

This coming Sunday, the fifth in Lent, marks a sort of mood swing in the Lenten journey. We now start to look more intensely towards the Passion, the suffering and death of Jesus. Not for the first time, if you recall our Lent course last year (still available on the website with the imaginative graphics) and a journey through Holy Week the previous year, both following the account as told by Mark, the first to write a Gospel, I would like today and next week to offer some perspectives on Jesus' death on the cross.

The Gospels tell us, with variations in the story, that Jesus was crucified between two other criminals. Mark and Matthew specifically call them 'bandits,' meaning insurgents, guerrillas or freedom fighters, depending on your perspective. Their presence adds stress to crucifixion as a specific form of execution reserved for those who refused to accept Roman imperial authority, and it was always public to serve as a deterrent – 'this is how we deal with those who oppose us.' Crucifixion was not used for ordinary criminals, certainly not thieves, as these two characters have often been called. We also read earlier, that another bandit, Barabbas, was released in place of Jesus. Jesus suffered the fate of one who opposed the imperial regime. He was executed. Crucified.

Mark, followed by Matthew, includes a striking scene as Jesus dies. The Roman centurion (and for Matthew, the soldiers with him) declare that 'Truly, this man was Son of God.' It is remarkable because, according to Roman imperial theology, Caesar, the emperor was 'Son of God. He was also Lord, Saviour, the bringer of peace on earth. But here through its representatives, the Roman Empire testifies against itself. It affirms that this man Jesus, crucified by the empire, is the Son of God. Thus, the emperor, Caesar is not!

The three Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke) all record that when Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two. As with the darkness covering the land for three hours, this reference is best understood symbolically rather than something someone remembered happening. It has two meanings. Firstly, it is a judgement on the temple authorities who had collaborated with the Romans to bring about the death of Jesus. Secondly, while the temple curtain signified a barrier between the people and God, which could only be bridged by the mediation of priests, the death of Jesus signified that access to God was now clearly available to all. In an important sense, Jesus had replaced the temple in his own person.

For us, as we reflect on the death of Jesus, we must understand that it provides us with a powerful symbol of transformation. We too, as Christians are on a journey to death and to resurrection. While that is central to our faith and hope for sharing the fullness of life with Christ once our earthly life comes to an end, it also signifies a pattern for our life in this world. Being Christian calls us to live a life in which we gradually die to sin - to the old life of convention and compromise, in order to rise, following Christ to a new life centred in God, thus living by the intention of our baptism. St Paul puts this very strongly in his letters, particularly to the Galatians where he writes, 'With Christ I am crucified and yet I am alive, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.' (Gal. 2: 20)

The most important meaning of the death of Jesus is as a revelation of supreme love of God for us. Without this understanding it does not make much sense. Paul and the other early Christians saw Jesus as the decisive revelation of God. In Jesus, his life, love, teachings and healings, all that he was about, we see what God is like. In Jesus' passion for the kingdom of God and his challenge to the powers of his day at the risk of his own life, we see the depth and breadth of God's love for us. The incarnation, God coming among us in the person of Jesus was an act of divine generosity, of compassion and solidarity with humanity and all our experiences. The death of Jesus reveals that God is with us not only in our life but also in our suffering and death.

In life and death, Jesus is the clearest sign that God is passionate about us, that God wants us to live in union with him, and while we are on this earth to work in partnership with him to heal and to transform this world.

Next week. What does it really mean to say that Jesus 'died for our sins?'

A prayer for this Sunday:

God of life, let us hear again today the Good News, that through your living image, Jesus Christ, love is stronger than death. Help us to walk with him the way of the cross, the way from death to life, in this world and in eternity. Give us hearts of compassion for one another as you are compassionate towards us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

