

Mark 15:1-47

30.03.18 (Good Friday)

The centurion's confession

There is a very strange climax to the dark and distressing story of Jesus' death by crucifixion. Mark chapter 15 takes us through the whole, ghastly narrative, beginning with Jesus being handed over by the Jewish authorities to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate; and there follows the choice of freedom for the rebel Barabbas rather than Jesus; and then the flogging and the mocking, with the cloak and the crown of thorns; and then the shouldering of the cross beam of the cross by a stranger as Jesus is too weak by this point; and then crucifixion and the taunting; and then the darkness and the cry, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'; then Jesus breathing his last breath, followed by the tearing of the curtain in the temple. And then comes this strange climax: an utterance by a Roman centurion who, we are told, stood facing him and who declared: 'Truly, this man was God's Son!' What a strange thing for a Gentile, Roman soldier to say. What an odd confession to make at that moment. What a peculiar climax to the story of the crucifixion.

I doubt that the sight of a crucifixion would have been anything unusual for this man. It was practiced widely by the Romans and they had it down to fine art. Jesus himself was probably about ten years old when an uprising in the town of Sepphoris, just a day's walk from Nazareth, resulted in the mass crucifixion of two thousand rebels and sympathisers. Can you imagine that? This was a disgusting, tortuous and degrading form of death, calculated in its cruelty to act as a deterrent, and this centurion has watched Jesus in his gruesome death-throes. Why on earth, looking at this hideous sight, would anyone declare, 'truly this man was God's son!' You might imagine him muttering, 'truly this man was cursed by God!', or maybe, 'truly, this man did not deserve this!' Indeed in Luke's Gospel the centurion declares at this moment, 'truly this man was innocent!', and that's an indication of this centurion's unease at an evident injustice. It's one thing, however, to protest someone's innocence, quite another to declare that they are God's Son. What prompts such an astonishing pronouncement? Maybe it's the fact that we are told that 'when it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon'. Maybe to this centurion the dark sky, the extinguishing of the sun, was an omen, a sign, the very cosmos declaring that something fearful was

happening. But why should that lead him to the conclusion that here, in the agony of execution, was God's Son?

Well, I would suggest that there is a clue in a rather unlikely place. It comes in the verse immediately before the centurion makes his declaration, where we are told that as Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last 'the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom'. This was the great curtain that hung in the temple, sealing off the area known as the holy of holies, the very heart of the temple where God's presence was believed to dwell. It was a sacred area, accessible only once a year to the high priest, who entered with fear and trepidation. And why should the rendering of that curtain, the tearing of it from top to bottom, have anything at all to do with the centurion's confession, 'Truly this man was the Son of God'? What's the connection?

Well, here we need to go on a bit of a detour. In fact we need to go back for a moment to the beginning of Mark's Gospel where Jesus is introduced to us. He appears down by the River Jordan where the prophet John is baptising people, calling them to a fresh start. And we are told that Jesus submits to John's baptism and, as he does so, something extraordinary happens. We're told that as he comes up out of the water the heavens are torn apart, torn open, and the Spirit of God descends and there follows a voice which proclaims, 'You are my Son...'. So right at the beginning of the story there is a tearing, as God invades the world, coming amongst us in Jesus, anointing him with Spirit, followed by a voice that affirms Jesus as God's Son. And now we are near the end and, lo and behold, what happened at Jesus' baptism is being echoed in his death. Here Jesus who was anointed at his baptism by the Spirit of God returns it as he breathes his last. And now once again there is a tearing – not the tearing open of the sky but the tearing of the curtain of the temple. Torn in two is that barrier that located God in the temple, that focused God's presence there amidst sacrifices and offerings, that centred God in the holy of holies and in Jerusalem and in Israel. And with that tearing, just as at Jesus' baptism, a voice is heard declaring that this Jesus is God's Son. Only this time it is not the voice of God but the voice of a Roman centurion, 'truly, this was God's Son!'

So Mark's Gospel begins and draws to an end with a tearing, and a confession of Jesus' identity. These are like bookends to the Gospel. And in between them, as we read Mark's narrative, there are other moments when Jesus' identity is revealed. Sometimes it's by the demons, the forces of evil that see him as a threat; sometimes it's by the voice of God again, as on the

mountain top where Jesus was transfigured and the same declaration made. But now, at the cross, a crucial moment is reached. God's invasion of the world, God's forced entry that began at Christ's baptism, reaches a climax as the temple is broken open and plundered and God is released. And suddenly God is at work in a new way, reaching out beyond the confines of Israel. And the first witness to this is a Gentile, Roman soldier. It is he who confesses the truth about who Jesus is.

All this gives us a very special connection to that centurion, you and I here this evening, a multi-racial throng drawn from nations all over the world. What unites and what connects us to that centurion is our confession that joins with his: 'truly this was God's Son!' Of course, as the centuries went by the meaning of God's Son was given deeper, more profound meaning. As Christians reflected on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus they found new insights, new truth. They found new ways of explaining what was happening on the cross, what it all meant. And so we come to see in the darkness that covered the land from midday until three in the afternoon the darkness of evil, the darkness of all that comes between us and God, all that separates us from our Maker, the darkness that threatens us. And when Jesus calls out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' we understand God in his Son Jesus penetrating into the very depths of that darkness, invading the far extremes of God-forsakenness. And in so doing he is bringing the presence of God to that place of God's absence; he is shining the light of God into deepest darkness. No matter how deep we might sink, the light of his presence is there. And that means, in the words of Paul, that there is nothing – nothing in heaven, nothing on earth, nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And all that – all that good news – is summed up in the centurion's confession at the foot of the cross.

Faced with a Good Friday world, a world where the darkness still descends, and where the cross is all too often a symbol of human life, this is a good day to join our voices with the centurion's, and to acknowledge with him, 'truly this was God's son'. Amen.

Living God,
not confined to some holy place,
not restricted to some religious compartment
but released and let loose in the world,
we pray for that world today on this Good Friday.
We think today of the distortions of religion,
the way in which religion was used to crucify
the Son of God.

O God, lead all people of faith into deeper truth;
help us to show your love to the world,
teach us the things that work for peace
and may we be a force for peace and reconciliation
rather than conflict...

O God on this day of crucifixion of an innocent man
we pray for prisoners of conscience,
for victims of injustice,
for those wrongly imprisoned.
We pray that justice may prevail and captives find release...

O God, Good Friday takes us to a violent world,
a world where life is cheap and devalued
by power misused and abused;
where people are tortured
and human lives of infinite value are snuffed out
by bombs and bullets and gas attacks.
We pray for governments and rulers,
that they may defend the dignity and worth of all...

O God of good Friday,
uphold the cause of justice,
defend the cause of peace,
empower the powerless
and bring truth and salvation.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen