

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

So here we are, five weeks into Lent, at the threshold of the passiontide. Normally we hear the reading of the passion account on Palm Sunday, and again on Good Friday. But this year we've been sojourning together with the gospel of Mark during Lent, and we've been focusing on the signs of the Kingdom in Jesus' ministry. These signs of God's Kingdom include deliverance, healing, detachment, and children. And today we hear about the final sign of the Kingdom in the gospel of Mark, the cross.

Mark is the shortest of the four canonical gospels, and many have remarked on how quickly the story moves. Unlike Matthew and Luke, there is nothing said about Jesus' early life. It starts out abruptly, and without ceremony moves straightaway into Jesus' ministry and teaching. There's almost a breathless quality to it as we bound from one episode to the next. Mark often introduces a story with 'Immediately', 'at once', 'straightaway', 'suddenly'; one gets a sense of urgency, as he dashes through his story.

But as the story unfolds, approaching its end, the pace gradually settles down. When we come to the cross, it is as if time were slowing, stretching out, lingering. . The almost frantic pace of the rest of the story has ebbed away. Mark has brought us through all of the preliminaries, important as they are, to bring us here, to show us these few precious hours in Jerusalem, to show us the Kingdom of God in the cross.

Looking at this story on one level, it is a story of massive, multiple failures. We begin with the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes. The night before our story begins, they are looking for some jumped-up charge on which to accuse Jesus so that he can be killed. Through the haze of false testimony and unfounded accusation, energised by jealousy, they abuse Jesus, bind him, and turn him over to Pilate. His own countrymen, who follow and serve the same Lord as him, betray him to the Gentiles.

The Gentile they hand him over to is Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect. Pilate, like many governors, is more concerned with keeping the peace than anything else. He could have, with a stroke, let the innocent man go free. Instead, he plays the game. Which would you have me release for you, the man guilty of insurrection or the innocent one? The crowd demanded the guilty Barabbas, and they got him. The governor, whose legitimacy is based on the ability to maintain peace by delivering justice, instead allows an injustice to go forward, if only to keep the peace.

Being delivered from chief priests to Roman governor, Jesus is now handed over to the soldiers. These men were well versed in brutality and are unstinting with Jesus, cruelly mocking and torturing him before they take him out to be killed. Rather than being an instrument of justice or stability, the soldiers simply continue the violence of society and perpetuate injustice. No doubt, they would say that they were just following orders.

These multiple failures are deeply troubling on their own, but perhaps even more troubling by their absence – the dog that doesn't bark – are Jesus' disciples. Surely, amidst the failures and betrayals of religion, government, justice, one can count on one's closest friends to bear with one? Yet we find that the disciples are absent because in the reading immediately before ours, they have abandoned Jesus. Even Peter, perhaps the closest to Jesus, denies him three times.

Abandoned by his friends, handed on from priest to governor to soldier, finally Jesus is handed over to the cross. Here, Mark's awareness of time becomes acute. Jesus is crucified at nine o'clock. At twelve o'clock, darkness covers the land. And although the darkness lasts three hours, it seems that time stands still. It is as if all of the sin, the failure, the wickedness, the evil in the world has assembled over the cross. And it is here, in the place of deepest darkness that we find Jesus on the cross. His last words, not just on the cross, but indeed the last words he utters in the entire gospel of Mark¹, cry out in the words of the psalm, my God, why have you abandoned me?

It is with only a hint of irony that Jesus' last words, as with so many of his other words, are misunderstood by his hearers who think he is calling for Elijah. This entire story unfolds a tableau of massive, multiple failures: abandonment by the disciples, betrayal by religious officials, injustice by the government, cruelty by the soldiers, misunderstanding by bystanders, and perhaps most striking, at the heart of darkness, the Son is abandoned by the Father.

But there is another level to this story. It is also possible to look at this from a rather different perspective, and to see, amidst all of the darkness and failures, the true Kingdom of God.

There is an oddness to this story that is worth noticing. Through all of the failure and wickedness, there is no sense that, if just one thing went the other way, things would have turned out differently. Jesus is never heard to curse under his breath that if the disciples had just hung in there this would never have happened. He doesn't appeal to his fellow countrymen to spare his life rather than abetting the occupying empire. He doesn't seize the opportunity in front of Pilate to mount a defence and escape what lies before him. He doesn't answer the insults of passersby by saving himself.

Indeed, while the sin and the wickedness and the failure in this story are real, there is also very much a sense in which Jesus allows it all to unfold, as much in conversation with his Father as subjected to others. There is no point at which Jesus seems surprised by the actions of other people or particularly anxious to save himself. His life isn't being taken from him: he's laying it down. There lurks in our story the sense of the unfolding of a plan – a surprising plan, a costly plan to be sure, but a plan nevertheless.

This isn't a tragic accident; this is what God planned and did. Despite our sin and failure, at the place of deepest darkness, we find God's plan for the salvation of the world. In a profound irony, it is God's Son, abandoned on the cross, that is actually God's act of solidarity with us. On the cross, God bears the brunt of our sin and the force of death. In the cross God finally defeats evil and death, and begins to open the way of new life – although we will have to put off saying much more about this new life until Easter, two weeks from now.

That these two levels are present in this story is hardly accidental, for these two levels are present in life. That's not to say that *all* is sin or darkness – certainly not. But I am fairly confident that each of us knows, first hand, the presence of sin and darkness in our lives. And we know on some deep level that the world is out of whack, that this isn't how God intended it to be. But in the cross we also see God at work on another, deeper level, working to transform sin into righteousness, shame into honour, death into life. In the cross, we find the definitive sign of God's kingdom, of God's gracious loving power.

¹ I take it that the longer ending of Mark, while perhaps genuine in some sense, is not in fact a part of 'Mark', and hence these would be the final direct quotation from Jesus – all the more striking in that they are recorded in Aramaic, and are thus the *ipsissima verba*.

This sums up and fulfils all of Mark's signs of the Kingdom: In the cross, we find God's promise for deliverance from oppression, spiritual and otherwise. This is a particularly apt reminder today, when we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the end of the slave trade in Britain. We find here God's power for healing, and the strength to carry on in the face of suffering. We find here on the cross God's transforming love, which enables us to so love him and love others that we can become detached from those less important things which threaten to dominate our lives. And here, we are allowed to trust God's power, and so to become like children. In all of these ways, the cross is the fullest expression of God's Kingdom.

And friends, when we find ourselves involved in massive betrayal, multiple failures, or shameful sin – whether as victim or as perpetrator – or when we find ourselves overshadowed by deep darkness, the Kingdom of God is there. Christ is there to heal and restore, in love.

Brothers and sisters, we find in the cross a bracing honesty about who we are, how we sin, how we suffer. It might be a bit uncomfortable. There is no room here, after all, for a sunny optimism. But there is ample room for hope. The cross is profoundly hopeful, for through it we find that even when we are in the depths of darkness, we are not beyond the grip of God's grace. *Amen.*