**Where is God? Good Friday April 2 2021**

**Mark 15:25-39**

Fear and fascination, pride and confusion drew observers to the first Holy Friday.

Mark creates a collage of brief snap shots like a photo album, connected but disjointed. A plain account, alluding to the prophetic tradition whilst drawing the gospel to its astounding conclusion. Mark’s cavalcade of images beckon to be pondered, probed and absorbed. They engender a sense of awe and amazement at the hidden hand of God at work.[[1]](#footnote-1) God is not where you may have expected him to be.

**Abused**

At this point Mark’s account becomes quite detailed. Abuse is hurled at Jesus from all sides, the soldiers, those just passing by, the Chief priests and scribes, and even the two other men who were also being crucified. They mocked his loss of standing, they humiliated him by stripping him and claiming his clothes. They ridiculed his claims, “you who would destroy the temple and build it again in three days”,[[2]](#footnote-2) they cajoled him to “save himself”[[3]](#footnote-3) and they belittled his ability to save himself. Mark however is saying that just because Jesus is king of the Jews he must stay on the cross, that is what he came to do, that is his royal task. [[4]](#footnote-4)

The tirade of abuse began during the trial and continues during the crucifixion. Yet ironically Jesus tormentors chose to ridicule Jesus power to save himself, when in reality Jesus was focused on saving others.

**Shrouded in Darkness**

The scientifically unexplainable onset of a period of darkness appears to have quelled the tirade of abuse. Cloaked in the actual darkness, the darkness and despair of what Jesus was doing was abundantly clear to him.

To the onlookers, cosmological signs like darkness had been associated with the death of great people in the past, Julius Caesar in particular. To people of faith, signs in the heavens were often associated with the activity or approach of God. Could God be there even in the darkness?

**Forsaken**

In Gethsemane Jesus had been deeply distressed, troubled, and overwhelmed with sorrow, he was accurately anticipating what lay ahead. “Jesus cry of dereliction is the inevitable sequel to the horror that he experienced in Gethsemane.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The profound sorrow of separation from God issues in his cry.[[6]](#footnote-6) “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” In Mark’s account these are Jesus only words from the cross, it starkly expresses his sense of being forsaken by God. At the time of Jesus, some people believed that in times of critical need Elijah may appear to “protect the innocent and rescue the righteous”[[7]](#footnote-7). Yet this did not happen here. So where is God?

“God is in and with this mortal man, who is helpless and about to suffer a terrible death. This is where God chooses to be and to declare himself, and the gospel is the echo of that self-declaration.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Where is God?**

Then Jesus dies. “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom”[[9]](#footnote-9). There were two curtains in the temple, the external one and the one which separated the “Holy Place” from the “Holy of Holies”. The torn curtain clearly exposes what is hidden. It opens access to the area, symbolically it reminds us that the way to God is open, freely open, open to all. The writer to the Hebrews uses this imagery to reinforce the free access we have to God because of the death of Jesus.[[10]](#footnote-10) “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf has entered”. [[11]](#footnote-11) So where is God? God is here. God has opened up this way for us.

The centurion beside the cross also points us to the activity of God in this scene. He notes the way in which Jesus died, notably different to how people normally died when crucified. It seems that Jesus exercises a significant measure of control over his dying. He refuses the wine with myrrh which could have dulled his senses and he appears to choose when he will submit to death. As the writer to the Ephesians stated “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Then the centurion declares “Truly this man was God’s Son.” Jesus has been affirmed as God’s Son by “the voice from heaven” at his baptism and at the Transfiguration, now this soldier adds his voice to this affirmation. God is present. This affirmation comes at the end. So we also need to hear the whole gospel before we can truly understand what it meant for Jesus to be the Son of God.

Baffling though it seems Jesus is inaugurating the kingdom of God through his death. God is here. God is in the midst of all that has been happening. Rowan Williams describes this helpfully when he describes the new world that the gospel inaugurates. He says it “must be one in which God cannot be dethroned by any degree of pain, disaster or failure. If the helpless isolated Jesus declares, ‘This mortal man is now where God is’, then God’s presence and resource, his love and mercy, cannot be extinguished by loneliness or injustice, by the terrible apparently meaninglessness, suffering in which human beings live. God has chosen to be, and to be manifest, at that lowest, weakest point of human experience. And so the poor and the helpless, the condemned and the isolated, reading this story told from the victim’s point of view, can know that God is with them, and that God who is with them cannot be defeated or deposed from his Godhead.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

God is present in the face of unjust ridicule and baseless accusations, even from those who should be Jesus companions and colleagues, the religious leaders of his day.

God is revealed through weakness. God is not where you may expect him to be. Jesus apparent weakness in death brings new life to birth. Jesus refusal to save himself brings salvation to us. Jesus willingness to experience the pain of separation from the presence of God brings us freely into the presence of God.

1. Donald English, *The Message of Mark,* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1992) 232 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 15:29 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mark 15:30 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. N. T. Wright, *Mark for everyone,* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 213 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark,*(Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1974) 572 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark,*(Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1974) 573 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark,*(Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1974) 573 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark,* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2014) 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mark 15:38 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hebrews 10:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hebrews 6:19-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ephesians 5:1 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark,* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2014) 60-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)