

had to grapple. He was immediately able to deduce that what was written over Jesus' head was the truth. Like an independent witness convinced of something he did not expect to see, he announced 'Truly this man was the Son of God!' and in so doing he made the same declaration of faith made by Peter (8:29). God was at work, and barriers were breaking down!

The women

The women who were present at Jesus' death were 'watching from a distance'. Indeed, there were 'many' of them (15:41). This is quite remarkable, and we would love to know more about who these women were. What this tells us is that there were quite a number of women who had followed Jesus from Galilee and had made it their business to 'provide for Him'.

However, who were the women who were named? The identity of Mary Magdalene (15:40) has always been a mystery, but she was closely associated with John, according to church tradition, and some parts of the church (The East) believe that they possess good historical evidence of her marriage to John at the 'Wedding at Cana' recorded in John chapter 2. Mark does not mention Jesus' mother among the women called Mary, and it is hard to imagine he would leave her out if he knew she was there. Mary Magdalene is paired firstly with Mary the mother of James and Joses (or Joseph, according to Matthew 27:56). These are common names which give us no real clues. Salome is also mentioned without comment, but if we look in the same verse from Matthew (27:56), she appears to be the 'mother of the sons of Zebedee' (that is, James and John). None of the women mentioned is Mary of 'Mary and Martha' who lived in Bethany (John 11:1f.).

It is impossible to say more about these women, but the overall impression is that the witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion were all women, and it is their testimony about what happened which the early church believed and has been passed down to us! Thank God for the women!

Application

'Good Friday' saw the trial of Jesus, his flogging and crucifixion, his mocking and his ultimate death, but it did not end in despair. That was undoubtedly what the disciples felt; they had failed to follow Jesus and do what He had asked, or fulfil their own promises to Him. It is presumptuous of anyone to imagine that any of us could do better, and it is wise for us to remember that we can only learn anything from this terrible day by submitting to the Jesus who died on the Cross that awful day. Despite all our failings, Jesus has not failed us, and perhaps fewer words and greater reflection on this spiritual truth is what the Lord requires of us on this special day.

We have studied this single day for more than a week now, and we should not forget that it was indeed one day; a terrible day for Jesus and a very special day for God. What we can do which honours this amazing text is to remember that it did not end with horror and dismay, but amazing miracles by which God began to show His power and authority in new and amazing ways. It was a foretaste of what was to come, and the mysterious beginnings of the Resurrection.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What parts of the story of Jesus' death have affected you this year? Share your response to this question within the group.
2. Do you think that Jesus gave up His spirit voluntarily, or that His death was purely in the hands of the Father.
3. Try summarising your thoughts about the death of Jesus. Take a piece of paper and write on it the key themes, and then share them in your group.

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. The extraordinary pathos of Jesus' death is recorded by Mark alongside God's great acts of power. Are we being taught by the Lord that death is never what it seems? Our forefathers certainly believed that death was an entry into a great glory and was something to be celebrated. Reflect on what you think was going on in Jesus' mind as he called out to the Father, and also as the effects of His death began to change the world forever.

Final Prayer

Lord God, speak into our hearts the truth of Jesus' great work for us on the Cross, and where words are not enough, enlighten our spirits. Forgive us if we have misunderstood the mysteries of Salvation, and lead us into all truth as we read about the death of Jesus, AMEN

Prayer

What a day, dear Lord Jesus. Not one of us can fully understand the pain and sacrifice that You accepted for our sakes. Forgive those of Your people who have argued and fought for years about the meaning of Your death, and where we repent of our failings, help us accept the truth that You have died for us. In amazement and awe, we offer ourselves to You, who gave up all things for us: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Universities

Pray today for the social effect on young people of universities. Many now live in either halls of residence or students housing flats and houses which dominate large areas of some cities. Pray for chaplains and university staff who work for the benefit of students outside of their studies and seek to influence what happens for good, and counter what is evil.

Meditation

Can we look on a Cross or a crucifix
Without seeing the truth that humanity has been compromised:
Two incompatibles, life and death,
Lie side by side in the person of our Saviour, Jesus Christ?

How deeply can you look?
Do you really see the gory details, or truly want to see them?
Can you face the awful spiritual truth
That the world has always been content to see Him die?

Are you appalled at the sight of death?
Do you need to move on rapidly because the sight is too awful?
Or can you look into the death of Jesus
And feel the full power of Easter, held back, for yet another day?

'He did it all for me.' You say,
But this is the death of God's own Son in brutal human savagery:
There's no escape, will you be touched
By this degrading sacrifice which saves your soul? Or walk on by?

Bible Study - Mark 15:33-41

³³ From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness came over the whole land. ³⁴ About three o'clock, Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' ³⁵ Some of the bystanders heard it and said, 'Listen, He's calling for Elijah.' ³⁶ Then someone ran to soak a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and offered it to Him to drink saying, 'Wait, let's see whether Elijah comes to take him down.'

³⁷ Then Jesus cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the veil of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

³⁹ Now when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that he breathed his last in this manner, he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'

⁴⁰ There were also some women who were watching from a distance, and among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹ When he was in Galilee, these women used to provide for Him; and there were many other women who had come up with Him to Jerusalem.

Review

Here, we read about that incredible and awful moment when Jesus died on a cross at Golgotha. For two thousand years, God's people have wondered what it would have been like to be at the foot of the cross at the very moment of Jesus' death. In prayer, and especially at Easter time, we wait on God and try to come to terms with this, the greatest mystery of all. Of course, we know that the resurrection will soon come, but there is something about the Cross which

demands that we pause and pray. Catholics have always treasured the crucifix, the image of the cross with Jesus on it, because it attempts to capture the spiritual reality of Good Friday and the meaning of the death of Christ. Protestants prefer the sign of the empty cross, which speaks of both Jesus' death and His glorious resurrection, but still, the cross is an instrument of torture and death, and its image is rarely understood. All of us who place our trust in the one, true and only God, know that ultimate victory over death and evil was secured because Jesus died, and did so in unimaginable inhumanity on a Roman cross of wood. The fact the Jesus died is as appalling as the resurrection is glorious.

In the three hours before Jesus died on the Cross, a heavenly veil of darkness was thrown over the whole earth, from midday until three in the afternoon (15:33). What does this mean? Was there a separation between heaven and earth in those hours because of the awful sins of humanity which took Jesus to the Cross? Was Jesus' cry, 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?' (15:34) a reflection of His own feelings about this appalling separation? Or was this an anticipation of the moment of His death? These and a thousand other questions occupy our minds, but Mark does not answer them. He reports the information he was able to find; it is simple and it is enough to tell us what we need to know, and its very simplicity leads us to ask a thousand questions which may or may not lead us to the truth. For us to find the true meaning of what happened, however, we need the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, which interprets God's Word to our hearts.

What we know from Mark's Gospel is limited, more so than any of the descriptions of Jesus' death in the other Gospels, and we will as usual explore the details in the main body of the study. Jesus' enigmatic cry 'Eloi, Eloi ...' (15:34) comes from the opening words of Psalm 22. On the one hand, these words do indeed express the pain of separation, otherwise called the 'sting of death', but if you read the whole psalm, it is a rich expression of faith in God, and it is unparalleled in Old Testament Scripture. In both Psalm 22 and here in Mark, we read about bystanders who continue to play out their customary games with those who are dying (15:35,36), and we cannot really tell whether the drugged wine offered to Jesus was kindness or mockery; we can only guess. Those who thought Jesus was calling Elijah mistook Jesus' Hebrew words of faith for an Aramaic cry, so whether they intended it or not, their words mocked the spirit of Jesus (15:36).

At the centre of our reading, Mark records Jesus' death with dignity and simplicity; 'Then Jesus cried out with a loud voice and breathed His last.' (15:37). We may empathise with the women who were present (15:40), and feel the terrible angst of suddenly knowing that the end had come, for they were left in a terrifying 'no man's land' of grief and uncertainty. Everything was in God's hands and they could not know all that God was doing. But we should not be surprised that there were earthly consequences to Jesus' death; at that very moment, 'the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom' (15:38)! And then, a Gentile soldier confessed that Jesus was God's Son! This was an extraordinary, unprompted and prophetic expression of faith. Resurrection was stirring, somewhere!

Going Deeper

There were indeed extraordinary and powerful things happening and we can never fully know what God was doing or how He was working. However, we have every right to explore the possibilities, if necessary, using the assistance of other Gospels and Scriptures. There is more to this passage than meets the eye!

The time of the crucifixion

Mark's Gospel races through Jesus' life and ministry, perhaps more so than any of the other Gospels. Mark connects many of the stories of Jesus with words like 'He went immediately ...' or 'suddenly ...' and there is an urgency in the task of preaching the Gospel which certainly left the disciples bemused at times (4:40,41, 7:17f.). Once in Jerusalem, however, the pace slows right down, and we find ourselves following Jesus day by day through his teaching and His various confrontations with the religious authorities (chapters 11,12,13), and suddenly we find that Jesus has been betrayed and faces execution, and on the very morning of His death the jeering crowds shout for His death, 'crucify, crucify!' (15:14). Then, led out to Golgotha, He was crucified, and at midday, Jesus was close to death. For three hours He hung there in what seems like suspended animation, the darkness over the land bringing a sense of lost isolation. The light between heaven and earth went out, and time stood still for three hours.

Centuries before, Amos prophesied "On that day," says the Lord God, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight." (see Amos 8:9, and also Joel 2:2,31 and Zeph. 1:15). The darkness also reminds us of the Creation story in Genesis 1:2, because 'darkness' is the state of chaos in the world before the Lord began creation. In that moment, all

God's Universe recognised Jesus' agony and death. A new light and a new Creation was needed to bring the world to life again!

Calling for Elijah?

The darkness, and the silence that may have accompanied it, was broken by Jesus' cry 'with a loud voice' (15:34). He said 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' quoting the first line of Psalm 22. It was astonishing that Jesus was still able to speak, but those nearby heard Him and thought He was calling for Elijah, and although we may be as confused about what Jesus said as they, but we must surely look at the possibilities.

Did Jesus' cry out because of the darkness of separation which He felt at that moment (see above) or does it anticipate the consequences of death? Did Jesus dread His death because He bore the sins of humanity and knew that this would mean separation from the Father? Or is this a pointer to the resurrection, because by quoting Psalm 22, He intended to point us towards the whole of Psalm 22 which ends with the hope of resurrection? (Psalm 22:29-31). It is possible, just as we might say the words 'The Lord's my Shepherd' and infer the sentiments of the whole psalm, not just the first line. All of these are possible and may be true, for Mark's Gospel does not give us any interpretation of Jesus' cry, it simply reports the facts. What we do know is that the idea of God's abandonment of Jesus on the Cross is essential to our understanding of a significant number of important scriptures in the New Testament; Rom 3:25, 2 Cor 5:21, Col 1:20, Heb 5:7-10; 7:27, 9:11-14. We will have to study these to find a fuller theology of what happened to Jesus on the Cross.

I simply offer my own observations. When the time of His death came, His cry was, I believe, a genuine cry of agony at abandonment by God. He was broken by the agony of separation, but He was also aware of the hope of resurrection; 'to you they cried and were saved, in you they trusted and were not put to shame' (Ps 22:5). There is a divine paradox at the heart of Jesus' death, and we can never quite express it in words. Both the agony and the victory of Jesus' death are recorded by Mark that we might have a glimpse of Jesus' saving work and give glory to God.

The confusion of those present who proceeded to offer Jesus a drink is understandable (15:36). The narcotic effects of the drink may have been intended to revive him to see what else he would say, also fulfilling Psalm 69:21 'and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.' Those playing sport with Jesus on the Cross were ignorant of the fact that Elijah had already come in John the Baptist. Their ignorant wait for Elijah was not far short of a sick joke.

The death of Jesus

The moment of Jesus' death came with a loud shout, before He stopped breathing (15:37). How death comes is rarely something explainable and always mysterious. Some suggest that Jesus' loud cry meant that He had more life left in Him, but He voluntarily gave up His life, but I fear this tries to look too far into the mystery of death. God took Him at the right time.

What happened next is extraordinary, and not often commented upon. From that very instant it is as if God the Father immediately acted to vindicate Jesus by unilaterally performing miracles! Principally, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two! Now the accusation levelled at Jesus which possibly caused the greatest damage at His trial before Caiaphas, was that He would tear down the Temple and rebuild it! So some believe that God tore down the 'veil of the Temple' (15:38) to show His anger at Jesus' death!

But which Temple curtain or veil was torn; the outer one that separated the outer Gentile Court from the Sanctuary or the inner one which separated the Sanctuary from the Holy of Holies? The outer larger curtain was a magnificent Babylonian tapestry depicting the whole world and standing eighty feet high. If this was torn, it would give the Gentiles access to God! Or if it was the smaller inner veil inside the Sanctuary, then its removal would signify the abolition of the priesthood! Mark does not say which, but it could be that the image of the 'curtain' or 'veil' generally represented all that was wrong with Temple worship. Alternatively, the tearing of the Temple veil could be the Father's outrage at the religious authorities who had killed His Son whilst pretending to act in God's Name. In the end, of course, the whole Temple was torn down by the Romans (in AD70). When this happened, the early Christian church saw it as a sign of the end of the Old Covenant, represented by the religious authorities and the Temple.

The conclusion of the Centurion

Near to Jesus, a centurion stood watching. He had probably been present earlier in the day when the cohort had mocked Jesus (there was only one cohort in Jerusalem). Observing everything that took place, he was not worried about the theological and historical issues with which we have