

## The death of Jesus: the end of the world (Mark 15: 33-47)

### **The Death of Jesus**

33 When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. <sup>34</sup>At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' <sup>35</sup>When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' <sup>36</sup>And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' <sup>37</sup>Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. <sup>38</sup>And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup>Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

40 There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. <sup>41</sup>These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

### **The Burial of Jesus**

42 When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, <sup>43</sup>Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. <sup>44</sup>Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. <sup>45</sup>When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. <sup>46</sup>Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. <sup>47</sup>Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

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## Commentary

### **Setting the scene**

Mark has set the scene for Jesus' final hours with care. The crucified Jesus is raised up as a failed revolutionary against Rome with the charge, "The King of the Jews" proclaiming both his crime and his abject failure to change anything. The mockery of the crowds is significant: the passers-by recall his electrifying denunciation of the temple and his prophecy of its destruction (13:2); the chief priests and scribes deride his claim to messiahship (14:62) and his failure to be the Davidic liberator that the crowds acclaimed him to be (11:9-10); the bandits on either side of him taunt him for his failure to fight for his revolution. As we hear the taunting cries of "Give us something to believe in! Surely *this* can't be it?", we witness the complete rejection of the way of Jesus by occupied Palestine – the apparent "subjects" of the "King of

Israel". And we empathise with them enough to want to demand of Mark, "What price your Good News of Jesus the Liberator, the Son of God?" (1:1)

### **Mark's Jesus: martyr, exemplar or saviour?**

One possibility is that Mark presents Jesus as a *martyr* whose death will gather people to his cause. In this sense, he is the "seed" that is planted and will grow and flourish because of his death. He is certainly *not less* than a martyr who dies for God's message and vision of the Kingdom. He follows in the "prophetic martyr" tradition – being killed for speaking truth to power. Mark has already connected his crucifixion to the death of John the Baptist, as well as through the public speculation about Jesus' identity: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets (8:28). Finally, there is the parable of the wicked tenants: the "servants" sent by the landowner are the prophets, and Jesus is the son – the final messenger.

Yet Mark's clear emphasis is on the *difference* between Jesus and the prophetic martyrs. Twice, Jesus' unique relationship to God has been revealed with the "opening of the heavens" – the two apocalyptic moments of his baptism and transfiguration: Jesus is the beloved Son. Jesus lays the same stress on his own mission in the parable of the wicked tenants: "Finally (*eschaton*) he sent his beloved son" (12:6). There is an eschatological finality to Jesus' death that sets it apart from the prophetic martyrs of Jewish history: killing the Son is something of a different order to murdering the "servants" who have been sent previously. If Jesus is only a martyr, he is only one more chapter in the tragic history of the triumph of Empire over God's Kingdom; nothing is changed.

A second possibility is that Mark's Jesus is an *exemplar* – an example to be followed. He is certainly *not less* than that: his call to take up the cross is a call to *follow*. Jesus' example is precisely what Mark is urging his own church to follow in their own context of the Great Revolt. As long as Empire dictates the way the world works, it needs to be resisted in the name of Jesus and the Kingdom. To follow Jesus is to bear that cost – to take on the consequences of opposing Empire in the same way that Jesus does.

Again, however, we need to take on board Mark's clear emphasis on the uniqueness of Jesus' crucifixion in the purposes of God. This is the point of his Gethsemane narrative: Jesus embraces the cross in faith, trusting that this is what his Father (*Abba*) calls him to do. He does so utterly alone: the disciples sleep (14:37, 40) and end up fleeing for their lives (14:50). He dies in the conviction that God, too, has abandoned him (15:34).

If the Kingdom is made possible by Jesus' death, as Mark wants to tell us it is, it is because of the uniqueness of Jesus' faithfulness. That his followers can "find their lives by losing them" (ie in walking the Way of the Cross) is possible only because of Jesus' submission to the cross, not because of their own. To read St Paul's words, "For it is by grace that you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2: 8-9) through a Markan lens is to hear him say, "Your salvation comes as an

undeserved gift of mercy-love from God. You have been saved by participation in the faithfulness of Jesus in taking up his cross – not by your own Walking The Way!”

Mark’s Good News (1:1) is that Jesus is *more than* a prophetic martyr and exemplar: he is the Messiah, the *saviour*. He has come to liberate the world from slavery to Empire and Satan – he has come to “ransack the house of the Strong Man” and destroy the powers that are ranged against God’s Kingdom. This is the world of Rome (the latest manifestation of Empire) that makes the world hell on earth for the poorest and most vulnerable, and seduces and co-opts even the temple and the Jewish monarchy as its agents of oppression.

Jesus has strongly resisted the title, “Messiah”, because of its popular imperial connotations of Davidic monarchy and military victory. When Peter says to him at Caesarea Philippi, “You are the Messiah!” Jesus’ immediate response is to silence him (as he has the demons who identify him) and to make the first of the three passion predictions (8:31). When Peter takes Jesus aside and tells him off for this ending to the messianic story, Jesus responds by calling Peter “Satan” (8:33). The only point at which he has been prepared to own that title has been, as we have seen, at his trial before the Sanhedrin (15:62). He then quotes Daniel 7:13 (a): “... and you shall see the Son of Man, ‘seated at the right hand of the Power’ and ‘coming in the clouds of heaven!’” (15:62). Jesus, the Messiah, is not the Son of David, but the suffering Son of Man (cf Mark 10:45).

Daniel was written to sustain a despairing Jewish nation under yet another occupation. It is underground political literature: it promises the people that, despite all appearance of Empire’s invincibility, God will destroy its power. We need to recall the dramatic context of Daniel’s vision of the Four Beasts in chapter 7. The four beasts are world empires (7:17). The final beast, with ten horns, has “human eyes and a mouth” (ie it is the human face of the demonic powers of Empire). It is supremely “arrogant” (7:8, 20). Yet its very arrogance provokes Yahweh to act – to judge the beast and pronounce its death sentence (7:10-11). This is the context in which the Son of Man is given “dominion, glory and kingship” by Yahweh (7:14).

This is the key to Mark’s presentation of Jesus as the Messiah: Rome, in Jesus’ eyes, is the fourth beast of Daniel’s vision, arrogant and invincible. Its crowning arrogance is most visible in its apparent triumph over Jesus – in supposing that his crucifixion is a demonstration that God has lost the battle for “dominion and kingship” (ie the Kingdom). This is the “arrogance” that will provoke God to act – to pass the death sentence on Empire. Ironically, it will happen as a direct result of its so-called “triumph”: Jesus’ messianic suffering and death will prove to be the undoing of its power. Jesus is indeed the “King of Israel” – the Messiah-Liberator – because he does *not* come down from the cross. And his faithfulness is the means by which God breaks the power of Empire. This is the meaning of Jesus’ statement about his death: “For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many!” (Mark 10:45)

### **The great reversal**

Mark's account of the crucifixion is unlike Luke's and John's: Jesus does nothing but hang on the cross. This is his act of faithfulness – his refusal to succumb to the taunts of the bystanders to “come down from the cross, so that we might believe”. He hangs in mute silence for 6 hours, then gives a great cry of despair and protest: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” A few minutes later, he gives a second “great cry” and dies.

The key to what is accomplished by his death is in understanding what God is doing in response to Jesus' faithfulness. Mark recounts two actions of God: the cosmic darkness at noon (15:33) and the tearing of the temple curtain (15:38). The first is the divine response to Jesus' crucifixion; the second to his death.

#### *The structure of Mark's narrative*

Ched Myers notes how carefully Mark constructs his narrative around these two key moments:

God's first judgment: darkness for 3 hours

Jesus' first cry in a “great voice”: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

Bystanders: “See – he is calling for Elijah!”

Man offers sour wine: “Let us see if Elijah comes”

Jesus' second cry in a “loud voice”: Jesus dies

God's second judgment: tearing the temple curtain

God's first judgment of **cosmic darkness** echoes Exodus 10:22 – the war between Yahweh and Pharaoh, where Yahweh blotted out the sun in Egypt (the first Empire) for three days as repudiation of the imperial order, legitimized by worship of the sun god, Ra. It also echoes Jesus' words in 13:24, prophesying the collapse of the world order represented by the temple. The cosmic order, represented by Rome, is unraveling at the precise moment when Rome is apparently and arrogantly triumphant.

*Jesus' first “great cry”: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”*

It is also the darkness of despair: there will be no divine rescue. Sour wine mixed with mash was the soldiers' standard fare. The man who offers Jesus the wine is saying, “Let's try and keep him going for a little while longer, to give Elijah a chance to rescue him!” But it is too late: this is the precise moment at which Jesus dies. Elijah will *not* come to “take Jesus down”. Elijah/John the Baptist has already been killed: he, like every other servant, has suffered the same fate at the hands of the wicked tenants.

This, too, is Jesus' fate. The darkness means that heaven is closed. There is no comforting divine voice reassuring Jesus that he is the beloved Son, as there had been at his baptism and transfiguration. This terrifying absence of God is what Jürgen Moltmann calls, “the suffering within suffering”. Walking the Way of the Cross smashes the intimacy of Jesus' relationship to the God whom he called “Abba”.

If Mark has a theology of the crucified Jesus as sin-bearer, it is in his sharing of God's judgment on the world order of Empire ("sin"), whose victim Jesus has willingly become. Jesus shares in the world order of rebellion against God's Kingdom (sin), not as a perpetrator of that rebellion, but as its *victim*. His death is sacrificial because he offers his life willingly. His life is not "being rendered to Caesar", as Rome proclaims, but to God as a sacrifice of faithfulness to the Kingdom. Rome and the temple cannot defeat or extinguish the Kingdom that is embodied in Jesus, God's Son.

But this means that Jesus is equally "in the dark". He experiences God's cosmic judgment on the world order of Empire along with everyone else. We need to be very careful here not to import "purity language" about sin and forgiveness into Mark's account. This privatized, individualized conception of personal holiness was precisely the theology of the Purity System that left the structures of oppression and poverty intact and strengthened, and to which Jesus was so implacably opposed. We have seen throughout his story how Mark talks about sin and repentance in terms of structures that imprison, rather than in terms of an offence to God's holiness. Mark presents Jesus as the liberator from sin, not as somehow bearing God's punishment for it. That is because God's purpose in judgment is not to satisfy outraged holiness, but so that the New World of the Kingdom can be born out of the death of the Old World of Empire. Jesus, God's Son, is the Messiah-Liberator because *God* is the Great Liberator of a world sold into slavery.

Jesus' death is the moment for God's second judgment: ***tearing the temple curtain***. The verb "to tear" (*skidzo*) is significant: it is the same word Mark uses to describe the tearing open of the heavens at Jesus' baptism, when Jesus sees the Spirit descending and hears the divine announcement, "You are my Son, the Beloved" (1:10). It is an apocalyptic term that signals God's verdict on the events taking place on earth. God "tears open" in order to reveal the truth of things, which are otherwise hidden from human sight.

Here on Golgotha, we have Mark's third "apocalyptic moment" of revelation. The first two were Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. On Golgotha, however, it is not the heavens that God tears, but the temple curtain. This was the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple building. The temple cult - including forgiveness of sins (2: 5-11) - was interpreted in terms of the Purity Code, against which Jesus had protested so consistently and vehemently because it was a system that exploited the poor, gave power, wealth and influence to its officers, and was in hock to Rome. It was a "den of robbers" that, in Jesus' view, was demonic and needed exorcising.

His exorcism of the temple had triggered the final chapter of disputes about where his authority for opposing the religious system came from (11:28). Jesus' response had been to ask the chief priests, scribes and elders first to tell him whether John's baptism had human or divine authority, and they had dodged the question. The tearing of the temple curtain is God's answer to the temple authorities: Jesus speaks

and acts with God's authority when he pronounced his verdict on the temple system.

#### *Golgotha: the temple vs Jesus' body*

The disputes in the temple culminate in Jesus' prophecy of its destruction (13:2). It is terminally corrupt; its soul has been sold to the Old World of Empire. The tearing of the temple curtain is God's confirmation that Jesus is right. The torn curtain is the "old cloth" (2:21) that cannot be repaired; it cannot be patched with the "new cloth" of the Kingdom, but has to be thrown away.

The mocking crowds at the cross have echoed the accusation made at Jesus' trial about destroying and rebuilding the temple (14:58/15:29). Mark is extremely ironic: Jesus' accusers are "wrong but right"! Jesus did not say he would "destroy the temple in three days and build another, not made with hands" (14:58). Yet Jesus' death is the moment at which *God* passes judgment on the temple. And of course, we are meant to hear in the "three days" the three days between his death and resurrection, as per the passion predictions.

If his death is the moment at which the old order of the temple "dies" by God's decree, with what will it be replaced? Mark's answer is, "Jesus' body!" Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross literally embodies the true meaning and role of the temple. The temple ought to have been the embodiment of the Kingdom – the visible manifestation of God's nature and intentions for the world; instead, it had resisted the Kingdom to the point of condemning Jesus to death as a blasphemer. It is the crucified, dead Jesus who embodies and reveals God's nature and intentions – who "brings heaven down to earth". As the temple embodied the Old Covenant, Jesus embodies and effects through his death the destruction of the temple order. In three days, he will be raised and embody the New World of the Kingdom. The temple of the New Covenant is Jesus, crucified and risen. His body is the New Covenant in the broken body and shed blood (14:22-24) of the Son of Man, who has come to serve, and "to give his life as a ransom for many".

#### **The aftermath: who are the disciples of the crucified Jesus?**

Mark presents us with three possibilities: the Roman centurion; the three women (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome); and Joseph of Arimathea. Christian tradition has seen all three as disciples. Mark's narrative doesn't support that interpretation.

#### *The Roman centurion*

Is the statement by the Roman centurion, "Truly, this man was the Son of God!" a confession of faith? Is the Roman officer responsible for overseeing the crucifixion of Jesus the first Christian convert? It's a deliciously tempting culmination of Rome's apparent "triumph": what greater reversal of the world order could there be?

Mark is keenly aware of the irony here: his gospel begins with the announcement that Jesus is the Messiah who has come to declare war on Rome in the name of God; that God's Kingdom, rather than Rome, will rule the world eternally; and that Jesus,

not Caesar, is to be worshipped as the true Son of God. That the story of Jesus' death ends with Rome's representative declaring that Jesus is "truly the Son of God" is as deliberately ironic as it could be.

That is not the same thing as telling us that the Roman centurion became a disciple of Jesus. Two points point compellingly in a different direction. The first is that Mark does not go on to recount that the centurion resigned his commission and joined the other disciples. This is significant: at every point in his narrative, he has emphasized the change that "conversion" brings about (eg Levi, the Gadarene and Bartimaeus). At the same time, he has been at pains to underscore the point that "theological correctness" that does not issue in giving everything up in order to follow Jesus (what Mark understands by "repentance") is not discipleship (eg the rich man and the scribe in 12:28-34, who is told by Jesus that he "is not far from the Kingdom"). It is inconceivable that Mark would not have told his readers about the dramatic change in the centurion's position and life that conversion and discipleship would have entailed.

Secondly, and even more significantly, Mark has recounted incidents in which the demons correctly identify Jesus, without any suggestion that this amounts to a confession of faith and discipleship! Similarly, his Passion narrative is soaked in titles for Jesus which he puts on the lips of Jesus' opponents (King of the Jews, Messiah, Holy One of God, Son of God). This is Markan irony: the being "wrong but ironically right" about Jesus – giving the titles their wrong content, but being correct in applying them to Jesus. Throughout Mark's gospel, in other words, it is possible to use the correct titles for Jesus and be his enemy.

If we are to grant the centurion the sincere admiration in his statement that Mark implies, but without seeing it as a confession of faith, how should we read it? Rome was sophisticated in its religious plurality and tolerance. In a world of many "tribal gods", military victory was seen as the divine triumph of one god over another. Rome's gods had prevailed over all other gods, so they could be confident in their own imperial theology, while allowing the worship of other "tribal gods" by the people they vanquished. They required only that people make sacrifices to the Emperor and acknowledge him as the Son of God (ie divine).

We might therefore read the centurion as saying something like, "This man is truly the son of the god whom he serves. But his god, like every other god, is powerless against Rome. I admire him – but I am only more convinced than ever that Rome's gods are mine, and that I acknowledge the true Son of God – Caesar!" It is more likely, in other words, that he is (wrongly) declaring that Rome's imperial gods have triumphed over Jesus' God of the Kingdom, than he is making a dramatic statement of conversion.

#### *Joseph of Arimathea*

Is Joseph the Nicodemus-type "secret disciple because of fear of the Jews" – a member of the Sanhedrin who is covertly a follower of Jesus – of John's gospel and traditional Christian interpretation? Again, Mark's narrative makes this reading

difficult to sustain, and we do violence to Mark's story if we do not recognize the significant difference between John and Mark at this point. Mark has told us tirelessly that the threat to survival does not let the would-be disciple off the hook: it is the cost of following Jesus that must be borne.

Mark describes Joseph as "a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the Kingdom of God" (15:43). The argument is made that, in asking for the body of Jesus and burying him in the tomb, he was ensuring that Jesus' body was treated with devotion and a respect and that was not normally afforded to victims of crucifixion: they would be left on the cross for wild animals to tear apart, and their remains would ultimately be thrown on to the rubbish heap in the valley of Gehenna outside Jerusalem.

Yet again, Mark's narrative of discipleship should cause us to pause: if he was truly a disciple of Jesus, and shared Jesus' vision of the Kingdom, how could he remain a member of the council? Where had his respected, dissenting voice been when "All the council condemned Jesus as deserving of death" (14:64)? We do not have to assume he was motivated by the same greed and lust for power that drove the council's opposition to Jesus; it is far more likely that he genuinely believed that Jesus was a dangerous blasphemer, precisely because he shared the Sanhedrin's theology of the Kingdom that was opposed to that of Jesus.

A more plausible reading is that Mark presents Joseph as the agent of the Sanhedrin, anxious to bring about a speedy closure to the whole "Jesus episode" to avoid any risk of him being seen by the crowds as a martyr, and rekindle any remains of the popular support that had posed such a threat. He goes to Pilate, not to frustrate the plans of the council, but as their spokesperson. The fact that he has to petition Pilate for the body underscores Mark's emphasis on the temple's collusion with Rome and complicity in Jesus' murder. We need to note his actions:

- The haste to bury Jesus is driven by Sabbath observance (15:42). That fact alone should cause alarm: dispute over Sabbath observance has been a repeated and central theme of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. Joseph is acting in concert with the very system of Sabbath observance that Jesus repudiated so trenchantly: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath! Therefore, the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath!" (2:27). That in itself should throw up warning flags against reading discipleship into his actions at this point. Even more so, we ought to see Mark's critical irony at work here: the Sanhedrin can be scrupulous in its Sabbath observance about avoiding pollution, yet has just been responsible for crucifying Jesus! The crucified Lord of the Sabbath is being shut away in a tomb as an act of Sabbath purity.
- Joseph – not Elijah, or even Jesus' disciples - takes down the body of Jesus from the cross. He does so in order to bury Jesus. While this may be seen as a possible act of devotion, it can equally be read as the conclusion of Rome's



and the Sanhedrin's "triumph" over Jesus: the Sanhedrin did the work of binding Jesus and bringing him to Caesar's representative; now they will complete the dirty work of disposing of his body.

- Joseph buys a linen cloth in which to wrap (bind) the dead Jesus. The word translated as "honorable/respected" (*euschemon*) also carries with it the sense of affluence: Joseph is likely to have been a wealthy landowner, who buries Jesus in his own private tomb (as Christian tradition recounts). That should cause us to pause: Jesus has been fiercely critical of the way in which the religious leaders amassed personal wealth at the expense of the poor. He has told a wealthy would-be disciple to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, and his disciples that it is impossible for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom. We should also recognize Mark's symbolism: the linen cloth represents the faithlessness of the disciples. Joseph's action emphasizes the desolation of the ending of Jesus' story: he is abandoned by his disciples, abandoned by God, and wrapped in faithlessness as he is hurriedly shut in the tomb.
- Joseph lays Jesus in the tomb and seals it with a rock. Mark has emphasized the need to rush because of the Sabbath. Joseph does not attend to the burial rites and observances prescribed in Jewish law. Jesus is placed in the tomb, unanointed, and the tomb sealed. This is hardly an act of devotion. The rock is not meant to be a temporary protection until the women can carry out the burial rituals on the day following the Sabbath. Mark makes it clear that the rock is a huge problem for the women: how will they get into a sealed tomb? Joseph has made no provision for that – unthinkable, if his intention as a secret disciple is to honour Jesus by his burial. He rolls the stone in place as the final nail in Jesus' coffin: the Sanhedrin's work in getting rid of Jesus is complete. The rebellion he embodies has been contained. Jesus, rather than the Strong Man, has been bound. Empire has won; the status quo is intact; nothing has changed.

That Mark intends us to read his story in this way is given further emphasis by the three women, who have watched Jesus die and watched as he is sealed in the tomb (15:47). They form the narrative bridge between Good Friday and Easter Sunday: they come to do for Jesus what Joseph has so conspicuously *not* done – to honour him by anointing his body. And the stone that Joseph has put in place on behalf of the Sanhedrin (not the disciples!) is the problem they expect to encounter.

#### *The women disciples*

It is these three women whom Mark presents as the true disciples of the crucified Jesus. He names them as the three representatives of a larger crowd of women (15:40-41), in parallel to the way in which Peter, James and John have functioned as representatives of The Twelve. Mark is unflinching in his portrayal of Jesus' male disciples: they resist the Way of the Cross at every point; they desert Jesus when he needs them most; they are nowhere to be seen on Golgotha; they do not fulfill their

obligation to care for the body of the dead Jesus; they are not at the tomb on Easter Sunday.

By contrast, he emphasizes that the women disciples have followed Jesus faithfully to the end. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses (presumably Jesus' own mother) and Salome had followed him and provided for him Galilee (15:41). Along with "many other women", they had followed Jesus from the Galilee up to Jerusalem. They have followed him on his journey from Pilate's residence to Golgotha; they have watched his crucifixion; they have kept vigil through the hours of darkness; they have watched Jesus being taken down from the cross, and followed his journey all the way to the tomb. And at first light on Easter Sunday, they will make the journey to the tomb, determined to care for Jesus' body with love and honour, undeterred by the rock that has been used to seal the dead Jesus into his burial cave.

We need not to miss the gender politics in play; they are certainly not lost on Mark. And yet it seems extraordinary that we have heard so much about the male disciples and their resistance to the Way of the Cross during the journey of Jerusalem, but nothing about the sizeable crowd of women who have been following faithfully along that same road. Their earlier absence during the narrative is suddenly and startlingly conspicuous because they appear at this point in story without prior warning.

We need to acknowledge that this imbalance in Mark's narrative is due to the fact that he is a male author, writing in a society and about a society that is patriarchal and chauvinistic. Their absence in the narrative reflects the women's place in their society: they were not decision-makers and agents, but the possession of their fathers and then husbands – and if necessary, their late husbands' brothers. They were there to be of service – principally in producing children, and particularly in providing male heirs. They are absent from Mark's narrative because his default mode is not to notice them; they are not worth writing about. Mark's story is primarily a story about men.

Mark has done us a disservice by their exclusion. It has taken us more than 2,000 to learn that a story about men – even the story of Jesus – is only half a story. It is precisely their exclusion from the narrative until now that alerts us to the fact that it is half a story; that the size and significance of the contribution by women are glaringly absent from the mainstream of Mark's narrative. We need, therefore, to pay very close attention indeed to the exceptions to that rule – to the places (such as here) where women force their way into the story in a way that even Mark has to take note.

Where women appear, they do so as examples of faith who "get" Jesus in significant ways and in sharp contrast to their male counterparts. To take three examples: the woman who touches Jesus' robe, believing that she will be healed; the Syrophenician woman, who teaches Jesus himself that God's grace is for the Gentiles as well as the Jews; and the woman who anoints Jesus at Bethany, who

alone understands her action as preparing Jesus for burial.

There is a parallel here between the women's response to Jesus and the reception Jesus gets from the poor and marginalized people. This is not because of some intrinsic merit or value in being either poor or a woman. Changing the material circumstances of poor people, or putting women in charge in place of men, is no guarantee that they will not begin to behave in precisely the same ways as their former oppressors did. But being poor in a wealthy society or a woman in a patriarchal one means that both are peculiarly receptive to Jesus' message of the Kingdom; both "have ears to hear".

This is because Jesus' gospel is a gospel of liberation, being heard by people whose place in the structures of power and influence mean they have nothing to lose by their world being turned upside down, and everything to gain. Jesus' proclamation of the world transformed into a place where the last come first and the first come last comes to them as pure gift, promise and Good News.

The Kingdom is Good News, first and foremost for *all* the excluded, marginalized and invisible people. What we discover as we read Mark's presentation of the women as the true disciples of the crucified Jesus is that Mark's half-story of Jesus is in fact also a story of liberation for women, despite what Mark himself may have realized, believed or intended. It is with these women that we wait for the end of the Sabbath – for Easter Sunday.

## Going deeper into the text (Mark 15: 33-47)

In his crucifixion narrative, Mark switches to the historical present tense, drawing the reader into the drama, as if to ask us where we stand. Is there not a part of us in each character here? A part that, like the male disciples, is wholly absent, having long ago abandoned Jesus at the first whiff confrontation? A part that, like the women, can only hold vigil, incredulous and numb with sorrow? And even a part that, like Jesus' detractors, joins in the protest against this ending? "Who indeed can believe" [Isaiah 53:1] that things have turned out this way? We might legitimately approach this cross with all those who have dared hope for a better world, especially those who have been crushed struggling for a justice that seems forever deferred, and demand an explanation. For who of us is prepared to accept that this is the way to liberation?

Attempting to face that question, many Christians who struggle for human rights have appropriated the ritual of Via Crucis (Way of the Cross) in new and creative ways. Whereas traditionally the "Stations of the Cross" offered the believer personal meditations on Jesus' trial, suffering, crucifixion, death, and burial - all designed for spiritual contemplation—now the same "Stations" are given a much broader scope.

These alternative liturgies have as their goal a linking of Jesus' journey to Golgotha

with the enormous suffering, both personal and social, represented in public places. Those who lead such modern variations of this ancient ritual are often themselves either victims or healers of the social evils being cited. Let us walk through a typical Via Crucis, which might be held in a city: See powerpoint

**Station One:** Jesus is condemned to death. The pilgrimage begins at an inner-city park where the homeless sleep, and the analogy is clear. Many of our brothers and sisters are condemned to a sub-human existence by an affluent society which has judged them to be disposable.

**Station Two:** Jesus takes up the cross. The procession moves to the city jail where day after day the condemned begin their own via crucis in a penal system that robs them of all dignity.

**Station Three:** Jesus falls. Outside an abandoned housing project, the pilgrims reflect on one more failure to provide adequate housing for the poor. This structure once stood as a symbol of social welfare, but now its broken windows and rotting floors testify to the indifference of society in the face of the down and out.

**Station Four:** Jesus meets his mother. In a particularly crime-infested area of the city a grandmother speaks of the children she has known who have had their lives cut short. She breaks into tears as she slowly names the boys and girls she has seen die from the greed and violence that result from drug trafficking and addiction.

**Station Five:** The cross is laid on Simon of Cyrene. A national coalition to abolish the death penalty takes responsibility for this stop on the way. They wage an incredible uphill battle to spare the lives of those condemned to die and to turn our society away from “killing to prevent killing.”

**Station Six:** Veronica wipes Jesus’ face. In the vestibule of a hospice for people with AIDS, a nurse recounts his experience with a dying patient on a previous Good Friday. He recalls holding the man in his arms during the last hours of his life, soothing his sores and assuaging his thirst.

**Station Seven:** Jesus falls again. On the sidewalk facing the Department of Justice, a public defender offers his reflections on the number of young people whom he has seen sent to jail after they fell back into crime. The lawyer points out that the criminal justice system too often aggravates the situation of ex-offenders by imposing on them the “two strikes and you're out” criterion.

**Station Eight:** Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem. The procession winds its way to the doorway of a bar that features “adult entertainment.” Women lead the prayer for other women; sisters weep for their exploited sisters; men examine their consciences with respect to their attitudes toward wives, daughters, indeed toward all women.

**Station Nine:** Jesus falls a third time. The procession moves to the offices of the

World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Analysts catalog the repeated failures of these institutions to remedy the devastating poverty of nearly two-thirds of the world's population. They cite statistics on the growing debt owed to these institutions by poor nations and ask why so many sisters and brothers around the world continue to fall deeper into poverty, misery, and hopelessness.

**Station Ten:** Jesus is stripped of his clothes. Spanish becomes the language now as prayers ascend on behalf of refugees whose dignity, sense of purpose, and humanity often disappear in the struggle to cope with a foreign culture.

**Station Eleven:** Jesus is nailed to the cross. Outside of the health clinic where she works a doctor reflects on the endless line of patients nailed to a health care system that has forgotten those who cannot pay. She speaks of the needless suffering caused by the insurance industry and about a medical establishment whose greed drives nails of pain even further into human flesh.

## All age worship ideas (Mark 15: 33-47)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

### 'Elvis has let the building...'

**Reflection** - As Jesus dies the temple curtain is torn in two from top to bottom. The conflict between Jesus and the state is over and though the cross might appear as a victory for the state the curtain proclaims that the victory belongs to Jesus. God is not contained or confined to a place only accessible by one person once a year. He is the God found not in the temple but in the sinful place, in the unclean areas, alongside the outcasts and the sinners.

This is not that God has been freed – he could never be imprisoned – but that people are now liberated from the trappings of narrow religion and purity laws and released are the tools for freedom from oppression and injustice.

This is the opening of the 'way' described in John 14 – it is through his death that Jesus has secured unfettered access to God for all people but essentially for those who had been previously denied. Through the once for all blood sacrifice comes the access to life in all its fullness.

**Idea/Prayer** – have some magazines and comics of differing thickness and a Yellow Pages if available. Have a mock competition to see who can tear up the comics and

magazines and test if anyone is willing to try a phone book.

When Jesus was tried and crucified it was because both religious leaders and Romans believed he had broken their laws. When the temple curtain is torn it was a bit like God tearing up the rule book. If Jesus's ministry was breaking the law then it was time for a new understanding – a fresh directive.

Today there are still all kinds of laws and economic and political systems that keep people in poverty, that hold back equality and deny the abundant life God has made available to everyone. Have a conversation about what 'rule books' or systems need to be torn up so that people can step into the way of freedom Jesus secured on the cross?

List those things on flipchart or if the congregation is large invite people in groups to write down the things they want 'torn up'.

Collect all the lists or fold up the large list and as part of the intercessions tear up the paper remembering to invite God to convict us of where we need to be actively challenging and/or campaigning against those things.

## Liturgies and hymns (Mark 15:33-47)

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

### Good Friday Prayer

O Holy God,  
the hosannas have died away,  
the palm branches have turned brittle.  
Now, today, there is only this –  
each of us,  
all of us,  
sitting in the darkness,  
the hymns of lament in the air,  
the mumblings of our own feeble confession,  
on this Friday  
which we tremble to call Good.

What is good about Good Friday?

What is good about the innocent one nailed to a cross?

What is good about the darkness of war that persists today?

What is good about our devastation of the planet?

... about people living in poverty?

... about the fog of addiction, depression, disease and despair?

What is good about the crushing weight of hunger, racism, scapegoating, apathy?

No, there is nothing good and desirable in these things.  
Yet you, O God, are Good.

When suffering reigns, yours is the first heart to break.  
When despair lurks about, we remember that you were there first,  
peering into the abyss and crying out, incredibly:  
"Father, forgive them."

When we feel forsaken, we remember that in your last moments,  
you cared for your mother and your beloved disciple,  
binding them to one another as a new family.

When we feel overcome by guilt, we remember that you spoke grace to a thief:  
"Today you will be with me in paradise."

Your love for us is just that boundless,  
and ever-present,  
and Good.  
Thank you.  
What else can we say here, in the dimness,  
in the darkness,  
but thank you.  
Amen.

*~ written by MaryAnn McKibben Dana, pastor of Idylwood Presbyterian Church in Falls Church, VA. Posted on LiturgyLink. <http://www.liturgylink.net/2012/04/04/good-friday-prayer-the-hosannas-have-died-away/>*

### **Prayer of Supplication for Good Friday**

God of love, we remember today all that our blessed Lord endured for us.  
Let us remember how Jesus was betrayed,  
and given up into the hands of wicked men ...

Lord Jesus, we remember today that it was one of  
Your own familiar friends who betrayed You,  
and we know that there is nothing that so breaks the heart  
as the disloyalty of one whom we call friend.  
Grant that we may not betray You.

Save us:  
From the cowardice that would disown You when it is hard to be true to You;  
From the disloyalty that betrays You in the hour

when You need some one to stand by You;  
From the fickleness that blows hot and cold in its devotion;  
From the fair-weather friendship that,  
when things are difficult or dangerous,  
makes us ashamed to show whose we are and whom we serve.

Let us remember how Jesus suffered death upon the Cross ...  
Lord Jesus, help us to remember the lengths  
to which Your love was ready to go;  
That having loved Your own You loved them to the very end;  
The love than which none can be greater,  
The love that lays down its life for its friends;  
That it was while people were yet enemies that You died for them.

Let us remember how Jesus now lives and reigns ...  
Help us to remember,  
That the crucified Lord is the Risen Lord;  
That the cross has become the Crown.

So grant unto us,  
to trust in His love and to live in His presence;  
that we may share in His glory.  
This we ask for Your love's sake. Amen.

~ written by William Barclay, and posted on Will  
Humes' **WJH** website. <http://willhumes.net/category/liturgy/>

### **where once**

feet that danced  
through the streets  
of Jerusalem  
welcoming the Messiah  
now softly pad  
the back alleys  
in search of shadows;

hearts that leapt  
with joy at the sight  
of David's true son  
are thrown out  
with Golgotha's  
garbage;

hands that wrapped  
a new born son



in bright bands of cloth  
now shroud  
his broken body  
and lay him  
gently,  
tenderly,  
softly  
in death's manger.

where glad hosannas  
rang out  
there is now  
only  
the silent  
weeping  
heart  
of  
God.

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### Hymn Suggestion

#### THREE SIGNS OF EASTER

*Tune: John Brown's Body*

1. In the **CROSS** we find a sign of love  
within a sign of pain,  
for it speaks of our desertion,  
how God looked to us in vain,  
yet it tells of Jesus facing death  
to win us life again –  
the cross proclaims God's love!  
Glory, glory, hallelujah! **(three times)**  
the cross proclaims God's love!
2. In the **EMPTY TOMB** the emptiness  
proclaims God's bold reply  
to the victory of sin and death  
that nothing could defy  
Jesus' goodness had to mean that  
even death itself must die –  
that tomb proclaims God's love!

Glory, glory, hallelujah! (*three times*)  
that tomb proclaims God's love!

3. In **OUR LIVES** the risen Jesus  
can empower us to be true  
to the cause of love and justice  
in whatever deeds we do;  
we can let his Spirit guide us,  
turn us round and make us new -  
our lives must show God's love!  
Glory, glory, hallelujah! (*three times*)  
our lives must show God's love!