

At the cross

We have followed the story, from last Sunday when we pictured Jesus entering Jerusalem on a colt, surrounded by his disciples, shouting and praising God; and last night we considered Jesus' last meal with his disciples, followed by his lonely vigil in the garden of Gethsemane, and his arrest; and today we follow the events of his trial and his condemnation, the cries of the crowd to release the revolutionary Barabbas and to crucify Jesus. And then the journey out to the place of execution, Simon of Cyrene carrying Jesus' cross and the women of the city wailing for him. Then that grisly scene of the crucifixion, and the mocking and the derision, and the darkness over the face of the earth and eventually – mercifully – comes death and an end to the terrible suffering.

As we survey these events I would like our attention to focus on the cross and the figures we find there, and especially to the criminals that are crucified on either side of him and the Roman centurion standing nearby. For in these three people we see very clearly different reactions that might be provoked by that figure at the centre of it all, the one on that central cross. Each of these people responds to Jesus in a different way, and we turn our attention first of all to the two criminals and their completely opposite attitudes to Jesus. On the one hand there is the one who taunts Jesus: 'are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' This man has no time for Jesus but he is not apathetic and indifferent – he is angry and bitter, and we can see why. This man, after all is at the extremes of suffering. Crucifixion is one of the most agonising and appalling deaths that have ever been devised by the twisted minds of human beings and it was reserved for the most lowly and despised criminals. And suffering can do terrible things to you. Pain can poison your spirit and it can provoke you to anger and to violence and maybe there is something of that in this man. In his aggression, his turning on Jesus, we hear his pain lashing out. And somewhere in his hostility to Jesus there is doubtless bitterness at God. After all, aren't you supposed to be God's Messiah, God's anointed one? So can't your God do something to save us? Here this man's anger and resentment at a God who allows such suffering is stirred and it boils over and targets the one who is said to be God's representative. And we can understand that reaction. It's the reaction of the suffering who simply cannot bear what they are enduring – maybe the cancer patient who in her pain and the collapse of all her

dignity cannot bear to hear talk of a loving God. And the chaplain or the priest comes by her bed and she calls out, to herself or out loud, ‘where is your God now? Can’t he come and heal me? If not, keep away from me!’ And her bitterness is fuelled by her pain – and by her desperate fear that eats away at her. That’s one of the criminals, the one who speaks first.

But on the other hand there is the second criminal. He is enduring the same pain, the same humiliation, the same fear – and yet his reaction is so very different. He rebukes the first criminal and then comes this plea, this desperate longing: ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Did he really believe that Jesus was God’s Messiah? Did he really trust that this one on the cross next to him held the keys to the gate of God’s Kingdom? Who knows? Maybe he indeed sensed something in this fellow sufferer beside him, but all we know is that something made him turn to Jesus in desperate trust and hope: ‘Jesus, remember me...’ And of course that is the other possible reaction to pain and suffering. It’s a faith that goes beyond asking why and seeking an explanation but which simply turns to God in desperation, maybe because there is nowhere else to turn.

It’s interesting how suffering provokes both of those reactions. Suffering polarises. For everyone who looks out at a suffering world and curses God, or the very idea of God, there is someone else who turns to God at such a time. In my ministry I witness both. I’ve heard and felt people’s anger and disdain at God. Sometimes it arises from their own pain which has gone too far and sometimes it comes out of a deep sense of compassion for the suffering of others and a genuine outrage that a loving God would allow such a world. But I’ve also been humbled sometimes at the way people turn to God at such times and faith is awakened or strengthened. Frequently people will point to a tragedy as the place where they found faith.

Those, then, are the two criminals on the crosses beside Jesus. But of course there is, too, the Roman centurion who stands by the cross. His reaction is intriguing. What is it about Jesus that makes him praise God, as we’re told, and declare, ‘certainly this man was innocent’? In Matthew’s Gospel he goes further. In Matthew’s Gospel not only does darkness come over the land but there is an earthquake and as creation explodes around him the centurion is prompted to exclaim in terror, ‘Truly, this man was God’s son!’ Here, in Luke, he says rather less – simply that this man was innocent. And maybe we see in him, the centurion, the many people who do not actually see God in Jesus at all

- just an innocent man, a good man, just one more righteous victim of a cruel world, one more person who does not deserve to suffer such a death. We're told that this centurion praised God and we might wonder why? Maybe it was Jesus' trust in God as he commended his spirit into God's hands. Maybe it was Jesus' forgiving attitude as he said of his killers, 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.' Whatever it was, something about Jesus was inspiring and it touched this centurion deeply.

Here, then are three attitudes to the suffering Christ on the cross. Someone, the centurion, sees in him an innocent man, a good man, an admirable and even inspiring figure – as do many in our world today. Someone the first criminal, looks at Jesus and is provoked into antipathy and rejection. His deep-seated resistance to God is stirred and exposed – a resistance that is as strong today as ever it was, if not stronger. But the second criminal is prompted to trust, recognising Jesus as who he is, the bearer of God's rule, God's Kingdom.

Let's close by just focusing on him for a moment, and let's just take note of what Jesus says to him: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.' What is that all about? We tend to think of paradise as the place people go after death – the next life, heaven - but that is really a misunderstanding. The word 'paradise' takes us back to the beginning of the Bible and to the story of Adam and Eve and the garden of Eden. That is Paradise. And it's not a place you go after death. It was a place that Adam and Eve enjoyed here and now, in the midst of life. It's a place of unbroken communion with God. It's a place where human beings walk and talk with God. It's what one writer describes as 'a zone of well-being presided over by Jesus.' It reminds us of Paul's words in his great chapter in the letter to the Romans where he considers all the things that might come between us and God and concludes triumphantly that 'nothing in all creation can come between us and the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' In his moment of trust and acknowledgement of this one on the cross beside him the criminal is given the assurance of paradise. Even this hell on the cross will not separate him from the love of God.

Two criminals and a centurion. Three different responses to the Christ on the cross. Rejection, admiration – and a faith that opens the gates of paradise and welcomes us into the love of God, from which nothing can separate us. Amen.

O gracious God,
In the events of Good Friday we see our world reflected:
a world infected by evil,
a world poisoned by hatred,
a world where the innocent suffer because of the violence
that we unleash upon one another.
We pray today for the people of Brussels,
for the injured and the bereaved and for the fearful.
And we pray for those who do such things,
for terrorists and murderers

and exponents of hatred,
even as Jesus prayed for those who killed him.
And we pray for those who cannot bring themselves
to believe because of their pain, their experience,
what they have gone through.
May they find in you comfort and hope...
And we pray for those who care for the suffering,
for those who nurse and tend and treat the sick and the dying.
Grant them the gift of compassion...
And God, as on this day we see a world on trial
for its rejection of the good and the true,
help us we pray to recognise the sin and the evil
and the failure to love in our own lives.
As we stand at the cross help us to see there
both judgement and grace,
that we may acknowledge the sin
and the darkness in our own lives,
and receive the grace that reaches out to us
from the one who hangs there.
In his name we pray. Amen.