

the true charge, indeed, they did not really mind what was said about Him, they simply wanted Him dead. But they used the charge to mock Jesus by saying 'Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now.' It was an ignorant use of words which should have been precious to those who had the task of guarding Israel's heritage; but they had already failed. The scribes (Biblical scholars), the priestly hierarchy and all the Israelite leadership showed themselves to be no more knowledgeable than ordinary people. They continued to demand signs and yet were unable to see the sign unfolding before them.

### Application

We continue to be shocked at the inhumanity with which Jesus was treated; a man who loved people, healed them, and both preached and lived to a high moral standard, was manipulated like a common criminal and thief. But it was the purpose of God that His own Son should be exposed to the very depths of inhumanity, in order to challenge evil and death head on and overcome them by the power of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus had to wait until the point of His own death to achieve this. None of us can fully appreciate everything He endured, and our passage today can only ever bring us to the edge of understanding the mystery of God's saving purposes through Jesus Christ. Each of us must stop and consider carefully what we do know about what happened to Jesus on the Cross, and when we do, the Holy Spirit will lead us closer to the source of our salvation. Mark's Gospel spends only a verse here and a verse there describing great swathes of Jesus' life and ministry, but in the last few chapters, he dwells repeatedly on the same features of what happened to Jesus: the false accusations, the opposition of the religious authorities, the mocking of Jesus and the cruel pain He endured. Mark has not dwelt on these without reason; they are the things which will lead us towards an understanding of our salvation and the purpose of God for our lives.

We will finish by considering one great truth about this passage of scripture. The glory of the Cross was that Jesus did not come down from it, as the high priests requested, He stayed on it. In Mark's and Matthew's Gospels, the stories of Jesus on the Cross are remarkably similar, and in my conclusion to the study of Matthew 27:38-44, I quoted from the Commentary on Matthew by Davis and Alison (T&T Clarke – p523) concerning this part of the story of Jesus' crucifixion, and I quote it here again, to close our study today. I shall slightly paraphrase what is said for brevity and clarity, but hope that it will speak as powerfully to you as it has done to me.

'Jesus' divine sonship takes up two models. On the one hand, God's Son is the enthroned king, victorious over His enemies; on the other, God's Son is true Israel, called to a life of humble obedience and service. Those who (like the chief priests, elders and scribes) set these two concepts over and against each other and propose a path without affliction are like the devil, and mock the Crucified. Jesus refused to break apart the two sonships; He refused to reign without the suffering of obedience. He turned away from self seeking acts of power and chose to let God save Him in God's own time. Sonship does not mean leaving the cross, but staying on it.'

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which of the taunts jeered at Jesus do you feel to be the worst, given those who were speaking?
2. Compare this passage with the equivalent in Matthew (Matt 27:38-44). How is this different from Mark, and why?
3. When you think of Jesus waiting on the cross to die, is it possible or right for us to imagine this happening to ourselves? Is it better to stand back and observe?

### 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. As suggested in the study, take time if at all possible to dwell on this passage and allow it to reveal to you the depth of human sin and the magnificent power of God in Jesus Christ which overcomes death and sin to save the world. Let God lead you through your thoughts and reflections to discover what He would say to you about these events, yourself, and your salvation.*

### Final Prayer

Holy and every living Lord, I cannot pray without addressing You who are the author of all, the Creator and Saviour of my soul and the inspiration of all my life. Lead me in the path of holiness so that by Your strength, I may fulfil Your purposes for me. All praise to You, Holy Spirit. AMEN

### Prayer

Gracious Lord, You have suffered more than we can ever know, and yet You endured it all for us and for our salvation. As we wonder at the price paid for our liberty, make us mindful of our own responsibility to love others and put the Gospel into practice. We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour; AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Universities

Pray today for those who run our Universities and administer the standards which define the quality of both teaching and research. Academic standards are essential if people are to have confidence in the education they receive at a University, and the systems which uphold them have to be exemplary. Pray for the integrity of these standards and those who uphold them.

### Meditation

In the midst of our greatest needs; You are there, O Lord:

When we go our own way, Your love sustains us;

When we become upset, Your peace heals us;

When we succumb to sin, Your mercy covers us;

When we feel exhausted, Your energy empowers us;

When we are oppressed by evil, Your power protects us;

When we lose our way, Your vision guides us;

When we need a challenge, Your mission calls us;

When we give up hope, Your future invites us:

May we never miss the wonder of Your presence,

By being too wrapped up in ourselves!

### Bible Study - Mark 15:25-32

<sup>25</sup> It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. <sup>26</sup> The written notice of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' <sup>27</sup> And they crucified two outlaws with him, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>28</sup> (So the scriptures were fulfilled which say that He was counted as one of the lawless) <sup>29</sup> Those who passed by threw insults at Him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Look at you! Someone who will destroy the temple and build it up in three days! <sup>30</sup> Now save yourself, and come down from the cross!' <sup>31</sup> In the same way the chief priests with the scribes ridiculed Him among themselves and said, 'He saved others, but He cannot save Himself. <sup>32</sup> Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him insulted Him as well.

### Review

These verses of scripture hold us in awful suspense, giving us some understanding of those terrible moments Jesus endured for us whilst on the Cross, before He died. Some Christians remember Jesus' last hours only on Good Friday, preferring to keep to the timing of events according to tradition because that is their nature. However, by closely following Mark's story of Jesus' crucifixion over several days, as we have done for the last week, we have time to dwell on the dreadful reality of the Cross, and as we read these words, time seems to stand still. Most of us either have experienced, or will some day experience, those awful moments of waiting for someone to die; everything has been done and everything has been said, or so it seems, and yet no one can say when death will come, and God Almighty will take a soul. Here, we wait for Jesus to die while he hangs in the terrible state of crucifixion, a torture designed to draw out the agony of that cruel time between fatal injury and death, and all the while, Jesus had to bear the agony and the taunts of those who had condemned Him.

Mark, whatever he felt personally about the dire story he told, reports the bare, cruel facts. He records the time Jesus was hung on the Cross (15:25), the official charge for which He was crucified (15:26), the other people who were crucified each side of Jesus (15:27), and the jeering of those who passed by (15:29). He also tells us about the mockery of the chief priests, who had come to check on the progress of Jesus' death and gloat over the success of their attempt to silence Him (15:31). Then finally, Mark relates the unpleasant scoffing of the outlaws crucified next to Him (15:32). However cruel this undoubtedly was, Mark reported the information he received and wrote it down with telling effect. As we read Mark's account, we can almost hear the constant abuse and jeering, and to cap it all, we hear the added taunt 'now save Yourself, come down from the Cross' (15:30) and the final offence; 'He saved others, but He cannot save Himself.' (15:31); both of these insults delivered with stinging vindictiveness by the chief priests and scribes. Such words were intentionally malicious, but some of what was said was the result of indifference and misunderstanding. Then, in a strange way, other things said to Jesus expressed the deep truths of God's saving love, but unbeknown to those who sneered; for the time would indeed come when Jesus would come down from the Cross, but not in the way those who shouted it would expect it!

All this was Jesus' last hour of testing, a final agony of human betrayal before His awful death. Jesus began his ministry being tested by Satan in the wilderness (4:1-11), and throughout his life He was constantly challenged and tested, by the Pharisees (2:16, 7:1, 8:11 etc.), by Peter and the disciples (8:32, 10:28 etc.) and by the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem (notably, chapter 12 onwards). For as long as He preached and ministered to people, those around Him probed and questioned Him, but Jesus faced His greatest test not before men and women, but before His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32-42). One might think that now Jesus was on the Cross and His death was a certainty, the testing would come to an end; but it continued to the bitter end (14:60, 15:2 etc.). Satan did not let up as the lips of those who passed by ridiculed the little they knew about the man who 'claimed to rebuild the Temple' (15:29).

The Cross of Jesus stands at the focal point of history, and just as Jesus had to stay on this cruel killing-stand for a few more terrible hours, so should we spend time reflecting on what He endured for us. It is right that we should pause, and not just at Easter time, to think again about why God allowed this to happen, and why it was the only route for salvation, and the restoration of men and women to God.

### Going Deeper

It is painful for us to dig deeper into all this because of the human frailty it exposes, but we must do so. The more we delve into the reasons why Jesus faced death in this way and contrast it with our own human attitudes, the more we will understand the mystery of God's grace found in the death and resurrection of Jesus. I would encourage you to spend time with this text.

#### ***The time of Jesus' death and the inscription above His head***

Mark tells us that Jesus was fastened to the Cross and hung up to be crucified around nine o'clock. In Greek it says 'the third hour', meaning at the beginning of the third watch of the day which begins at around nine o'clock (our time). Everything had happened so fast; since daybreak, the Council had met (15:1) and Jesus had already been scourged by the soldiers (15:16f.) and led out to Gethsemane (15:22). The day we now call 'Good Friday' is recorded in far more detail than any other day of Jesus' life.

When Jesus was crucified, the soldiers placed a placard over Jesus' head stating the reason. It was probably written as an insult following their mocking of Jesus in the Praetorium (15:16f.), but it spoke the simple truth in a more powerful way than anyone could otherwise say, and read simply; 'The King of the Jews.' Throughout the mocking of Jesus, no-one disputed this title, and it stands imperiously over His head throughout His suffering and death. Here indeed was a King who died for His people.

Mark does not say where the placard was placed, but Matthew says it was placed 'above His head' (Matt 27:37), indicating that the cross Jesus died on was most likely to be of the traditional cross shape with an upright rising above the head, and not the T shape argued for by some on the basis that this was the normal structure of a Roman cross. There was probably no standard shape, for the 'Cross' was for the Romans, merely functionary.

Such speculation, however, does little to help us understand Jesus' death because the truth about the shape of the Cross can never be completely verified. What we do know is that of all the things that happened to Jesus in His life, it was His death on the Cross which gave purpose to

everything He did and said. In the earliest days of the church when Mark wrote this Gospel, he must have written with a sense of awe at what he was writing, because despite the prophecies of the Old Testament, nothing like this had been seen or testified to before in human history. Great people had come and gone, but the story of Jesus' life and death was something utterly different.

#### ***Two outlaws***

Two outlaws were crucified next to Jesus. Tradition generally regards these two as thieves, which then ironically reminds us of when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, and complained 'Have you come ... to arrest me as though I were a thief?' (14:48). However, the word used by Mark in both texts (14:48 and 15:27) is a word used for a political insurrectionist, or what we might loosely call a terrorist, and I have translated the word here as 'outlaws'. It is ironic that Jesus was killed between two characters that between them represented the kind of leadership Jesus had spent his whole life repudiating. He had refused to conform to the activist ambitions of zealots who wanted a political and military Messiah to throw the Romans out of Israel, so when the two outlaws 'insulted Him as well' (15:32) they were probably taunting him for not living up to their expectations of who a Messiah should be and what he should do, and they did so most likely, with venom.

Note as well that two disciples had asked to be at Jesus' right and left hand side (10:37). This was not the kind of glory they had in mind or were even prepared to undergo; it was not they who accompanied Jesus on the Cross, but the scurrilous 'outlaws'. The whole scene reminds us of the prophecy of Isaiah which says 'he was numbered with the transgressors' (Isaiah 53:12), and is quoted in verse 28 (you will not find verse 28 printed in most modern Bibles, but it does appear in the Authorised Version; this is because this quote from Isaiah is not found in early Greek manuscripts of Mark's Gospel, only in later texts from the ninth century onwards).

#### ***Those who passed by***

Those who passed by the scene demonstrated an utter ignorance of what had happened. Most were pilgrims returning home after the Passover Festival and they had probably heard something about what had happened. It seems that the rumour which most caught the popular imagination was the original charge put to Jesus when He was first captured and brought to the high priests; 'we heard Him say that He would destroy the Temple ... and build it in three days ...!' (14:58) Neither did they think He was a Messiah who was going to save them; no-one could then see the connection between what they saw and knew, and the words of Psalm 22 'all who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me, they shake their heads ...' (Psalm 22:7, see also Lamentations 2:15). These were not the people who were going to understand Jesus' Messianic mission. The disbelieving ignorance of these people who passed by is a tragic reminder of the inability of God's people at that time to understand the words of their own prophets, blinded as they were by the religiosity of the Pharisees and the political manoeuvring required of the chief priests, scribes and elders in order to maintain peace.

In the Praetorium, Jesus had been subject to a 'mock' coronation, with crown, robe, and sceptre. Now, the charge 'King of the Jews' invited popular scorn and derision; they shouted 'now save yourself, and come down from the Cross!' While Jesus was impaled on the cross, it was indeed possible for Him to come down; but the power of Jesus was shown in His mastery of His own will and the will of God in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was there that the battle was won and all possibility of a fracture between God's will and Jesus' actions were finally put to rest. Jesus would stay on the cross, not for a false glory in death, but for an eventual complete victory over it.

#### ***The mockery of the chief priests***

Whilst those who passed by spoke directly to Jesus even if what they said was insulting (15:29) or ignorant (15:30), the chief priests and scribes spoke about Jesus 'amongst themselves' (15:31), right in front of him. They spoke indirectly, using the third person; 'He saved others ... He cannot save Himself' 15:31, adding further insult. The irony of everything they said about Jesus was palpable. They appeared to recognise that the man who they arranged to have crucified had indeed saved others (15:31). How ironic this was, as from an earthly point of view, their actions prevented Him from helping anyone else! But the irony was far deeper, for they did not understand that it was precisely by NOT saving Himself that He was now saving others with a far greater salvation! Nevertheless, what an insult it was to the many Jesus had healed that they should say this and be satisfied with His death.

The mockery of the chief priests (15:32) also included a recognition of the words written above Jesus' head, 'the King of the Jews'. The chief priests of course, would not accept that this was