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# The Crucified God

Mark 15.16-39

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 6, 2007 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

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The little boy used to bring home friends from school. They used to play in the living room. But his father began to notice that his son stopped bringing home friends to play. So he sat down on the stair with his son, the place where they would chat. He said, "I've noticed you don't bring friends home to play any more, son. Is it because of your mum?" His son nodded. "Is it because of her hands?" His son nodded again. "Let me tell you how your mum got those hands. One day when you were a very little boy she was next door and heard you screaming. You'd crawled into the fire. So she plunged her hands into the fire to get you out. But her hands were badly damaged. So when you see your mum's hands, you see how much she loves you." A week or two later the father noticed his son started bringing friends home again. And one day he overheard his son say to a friend, "You see my mum's hands? They show how much she loves me."

On Good Friday we see God's hands. And we see how much God loves us.

God comes into our story to save us not only from the prisons others have put us in, but from the prisons we have made for ourselves. The first kind of deliverance we call liberation, the second we call forgiveness. The first kind sets us free from oppression and death. The second kind sets us free from sin and stupidity. I want to explore today how Mark's account of the crucifixion shows us how Jesus brings us salvation in both senses.

There's a tension that runs all the way through the Old Testament. On the one hand it seems Israel's major problem lies outside itself. The definitive story in the Old Testament is the story of the Exodus. This is the story of how Israel found itself in Egypt in a condition of slavery, with a hard-hearted Pharaoh impervious to the appeals of Moses to let his people go. This is a story of a people who had done nothing to deserve their oppression. Like slaves snatched from West Africa and bundled into ships to come to North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this was a people who had no part in their own enslavement. No law of nature or personal inadequacy had caused this: it was simply the hard-heartedness of their fellow human beings. God intervenes in history because his heart is to set people free and his special love is for Israel and for the sore oppressed.

On the other hand it seems Israel's major problem lies inside itself. The definitive story may be the Exodus but the definitive location is the Jerusalem Temple. The Temple housed the Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat where priests went to offer sacrifices to God to take away the people's sins. This was a people who were given freedom but forgot what to do with it. By turning to other gods, by neglecting the poor among them, by failing to keep the commandments, the people became estranged from God. They came to understand that they had gone into exile, and lost the Ark of the Covenant, precisely because they had strayed from God's ways. They built a new Temple, but it did not contain the Ark of the Covenant and so there was a sense that the regular sacrifices did not succeed in taking away sins.

The same tension that runs through the Old Testament runs through contemporary society and the contemporary Church. On the one hand it seems that our major problems lie outside ourselves. Global hunger seems to be about a shortage of food, disease seems to be about shortage of medicine and cures, and the power of terrorism is that there seems to be no way in which reason can persuade it to stop. On the other hand it seems our major problems are of our own making. Climate change, species depletion, drug dependence and AIDS are all problems that only a change in human behavior can address.

As Mark tells us about Jesus' crucifixion, he shows us how Jesus overcomes both slavery *and* sin, both what others have done to us *and* what we have done to ourselves.

What others have done to us is represented in the story by Rome. Rome puts Jesus to death. Rome was in the habit of parading those they had defeated in battle through the streets in a triumphal march. Jesus likewise is paraded through Jerusalem, down the *via dolorosa* of humiliation, to Golgotha. Rome executes Jesus the way it

executed political opponents. It puts an inscription over his head which says “The King of the Jews,” both as an ironic taunt at this naked figure and as a warning for anyone who might similarly challenge Rome.

What we have done to ourselves is represented in the story by the Jerusalem Temple, and those who attend to its work. The Temple is an edifice built for sacrifice, but no one can see that the sacrifice that really matters is taking place before their eyes. The chief priests ironically summarize the whole gospel with their words “He saved others; he cannot save himself” – but they are still obsessed with the idea of the Messiah not having to suffer, the idea that Jesus will bring transformation by pulling off a stunt and avoiding death at the last minute. They keep referring to Elijah, because Elijah was the prophet who never died, who went to heaven in a blaze of glory and was expected to scoop up any who were too good to die. The crucified God is looking down at the chief priests, but they can’t see him. Jesus of course is their king, but it takes the sarcastic Romans to name him. Jesus of course is their new Temple, the one who really takes away their sins through sacrifice, but they tease Jesus by quoting back his words about rebuilding the Temple in three days.

And yet Jesus’ crucifixion transforms Rome and transforms Jerusalem – transforms our outward oppression and our inward confusion, transforms the prison others put us in and the prison we put ourselves in.

Jesus’ crucifixion transforms Rome by identifying Rome as Pharaoh’s Egypt. “When it was noon,” Mark tells us, “darkness came over the land until three in the afternoon.” The sun was gone for three hours. Go back to Exodus 10, in the heat of the contest between Moses and Pharaoh, and we read, “Moses stretched out his hand towards heaven and there was dense darkness over all the land of Egypt for three days.” Pharaoh’s Egypt worshiped the sun. Rome’s Caesar was regarded as the sun. Egypt went dark for three days. Israel went dark for three hours. What is Mark telling us? He’s telling us that the God of Israel had once put Pharaoh and his power in the shade and that he was now putting Rome and its power in the shade.

Then at the moment of Jesus’ death his crucifixion transforms Jerusalem by identifying Jesus as the new Temple, the new sacrifice that finally takes away sins. “Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last,” we read, and then immediately “the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” The Temple system, the ordering of Israel around the elaborate methods of propitiating God through timely sacrifice, the perpetual exile of the Jews from their true home at the heart of God, all this is suddenly over. Jesus is the full presence of God to his people, and of his people to God; he is the sacrifice that truly takes away sins, and thus he is the new Temple that is the genuine place of encounter between God and his people.

And this resolves the tension that runs all the way through the Old Testament. Does Israel’s problem lie with external oppressors or with internal sin? Jesus’ cross is God’s judgment on both. The God who blots out the sun while his Son hangs on the cross is a God who can swat Rome aside with one sweep of his hand. The God who tears the curtain of the Temple in two while his Son swings from the tree is a God who sees his son’s death as the sacrifice that finally brings sacrifice to an end. One part of the Church says it’s all about public politics and seems to believe only the first judgment matters. Another part of the Church says it’s all about personal morality and seems to believe only the second judgment matters. But today’s gospel offers us both.

And then there’s the big finish. The account doesn’t finish with darkness at noon. It doesn’t finish with the Temple’s torn curtain. It finishes with the words of the Roman centurion, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” Why does it finish here? Because this summarizes everything that has gone before. It’s the last word on oppression, because here is the Roman soldier, the one who is accustomed to calling his emperor the Son of God, realizing that here at the foot of the cross he was in the presence of the true Son of God. Just as when the sun went dark Pharaoh discovered that he was under the authority of a God far greater than his sun-god, so here the centurion discovers he’s under the sovereignty of a Son of God greater than his Emperor. It’s not just the last word on oppression, it’s the last word on sin, because this Roman centurion is the man who had Jesus nailed to the cross. He’s the man who killed Jesus. And here he is, at the moment of Jesus’ death, realizing that the man he has killed is the Son of God. The cross has become the place where sins are forgiven.

So the cross is the last word on oppression and the last word on sin – but there’s a hint of more even than that. The cross is the beginning of a new community. The chief priests thought they ran the community of God, but they have been exposed at the cross and condemned by their own words. The disciples thought they were becoming the new community of God, but at the cross they are nowhere to be seen. Instead we have a rag-tag

new community of God. We had a hint of it in the dragooning of Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross. He has the same name as the first disciple and his sons' names suggest he's not a Jew. He's the first of the new community. Then we have the centurion. He's an agent of the oppressing army who becomes the prophet who completes the gospel by announcing Jesus in the same words Mark uses in the very first line of his gospel – the Son of God. And then we have the faithful women disciples watching from afar. These are the ingredients from which God will make up the new community of the cross. They are the first to recognize the salvation Jesus brings. Jesus' cross has defeated oppression and forgiven sin. These are the first people to reap the benefits.

On Good Friday we see God's hands. Hands that formed us in creation, now stretched out in agony. Hands that, despite the agony, through the agony, deliver us from oppression and forgive us our sin. Hands that make a new community made up of foreigners and sinners and the socially excluded. A new community that has a place for us. On Good Friday we see God's hands. And we see how much he loves us.