dies, God enters death. But God is the source of life. So what happens when the source of life enters the grave? Its gates are broken open. Jesus enters even death itself to bring his life to the dead.

John Calvin writes, “This was a particular portent in which God testified that His Son had entered death’s prison, not to stay there shut up, but to lead all free who were there held captive.”⁵ This is nothing less than the defeat of death, and the freeing of all those who are held in slavery by their fear of death.⁶ It’s interesting to note that there was also an earthquake when Jesus’ own tomb was opened. If the gates of death trembled when the author of life descended into death, how could they not also be when he burst forth from the grave? And the saints who Matthew records appear after Jesus’ resurrection are the first of the freed captives joining his victory parade. They are a little window into the promise and sure hope that Jesus’ resurrection brings to all who would believe in him. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. His death is not defeat, but the victory over the grave. Will you trust in him with your life and with your death? In him is hope!

Finally we read, “When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified and exclaimed, “**Surely he was the**

³ Hebrews 10.19-22

⁴ Ephesians 2.18

⁵ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. A.W. Morrison, vol 3, Saint Andrews Press, 1972: 211

⁶ Hebrews 2.15

Son of God!” We’ve taken as a theme for today the idea of dramatic irony or double vision. As we read the account of Jesus’ crucifixion one thing we see clearly is human wickedness on display. Yes the cross reveals hypocritical religious authorities conspiring with corrupt government to commit injustice. We don’t need the crucifixion to tell us of human capacity for cruelty and violence. We don’t need the crucifixion to tell us people to do evil things out of envy or fear or resentment or expediency or being swept up with the crowd. We need only look in the mirror. What is astonishing is that after seeing all this, the centurion says, “Surely this was the Son of God!”

The death of Jesus is the revelation of God. God you see does not conform to our expectations. The cross looks like weakness and foolishness, especially in a world that values strength and intelligence. But it is in fact the power and wisdom of God. More than that, in his death, Jesus shows us what God is like. That he is humble and gentle and willing to step down into the mess and filth and cruelty of human life and to suffer with us and to die for us because he loves us. Because he loves you.

In a world full of confusion and competing claims, here is where to look if you want to know what God is like. In dying Jesus tells us the truth about God. And that truth is that he loves you enough to die for you.

Will you trust him as the Truth? Will you look to him as the Life? Will you come to him as the Way?