

offered to Jesus. It was an act of charity inspired by Proverbs 31:6,7 'Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more'. Mark records this as happening just before Jesus was hauled onto the cross, but no explanation is offered as to why Jesus refused this kindness. Some believe that it shows Jesus' intent to fully experience the suffering of death, but this is just supposition. It is probably reported to show the fulfilment of the prophecy of Psalm 69:21 'they gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink'; but we have no idea why Jesus refused to drink and we do not know if this has any significant meaning.

Briefly, Mark tells us that after they had hung Jesus on the Cross the soldiers continued their sport by sharing out Jesus' clothes; his only belongings (15:24). It was normal for the soldiers to do this, but because what Jesus left them with was so little they had to draw lots. Jesus ended His life with nothing, fulfilling Psalm 22:18, which in the Septuagint version of Jesus' day said that the soldiers would 'cast lots' for his clothes (whereas if you look it up in your Bible, it says 'divided').

Mark records nothing of the cruelty of the crucifixion itself, perhaps appalled, as any Jew would be, at the inhumanity of it. However, the lack of words adds a power and dignity to the narrative which would hardly be possible if we were to pour over the details of nails and ropes and wooden beams.

### Application

We learn from this passage the bare facts of Jesus' mockery and treatment by Roman soldiers, the painful walk to Golgotha, the reality of the truly dreadful crucifixion, and the profound truth of His title, the King of the Jews'. Mark tells us a relatively brief story, and we find out more in some of the other Gospels, but the simplicity of his story is powerful enough. These events are an awesome expression of the love of God in Jesus, who was prepared to endure this agonising sequence of events in order that we might have the life of faith which we enjoy today. Christian people now have every right to be thrilled and rejoice in the liberty which they have through Jesus and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, but it does us good to read again the extraordinary story of what happened when the Saviour was killed by those who thought they knew better than God and tried to stop Him. We must be in no doubt, Jesus felt the pain of all this as deeply as anyone could, even though the final outcome was victory on Easter Day.

Mark clearly wanted people to understand that this was the real work of the Messiah, and we can imagine that the first readers of the Gospel listened to this story and found it hard not to weep; shocked at what was being described. They had heard about Jesus' death, but never before from such a 'human' perspective. One can also imagine that those who were unfamiliar with the story were also deeply affected, and the story gave them a strong desire to know more. This is the truth about Jesus, God's Son, who has died so that people may be set free; and people throughout history have read this story and found that God has spoken to them through it. This is the heart of our treasury of God's grace, a profoundly holy story of a profoundly holy moment in the history of the world. We must read it and treat it as such.

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. Try to imagine being mocked by a gathering of 600+ armed men. Discuss what you feel.
2. What mental pictures do you have of Jesus' walk from the Praetorium to Golgotha? How do they help or hinder your faith?
3. What accusations might be written against Jesus Christ and His Church today, and are they worthy of the death penalty?

### Discipleship

*Those who are following the series of discipleship suggestions in Lent are writing a series of reflections on what Jesus felt as He came closer to Easter.* It is hardly possible to imagine what Jesus may have felt during His scourging and abuse at the hands of the soldiers who mocked Him, let alone His crucifixion. Mercifully, Mark does not tell us how Jesus responded to being crucified, so again, we can only imagine; so that God will help us understand His grace.

### Final Prayer

Holy Spirit, come and fill my life with Your power and love and self control. Power to follow through every part of my call; love to do this with compassion, care and purpose; and self control to make sure that I do not take credit for what You are doing. Come, Holy Spirit: Come!

### Prayer

Lord God, we praise You for the gift of words; words by which we speak to each other, words written in books and words spoken by mobile, phone, internet and radio. Above all, we praise You for Your own Word written in Scripture, Your Word spoken to us in prayer, and Your Word revealed personally to Christian people down through the ages. Thank You for Your Word and for our words, Lord God; AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Universities

Pray today for the many teachers, tutors, and staff within Universities. Many of them are engaged on essential research which is vital to life as we know it; they pursue the technologies we take for granted and find solutions to problems, thus enabling all kinds of medicines and goods to be made available to us. Pray for God to bless what is done that is good.

### Meditation

When sorrow bites and pain consumes;  
Bring me to the Cross of Jesus.  
When love is lost and trouble wins;  
Bring me to the Cross of Jesus.  
When strife persists and anger flares;  
Bring me to the Cross of Jesus.  
For sorrow and pain were broken down;  
For me, even me, on Easter Day.  
And love is victorious and strife overcome;  
For me, even me, on Easter Day.  
The Kingdom of God has come on earth;  
For me, even me, on Easter Day.  
True life begins when the Spirit descends;  
In a dove and a flame at Pentecost.  
The gifts of the Spirit flood into our hearts;  
In a dove and a flame at Pentecost.  
And our eternal home is secured for ever;  
In a dove and a flame at Pentecost.

### Bible Study - Mark 15:16-24

<sup>16</sup> Then the soldiers led Him inside the palace (that is, the Praetorium); and gathered the whole cohort around. <sup>17</sup> They put a purple robe on Him; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on Him; <sup>18</sup> they began saluting Him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' <sup>19</sup> They repeatedly hit Him over the head with a stick, spat on Him, and knelt down in mock homage to Him. <sup>20</sup> And when they had mocked Him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, put his own clothes on him, and led him out to crucify him.

<sup>21</sup> They compelled a passer-by to carry His cross; he was someone called Simon of Cyrene who was coming in from the country (the father of Alexander and Rufus). <sup>22</sup> Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the 'Place of the Skull'). <sup>23</sup> They offered Him wine mixed with myrrh; but He did not take it.

<sup>24</sup> Then they crucified Him, and shared out His clothes, casting lots to decide what each of them should take.

### Review

Today we reach the terrible climax of Mark's Gospel; his description of the crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans. Jesus had been tried and sentenced to death, not so much as the consequence of a legal decision but more because of a combination sins and human failings. Pilate showed a poor understanding of the people he governed, Jesus' enemies in the Jewish religious hierarchy

manipulated events to their own ends, the disciples had no idea how to defend their Lord, practically or spiritually, and the crowds of people in Jerusalem proved fickle beyond belief. What happened to Jesus is a condemnation not just of those involved at the time, but of all people throughout time who seek self interest over justice, and show this in weak government, religious presumption, poor judgement and erratic behaviour. His death shames us all.

Mark's story gives few details of this painful story, but he says enough for us to understand the dreadful nature of what He endured. A cohort of Roman soldiers took Jesus, brutally abused Him (15:17,18), and mocked Him as the 'King of the Jews' (15:18-20). They then dragged Him off to the killing field of Golgotha, outside Jerusalem, far too far for a man so brutalised to drag the cross on which he would be crucified. Another man was commandeered to help (Simon of Cyrene – 15:21), and when they arrived at Golgotha (15:22), Jesus was offered some drugged wine (15:23). He refused the drink and was crucified (15:24), with the soldiers responsible dividing out Jesus' possessions, his clothes, amongst themselves. In complete contrast to the extended narrative of Jesus' pathway to the Cross that has built up over centuries, no more information about this is given in the Gospel of Mark or Matthew. Luke describes the crowds, including women, who followed Jesus to Golgotha (Luke 23:26-31), and John does not describe the journey, mentioning only that Jesus carried His cross (John 19:17).

So we have the barest of cruel facts about Jesus' journey from His trial to His crucifixion, along with the description of the soldiers' brutality towards Jesus in the Praetorium. This was the only time Jesus was ever worshipped as a King, and what was done to Him was shocking, though we recognise in these men the base overreactions of a group of mercenary soldiers to someone they regarded as an enemy. People have always wondered how Mark (and Matthew) gained their information about what happened to Jesus in the Praetorium. By this time, Peter was trapped in shame (14:72), and if any disciple had seen what happened there we would surely know about it. Mark may have obtained the information from one of the soldiers, or is it possible that one of those present was the centurion who, later in the story declared 'truly this man was God's Son!' (15:39). Tradition tells us that this man later became a Christian, and it seems logical that he would know about what happened in the Praetorium; we cannot know for sure, but it is a fair assumption, given what we know from all the Gospels.

There is one other possible explanation for the content of Mark's story. Mark wrote using only the facts available to him, which were sparse, and he wrote against the backdrop of Old Testament scriptures which spoke of the death of the Messiah. Passages such as Psalm 22 or Isaiah's prophecies of the 'suffering' servant (Isaiah 53 etc) speak of the personal suffering of Jesus, and it may be that these influenced how he described what happened to Jesus. Mark certainly expects his readers to spot these Old Testament passages within the story, but his focus remains fixed on the figure of Christ Himself, and Mark creates a powerful sense of tragedy in the story of Jesus' crucifixion by using the minimum of details.

It is important to try and understand the story and what it means, but if we cannot 'feel' what is going on from the bare story Mark gives without having it spelt out for us, then surely there is something missing in our humanity. Death is the enemy of all humanity, and Jesus endured it with us and for us.

### Going Deeper

What Mark described is beyond the pale of humanity, even though we know that crucifixion was performed on thousands in Roman times; it was designed to be inhuman in order to impress upon citizens the need to accept Roman governance. As we read this, all of us feel the burden of sin which the human race has inflicted upon others since the beginning of time, and at this moment, inflicted on God Himself. This, however, is the suffering of Jesus, by which we are saved and healed!

#### ***In the Praetorium***

The Gentile soldiers took Jesus for sport and mocked Him. This was the second time that Jesus had been mocked, the first time was when He had endured the abhorrence of the chief priests, elders and scribes, who blindfolded Him, spat on Him, hit him and mocked His prophecy (14:65). Paradoxically, the scourging of Jesus happened in the same sequence as the proclamation of the Gospel; 'the Jew first and then the Gentile' (Rom 1:16). Our reading today finds Jesus thrown out of the midst of His own people and at the mercy of the whole cohort of the Governor's guard, numbering between 300 and 600 men. It seems extraordinary that such a large number should be involved, but within the cohort there would have been mercenaries from nearby countries such as Syria, Phoenicia and Samaria, and they would have enjoyed mocking an Israelite 'King'. This was 'sport' for these soldiers, and they enjoyed it.

It is possible that the purple robe (15:17) was a soldier's cloak relating to some rank in the army, and it was placed on Jesus to mimic a royal gown. The other famous sign of royalty was a crown which was improvised, as Mark clearly describes (15:17). The sport of the soldiers was to dress Jesus up as a King in this way and play mock homage, using this as an excuse to assault their victim by striking Him over and over again with a stick (15:19 - in Matthew's Gospel, this stick is likened to a mock royal staff to add to the sport). Verse 19 describes the cruelty of what happened to Jesus, and the verb tenses suggest that everything happened in a sequence, as if the soldiers came up one by one, paid their mock homage and then brutalised Jesus as they wished; each soldier shouting out the charge 'Hail, King of the Jews!'. The whole ugly parade was a perversion of the truth. Some commentators describe all this as mockery rather than torture, but for one who had already endured a flogging with nail studded leather whips, the whole scene is surely beyond the bounds of all human behaviour. I suggest this was no mere mockery.

All this fulfilled Jesus' own prophecy (10:33,34) 'they will hand Him over to the Gentiles; they will mock Him, and spit on Him and flog Him, and kill Him ...', words spoken as Jesus led His disciples to Jerusalem just before His triumphal entry. Isaiah also has a prophecy, traditionally read as referring to the suffering of an Old Testament prophet, but it sounds more than that in the light of Jesus' suffering; 'I gave my back to those who struck me ... I did not hide my face from insult and spitting' (Isaiah 50:6). It is also difficult to read Psalm 22 and not feel that the poetry of this psalm strongly connects with this passage; 'I am scorned by others, despised by the people, all who see me mock me ...' (22:6,7).

What difference does it make to us or to anyone to know that what happened to Jesus was prophesied beforehand by the prophets and by Jesus Himself? It tells us that God already knew that eventually, the mission of His Son would be met by extreme violence before He died and rose again. What Jesus was aware of we cannot be sure, but this helps us know that God was in control despite the appalling events which unfolded.

#### ***Going to Golgotha***

They took the soldiers' robe from off Jesus' back as he would not be allowed to be crucified in it (15:20) and they put his own clothes back on Jesus. Within the Roman Empire generally, it was traditional for men to be taken to be crucified naked, but in deference to the Jewish people who regarded any nakedness as a personal and social insult, this was not done in Jerusalem. This is why Jesus wore His own clothes on the journey to Golgotha, and is likely to have been crucified wearing a loin cloth (although this is not mentioned by Mark). So it was that Jesus was led out to be crucified (15:20). It is tradition only that Jesus went to the cross and was crucified wearing the crown of thorns, and it is a reasonable tradition, for this crown expresses the terrible truth of His condemnation by the authorities. Although the crown of thorns is not mentioned again in Mark, it remains a powerful reminder of Jesus' ordeal and death, and after the resurrection it becomes the supreme symbol of His supreme authority on earth.

As Jesus went on His journey through Jerusalem to the place of execution, the cross-beam which prisoners had to carry with them became impossible for Jesus to carry, probably because of the flogging that He had received earlier. It was not uncommon for Roman soldiers to commandeer bystanders to perform this task, and the man chosen on this occasion was Simon of Cyrene in North Africa. It is likely he was a pilgrim come to Jerusalem for the Passover, or perhaps part of the small North African community in Jerusalem which had a small synagogue there. Tradition certainly claims that Simon was converted because of his experience in carrying Jesus' cross, and this explains the mention of his sons (15:21). Doubtless, he was one of the sources Mark used to find out what had happened at the crucifixion.

Golgotha was outside the existing walls of Jerusalem, being a place regularly used for executions. As Mark tells us, the word Golgotha comes from an Aramaic word meaning 'skull' (15:22), and the New Testament Greek literally reads 'Place of the Skull' (for completion, it is helpful to know that the word 'Calvary' comes from the Latin for 'Place of the Skull'). The location of Golgotha has long been agreed as likely to be near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, placing it near a major roadway into the city of Jerusalem. It was normal for the Romans to use such a site, to make crucifixion as visible as possible.

#### ***The crucifixion***

When Jesus arrived at Golgotha, he was offered wine with myrrh to drink, but refused it (15:23). It was common for women to offer the poor souls brought to Golgotha a drink of wine spiked with some kind of pain killing drugs, to ease the pain, and it is probable that this is what was