

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.

(1 Timothy 1.15)

***He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,
so that we might die to sin, and live for righteousness;***

by his wounds we have been healed.

(1 Peter 2.24)

Let us worship God.

HYMN: There is a green hill far away

PRAYER OF APPROACH:

Holy and righteous God:

We come into your presence today to remember the tragic events of another Friday long ago — the suffering and death of Jesus, your Son. It is a story we know very well; nevertheless, it is a difficult story to hear. Yet, it is a story we *need* to hear again and again — the story of how people turned against Jesus because they felt threatened by him, or because he didn't do the things they expected. It is the story in which Jesus was subjected to injustice and cruelty because of human malice on the one hand and indifference on the other. It is a story in which sin seems to win the day, although we know that *you* won the victory in the end.

Give us strength to hear the story again, we pray. Remind us of details that we have forgotten, and speak through it once again your message of grace and love.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO THE READINGS:

In today's service, we commemorate the events of the day on which Jesus was put to death — from his trial before the Roman governor first thing in the morning to his burial late in the afternoon.

This year, we're reading Mark's account of these events, so chances are you will hear some details that are different from the way you remember the story, while other details, which are found in one or more of the other three Gospels, are absent.

The story is not an easy one to listen to. The fact is that Jesus was treated unjustly, and with extreme cruelty, and there's no way to sugarcoat that.

It's shocking that anyone should be treated as Jesus was that day; and it's doubly shocking that the Son of God — the second Person of the Trinity — should be treated in that way by human beings. It's surprising as well that Jesus submitted to that unjust and cruel treatment, when he had the authority and power to put a stop to it at any time — or even to retaliate in kind.

Nevertheless, the New Testament testifies that Jesus' suffering and death, unjust and violent as it was, was for the benefit of others. As Jesus himself once put it, *The Son of Man came not*

to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10.45).

We're going to read through Mark's account of the events of that Friday long ago, now, in five segments.

FIRST READING: Mark 15.1-20 - Jesus is tried and sentenced

REFLECTION:

As Mark tells the story, Jesus' trial before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate has much in common with his experience before the Sanhedrin the night before: Accusations are made against him, he speaks only once, and in the end, he is subjected to verbal and physical abuse. Worst of all, both proceedings are conducted hastily, in a haphazard, chaotic manner, with little semblance of due process.

When Jesus is brought before Pilate, then, the Jewish leaders accuse him of claiming to be the Messiah, the king of Israel. To the Romans, such a claim implies that Jesus was planning a rebellion against Roman rule in Israel. In questioning Jesus, though, Pilate asks him, not "Are you the Messiah?", but rather, *Are you the king of the Jews?* (Mark 15.2). "King of the Jews" tends to be a term or title used by Gentiles, such as Pilate, rather than by Jews themselves.

Jesus' answer to that same question to the Sanhedrin the evening before had been an unequivocal *I am* (14.62). But his answer to Pilate is ambiguous; all he says is, *You say so* (15.2). In Mark's original Greek, Jesus' answer is only two words: *Su legeis*, which means "You say". Other than that, Jesus says nothing in response to the various accusations that are made against him. Nor does he maintain his innocence, or protest the unfairness of the proceedings.

Mark tells this part of the story in less detail than the other Gospel writers do; and in Mark's version, Pilate doesn't make any effort to see that Jesus is given a fair hearing, even though he recognizes the religious leaders' true motives in bringing Jesus before him.

One key difference between the trial and the hearing before the Sanhedrin the night before is that the trial is held in public. A crowd is present, and they want Pilate to release a prisoner, as apparently was his custom at the Passover festival. When Pilate asks if they want him to release Jesus, the chief priests stir them up to ask for the release of Barabbas instead — a man already tried and convicted of doing the very thing that Jesus was being accused of *planning* to do: committing murder in the course of an uprising against Roman rule. Perhaps Barabbas had even been scheduled for crucifixion that day, since at least two other men were going to be crucified that day. When Pilate then asks what he should do with Jesus, the crowd, now metamorphosing into a mob, shouts, *Crucify him!* (15.13). And when Pilate asks, rather lamely, *Why? What crime has he committed?* (15.14), they clamor for his crucifixion even more insistently.

Pilate gives in to the crowd's demands, releasing Barabbas, and sentencing Jesus to death. Here in Mark's account, Pilate comes off looking like a pawn in the hands of the Jewish leaders. He doesn't show much interest in seeing that Jesus is given fair treatment, and he quickly gives in to the demands of the crowd, who are themselves egged on by the chief priests.

As he did the night before, Jesus submits to the people in authority. He says very little, and allows events to run their course. Now, having been sentenced to death, he is subjected to another round of physical and verbal abuse, much more severe than what he endured the night before, since it involves a flogging or scourging, in addition to the mock coronation with the crown of thorns. Like Pilate, the soldiers use the term “king of the Jews”.

HYMN: Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended?

SECOND READING: Mark 15.21-27 (28) - Jesus is crucified

REFLECTION:

Mark tells this part of the story sparingly and concisely, without much detail.

Jesus, apparently weakened by the scourging he had received, doesn't have the strength to carry his crossbeam to the place of execution, so a stranger and foreigner named Simon is forced to carry it for him. Mark alone identifies Simon as *the father of Alexander and Rufus* (Mark 15.21), implying that Alexander and Rufus were men whom his readers were acquainted with.

The place of execution has the ominous name “Golgotha”, which means “the place of the skull” (15.22). The *wine mixed with myrrh* (15.23) that Jesus is offered was apparently intended to deaden the initial pain of crucifixion somewhat. Of the crucifixion itself, all that Mark says is, *And they crucified him* (15.24), sparing us the gruesome details. It is nine o'clock in the morning.

The Romans post an ironic notice on Jesus' cross that reads *The king of the Jews* (15.26) — the third time we encounter that expression in this chapter. The irony is that it implies that Jesus falsely claimed to be the Messiah, when in fact he actually *is* the Messiah. The Romans probably intended it to be a sarcastic comment on Jesus himself, as well as on the Jewish people — an insult to both him and them at the same time.

As in all the other Gospel accounts, two men are crucified along with Jesus. The Greek word that Mark uses for them means “robbers” or “bandits”, although the version of the Bible that I work with translates it as “rebels” (15.27). Presumably, they had already been scheduled for crucifixion that day; and perhaps, as I mentioned earlier, Barabbas was originally to have been crucified with them. Crucifixion was reserved for crimes that challenged Roman sovereignty, including rebellion. It was also used in punishing runaway slaves. In addition to being agonizingly painful, crucifixion was intended to humiliate its unfortunate victims, and thereby to serve as a deterrent to others who might consider rebelling against the established order.

HYMN: O sacred head, sore wounded ...

THIRD READING: Mark 15.29-32 - Jesus is mocked and taunted

REFLECTION:

As if the physical agony of crucifixion weren't bad enough, Jesus is also made fun of and taunted by the onlookers. Recalling one of the accusations that had been made of him the night before, some people say to him, *You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, come down from the cross, and save yourself!* (Mark 15.29-30). In addition, the chief priests and teachers of the law who had conspired against him take perverse delight in his suffering and his apparent powerlessness. And, to make matters even worse, so do the two men crucified with him.

This last point may come as a surprise to us, because in Luke's account, only *one* of the men crucified with Jesus joins in the taunting, while the other one speaks up in Jesus' defence. However, here in Mark, as well as in Matthew, both of them join in the jeers and insults.

In physical agony, left to die, and surrounded by hostile people who insult and deride him — it's hard to imagine a worse position for someone to be in. Jesus must have felt totally alone and isolated — no compassion or support; just hostility from all sides. Even his disciples are nowhere to be seen. Mark doesn't mention them at all, so we have no idea where they are. They're not at Golgotha, though; presumably they're all in hiding, afraid that they might receive the same treatment as Jesus.

HYMN: When I survey the wondrous cross ...

FOURTH READING: Mark 15.33-41 - Jesus dies

REFLECTION:

It is noon, and Jesus has now been on the cross for three hours. For the next three hours, darkness falls over the land. Mark provides no explanation for the darkness. In case we think it may have been a solar eclipse, it should be pointed out that the Passover is always held when the moon is full; and at full moon, the moon is in the wrong position to cause a solar eclipse. No doubt, Mark saw the darkness as having a *supernatural* cause, in keeping with the fact that the Son of God was being put to death.

By three o'clock in the afternoon, Jesus' ordeal on the cross has gone on for six hours. At that point, he cries out, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Mark 15.34). Mark quotes the actual Aramaic words that Jesus would have used. Ever since that time, people have discussed and debated what Jesus meant. Did God actually forsake him while he was on the cross? For us who believe in the Trinity, it's hard to comprehend how that would even be possible. Of course, Jesus' words are also the first line of Psalm 22, a lament in which a person in deep distress does feel that God has abandoned him. Perhaps in his agony, his humiliation, and his being taunted by hostile onlookers, Jesus was simply experiencing the same feelings that anyone in that situation would experience. Perhaps in our own darkest moments, when we may feel

that God has abandoned *us*, we can find some comfort in knowing that even Jesus himself once felt that way.

The response of some of the *bystanders* to Jesus' cry, *Listen, he's calling Elijah* (15.35), actually doesn't make much sense. Surely they would have understood what Jesus said, and would've recognized those familiar words as being the first line of Psalm 22. Why they would have understood him to be calling to Elijah doesn't make sense — unless this, too, was a case of the on-lookers making fun of him. In any case, Jesus dies shortly afterward.

When I was a kid, I always assumed that Jesus died simply from loss of blood — that he slowly bled to death. But later on, I learned that in crucifixion, victims had extreme difficulty breathing — that to breathe while nailed to a cross required physical exertion, which only added to the physical pain. Eventually, the exertion would become too much for the victim, and he would essentially die by suffocation as much as from loss of blood. Jesus died after six hours on the cross. Some victims of crucifixion, apparently, have lasted for two days or longer before finally dying.

The curtain in the temple that tears in two at the moment of Jesus' death was the curtain that separated two rooms inside the temple — the Holy Place, which only priests were allowed to enter, and the Most Holy Place, in which God was believed to be present, and which only the High Priest was allowed to enter. The tearing of the curtain appears to be a supernatural occurrence, like the darkness that fell at noon. Although Mark provides no explanation as to what it signifies, it is generally believed that, in Jesus' death, a significant barrier between God and human beings was removed — by God himself.

At the death of Jesus, the centurion, having witnessed the events of that day, says of him, *Surely this man was the Son of God!* (15.39). It's remarkable that this insight would come from a Gentile — and one who presumably had had no previous contact with Jesus. It reinforces Jesus' own admission to the Sanhedrin the night before that he was *the Son of the Blessed One* (14.61), as well as Mark's own assertion right at the beginning of his Gospel that Jesus is both *the Messiah* and *the Son of God* (Mark 1.1).

Finally, Mark mentions the women who were present. He names three of them — *Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome* (15.40) — but says that *many other women* who had traveled to Jerusalem with Jesus also were present (15.41).

Women — but no men. In that patriarchal society, women were relatively powerless, and therefore posed no threat to the authorities; so it would have been safe for them to be present at Jesus' crucifixion, while it would've been dangerous for Jesus' male disciples to be on hand. The women, then, do what the male disciples should do, but don't. In Mark, there is no "beloved disciple" at the cross, as there is in John's account (John 19.26). Significantly also, Mark doesn't mention Jesus' mother, as John does (John 19.25); neither do Matthew or Luke. Since these female followers of Jesus were the only ones present, the Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion probably stem from their memories of the events of that day.

HYMN: Beneath the cross of Jesus ...

FIFTH READING: Mark 15.42-47 - Jesus is buried

REFLECTION:

It is less than 24 hours since Jesus and his disciples have shared the Passover meal together, and Jesus is now dead. The disciples have presumably gone into hiding, and no one from Jesus' family seems to be on hand. Fortunately, though, someone else comes forward to claim his body, and give it a proper burial.

Joseph of Arimathea is named in all four Gospel accounts as the one who looks after placing Jesus' body into a tomb, but other than that, he's not mentioned anywhere else in the Gospels. Mark says that he was a prominent member of the Council — presumably the same Council that had interrogated Jesus the night before. He obtains the body with Pilate's permission once Pilate has received confirmation that Jesus is dead.

It's this part of the story that tells us that Jesus died on a Friday, the day before a Sabbath, which was, of course, a Saturday. Jesus died at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and the Sabbath began at sunset, so Joseph didn't have a lot of time in which to accomplish his task; it had to be finished before the Sabbath began, since the Sabbath was the weekly day of rest. We can imagine that the task was done hastily, setting the stage for some of Jesus' female followers to go back to the tomb first thing on the Sunday morning, as soon as the Sabbath was over and there was enough light to see what they were doing.

Speaking of the women, two of the three women named earlier are now mentioned again: *Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph* (15.47). They have witnessed Jesus' crucifixion, and they now witness his burial also.

It remains, then, to reflect on the *meaning* of Jesus' death. The fact that two other men were crucified with him that day serves to remind us that Jesus was not the only person ever to have endured that barbaric form of execution. Was his death by crucifixion just a meaningless tragedy, or did it accomplish something?

It doesn't help that crucifixion was not considered an honorable way to die. On the surface, at least, it appeared to discredit not only Jesus himself, but his entire ministry, since it all ended in such an ignominious way.

The apostle Paul acknowledged this in his First Letter to the Corinthians, when he wrote, *The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing Jews demand signs [meaning miracles], and [Gentiles] look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified — a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles* (1 Corinthians 1.18, 22).

Nevertheless, the writers of the New Testament teach that Jesus' death did accomplish something. It served as the sacrifice that pays for human sin, allowing God to forgive that sin, and to

make human beings part of his people — his family; not just the people of Israel, but anyone. The apostle Peter, for example, writes, *Christ died for sins, once for all — the righteous for the unrighteous — to bring us to God* (1 Peter 3.18a). And the apostle John writes, *If anyone sins, we have someone who speaks to the Father in our defence: Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the sacrifice that pays for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world* (1 John 2.1-2).

Of course, we can't think of Jesus' death without also thinking of his resurrection. Jesus did die a horrible death on the cross, but he was also *raised* from death to new life, less than forty-eight hours later. And, just as his death appeared to *discredit* him and his ministry, his resurrection served to *vindicate* him and his ministry.

Still, we can't escape the fact that Jesus died because of the sinfulness of human beings. It's easy to point a finger at the people who played a role in the Good Friday story, and say it was all *their* fault — Judas, the members of the Sanhedrin, the crowd at Jesus' trial, Pilate, the Roman soldiers. But the fact is, that if Jesus had come into the world at any other time in history, he would likely have suffered a very similar fate. We human beings are sinful by nature, and, as such, we so easily resist God's ways and God's purposes. Yet, paradoxically, God has taken our greatest act of rebellion against him, and transformed it into the means by which we all can be reconciled to him. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Colossians, *God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus], and through him, to reconcile to himself all [people] ... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross* (Colossians 1.19-20).

Thanks be to God!

HYMN: In the cross of Christ I glory

CONCLUDING PRAYER:

God of grace and love:

We thank you that, in Jesus, you entered the world in human form, and experienced life as we human beings experience it. We thank you that in Jesus, you revealed yourself more fully to us human beings than you had ever done before, and that you also gave us a clearer understanding of your purpose and your ways.

We confess, however, that we human beings continued to rebel against you, and that we took out our fears, our frustrations, and our disappointments on Jesus, seeking to destroy him because he either challenged us, or because he didn't do the things we wanted.

Gracious God: In the events of that Friday long ago, some people no doubt see you as being weak and powerless. But *we* see your loving purpose; for we know that Jesus came into the world above all to *save* us sinful human beings by making it possible for us to be reconciled to you.

We know that it was while we were *sinner*s that Jesus suffered and died for us — and not for us only, but for all people who receive him in faith. Save us then, we pray, from the smugness

and self-righteousness that pins the blame for his death on others. Humble us, and remind us that we all share in the responsibility for his death, because we all share in the sin of humanity — we all turn away from you, and wander off on our own.

We thank you for the courage, strength, commitment, and love that Jesus showed in enduring the worst that we human beings could do to him. We thank you also that you do not hold his suffering and death against us, but that you have instead accepted it as the sacrifice that pays for our sin.

Help us, then, to grasp the enormity of your love and grace, and to be appropriately grateful. May your love for us, shown in Jesus, inspire us to love you more, and to seek to live in your ways more faithfully.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior, who for our sake died and was raised. Amen.

Our service will continue on Sunday morning, as we celebrate the *resurrection* of Jesus.