

SERMON SERIES ON MARK'S GOSPEL – WEEK SEVEN

Readings: Mark 14: 55-65; Mark 15: 25, 33-39; Mark 16: 1-8

May I speak now in the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, here we are, the final week of our seven week sermon series on Mark's gospel. Thank goodness it's the end, some of you might be thinking, we can now go back to the normal lectionary. Or you might be thinking, it's rather a shame to be ending this series, I've learnt so much from it all. Or, I don't really care too much either way, as long as the preacher doesn't drone on for too long. So, I'll try not to do that, but before we get into this week's readings, I thought it might be useful if we reminded ourselves what we have covered so far. If you have been around for any of the previous sermons over the past six weeks, now's your chance to shine and dazzle us with your amazing memory! So, to start us off this morning, I wonder if anyone here can remind us what Rachel preached about six weeks ago on 7th June? (*the introduction to Mark's gospel; John the Baptist; the baptism and temptation of Jesus; the calling of the first disciples, and the healing of a man with an evil spirit*). What about the second Sunday, when Marion was with you? (*Jesus' attitude to the Sabbath; Jesus' relationship to his family; and his stilling of the storm on the lake*). Then on 21st June, I was here, what did I preach on? (*Jesus' healing of a woman with a haemorrhage; the sending out of the twelve disciples; and Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees regarding their religious rituals*). On the last Sunday of June, I think it was Mike again (*he preached on the nature of Jesus' identity; the Transfiguration; and Jesus' identification of greatness with service*). The fifth Sunday sermon was given by Marion, what did she preach on? (*What might get in the way of following Jesus – our wealth, our status; Jesus' cleansing of the temple; and the story of the widow's mite*). Last Sunday, Marion looked at what? (*Jesus teaching about the Temple, his sharing of the Passover meal with his disciples, and his arrest in Gethsemane*). So, finally, this morning I will be looking at the climax to Mark's gospel with the accounts of Jesus' trial, his death on the cross, and his subsequent resurrection from the dead. So here goes....

Mark's account of Jesus' trial in chapter 14 makes for some very interesting and also disturbing reading. For it records not a standard trial but more like a so-called 'kangaroo court', in which the accused is dealt with in a hurried and unjust manner. So who comprised this particular court then? The Jewish court which tried Jesus was the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court at Jerusalem. Its 71 councillors came from influential families who were elders, lawyers, Pharisees and Sadducees, and the high priest for the year (in this case Caiaphas) presided over it. The Sanhedrin had wide powers in civil and religious matters in Judea, but whilst it could pass the death sentence (for blasphemy, for example), under Roman law it was not able to carry this out. Hence Jesus gets passed onto the Roman governor, Pilate, following this trial. So what was wrong with Jesus' trial then? It was held at night, not the usual daytime; there were no defence witnesses; and the prosecution witnesses, according to Mark, could not agree on their story. And the death sentence, which should not have been pronounced till the day following the trial, was immediate. Jesus didn't stand a chance, it seemed, the odds were heavily weighted against him. There is for Mark this sense of impending doom in relation to Jesus – he can't escape his fate even if he wants to – and yet he is also pictured as willingly doing his Father's will.

The death of Jesus in Mark chapter 15 again makes for some harrowing reading. Crucifixion was a standard method of capital punishment used by the Romans, and the crosses by the roads leading into Jerusalem were a constant reminder to any who dared to flout the imperial law of the fate that awaited them. For three hours Jesus hangs on the cross in the heat of the morning sun – if you have been to Palestine, you'll know just how hot it can get. And then at noon, darkness comes over the land for the next three hours. What caused this we don't know (it wouldn't have been a solar eclipse since there was a full moon at Passover) but its timing is clearly supernatural. The physical darkness represents the spiritual darkness as Jesus bears the weight of the world's sin upon the cross and experiences being cut off from his heavenly Father. Hence he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Mark uses here the Hebrew words of the first verse of Psalm 22, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabacthani?", a Psalm that begins with despair and as yet, as Jesus would have known, ends in hope. Did Jesus know how it all was going to end, with the triumph of the cross over sin and death expressed through the new life of the resurrection, or was this just a faint hope? When he gives his final cry before death, was this a cry of despair or a cry of victory? We don't know, but we do know that his suffering and sense of abandonment was real. But as if to emphasise that the victory is God's, we are told by Mark that the temple curtain, dividing the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place, is torn into two. The inner sanctuary was only frequented once a year by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. The ripping of the temple curtain emphasizes that Jesus' death has opened up the way to God once more, now all can access an individual relationship with God, including you and me.

And finally, we move on in Mark chapter 16 to the resurrection of Jesus, not that much is actually said about this at all. The abrupt ending to the gospel at verse eight with the women fleeing the tomb and being too afraid to tell anyone is not the text book story ending, which is more like what the other gospels enjoy, people meeting Jesus and experiencing fellowship with him. Some later versions of this gospel do continue for another twelve verses and give us more in common with the other gospels but the most ancient versions of the text do not. So the women are left with some surprising news, that Jesus has been raised, and they are not quite sure what to make of it, other than the clue given by the 'young man', probably an angel, in verse seven, "He is going ahead of you to Galilee". In other words, Jesus is going back to the place where his public ministry started three years earlier and he is inviting them to come and meet him there (with the other disciples), to meet him in the ordinary, everyday events of life. For those are the places where most of us will encounter Jesus most of the time – not at the holy sites in the holy land, if we are able to go there – but in our Galilees – Waitrose, Tesco, Christchurch Meadows, our places of work, our homes here in Caversham.

I would like to leave you, as ever, with three things to think about from our readings today. Firstly, in relation to Jesus' trial. Have we ever been to court? I have been once, back in the early nineties on account of my refusal to pay the poll tax, an act of solidarity from one who could afford to pay to those who could not and who were being hit hard by it in the inner city London borough in which I lived at the time. I think I was fairly treated in my court appearance though I felt the legislation was unjust. What about you? Have you ever been to court, and what was it like for you? Were you fairly treated, or did you feel that you got the thin end of the wedge, like Jesus did, and as we know others have done in the past, both in this country and abroad. Secondly, in relation to Jesus' suffering on the cross. Have we ever felt abandoned by God? Perhaps we might feel abandoned by Him now, let down by him on account of the suffering that we or others we know are going through? Does the hope at the end of Psalm 22 help us when we are in despair, or not? I can't say that I have ever felt

abandoned by God even though there have been times in my life when things have seemed pretty grim. I'm fortunate, I think, to have always retained a sense of belief in God, even if I have not been sure what I believe about the Almighty. But if your experience is of feeling abandoned by God, then perhaps you might be able to take heart from this passage that Christ is alongside you in your suffering, even if you're not sure that things will get any better. Sometimes we perhaps have to experience forsakenness in order to experience true hope and real joy, just as Jesus did. Thirdly, in relation to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Does the prospect of resurrection, new life after death, make us fearful or give us hope? If we are afraid, like the women were, what might we need in order for Jesus to transform that fear for us? If we are hopeful, can we tell others about Jesus by taking him into our everyday lives, into our Galilees?

So, to conclude, we have today finished our journeys through Mark's gospel by looking again at its final events – the trial of Jesus; Jesus' death on the cross; and his resurrection from the dead. Thank you for making this journey through Mark over the course of the past seven weeks, or for however long you have been part of it for. And thank you too for journeying with me through my time in this parish. As Community Priest here, one of my key focuses has been on trying to find ways of enabling others to take a step forward on a journey of discovery about Jesus. The best way we can all do that is by sharing with others the experience of our journeys – of how Christ has been real to us through the ups and downs of life, if that has been true for us. May God bless you as you seek to share your gospel – your good news about Jesus – with others in the days, weeks, months and years ahead. Amen.

Let us pray...

Loving God, thank you for Jesus' triumph over death. Thank you for the writers, like Mark, who passed down the good news of Jesus, each in their own way. Help us as we seek to be living embodiments of good news to others for the sake of your kingdom, here on earth as in heaven. Amen.