

We come today to the last of our four Lenten readings in Mark's Gospel, and thus to the very crucifixion of Jesus. It feels early – Good Friday is still nearly three weeks away – but perhaps we need time fully to face and to absorb the awesomeness of this moment. To be honest, I feel a terrible responsibility in leading you into this scene, because we walk here into the central mystery of the Christian faith, and I do not feel truly competent to understand it myself, let alone explain it to others. The cross of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, is a mystery, not because it is intellectually difficult, not because it is obscure, not because it is remote from our experience, but because it is so simple, and at the same time so strange. The Gospel of Mark tells this story in its simplest, and at the same time its most brutal form. There are in Mark no sympathetic supporters at the foot of the cross – the women are mentioned only at the very end of the story, and even they were watching from some distance. There is no Mary and no beloved disciple: only the soldiers throwing dice for Jesus' clothes, and the mocking onlookers taunting Jesus with his inability to save himself. There is in Mark no penitent thief who recognises Jesus in a last-minute act of repentance: both the thieves – actually, the term means what we would call 'insurgents' – both join in the mockery. In Mark Jesus utters no triumphant cry of victory, and speaks no calm committal of his soul into the hands of God: instead, this abused, humiliated and totally isolated man dies with a terrible cry of despair and a harrowing final question: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' If we have four Gospels in our New Testament, with four versions of this Golgotha scene, we are meant to hear each one for itself and in its own right. It is today our responsibility to

listen to Mark and not to harmonise him with the other gospels; it is necessary thus to watch this scene in all its brutality and bitterness.

Mark's account is simple and unvarnished, but tells for his first-century readers quite enough to gesture to a larger background. Four times in the space of six sentences he uses the term 'cross' or 'crucify', and although he does not describe in graphic detail the horror of the nails and the agonising pain, the very word 'crucify' is enough to send a shock-wave through his hearers. Roman citizens (said Cicero), people who are by status immune from such punishment, shudder at the very word 'cross'. It was a punishment designed to torture and humiliate, a display of dehumanising power employed to crush the condemned – in particular, disobedient slaves and troublesome provincials deemed to have challenged their superiors. The flogging and the beating beforehand are designed to break the victim's spirit, but the ultimate humiliation is to pin him, helpless and wholly naked, raised high and widely visible, to suffer a long drawn-out torture, with only one, inescapable end. The crucified man is rendered entirely powerless – physically unable to move a limb, wholly vulnerable to whatever the Roman soldiers or passers-by choose to do to his body – or as time continues, whatever is done to it by flies and birds. The victim is also psychologically crushed, and this Mark does spell out in a little detail.

During the preliminary flogging, Jesus was dressed in purple – the royal colour – given a pretend crown, and mocked with ironic adulation as 'King of the Jews' – just enough to make him laughable, before they spat in the face of this 'King'. In the crucifixion, they elevate him in a mock-enthronement – between two insurgents, as his putative bodyguard, one on the right and one on the left – and they place over his head the jeering label – 'the King of the Jews'. Equally exquisite in its cruel design is the mockery of the

onlookers, who have heard tales from Galilee of Jesus' power to heal and to restore the sick: 'he saved others', they laugh, 'but he can't save himself'. 'If he is worth anything, let him come down from the cross'. He doesn't, and it seems he can't. He is in their eyes as worthless as every other piece of scum who has ever been nailed to one of these stinking crosses.

My friends, I am sorry if I seem to be laying this on thick, but we need to remember all this if we are to understand the scene that Mark is drawing. We need to remember, as George MacLeod once said, that 'Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candlesticks, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage-heap ... at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse and soldiers gamble.' Why do we need to remember this? Because we who follow Jesus bear on our bodies the mark of this cross, this sign of laughable powerlessness, this symbol that can only mean, in the eyes of the world, humiliation and failure. How do we bear this mark? I do not mean those lovely silver crosses that women wear in their ear lobes or round their necks, nor those magnificent gilded crosses which adorn the chests of bishops. If they don't make us shudder, *those* are not the mark of the cross. I mean the cross implanted on our foreheads when we were baptised: 'I sign you with the sign of the cross, the sign of Christ'. Do you remember the words, said in more or less this form to each one of us who has been baptised into Christ? 'Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified. Fight valiantly under the banner of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and continue his faithful soldier and servant to the end of your life'. Yes, we have been enlisted under precisely this sign, and it is hard to imagine any more blatantly counter-cultural symbol. How can we bear the sign of the cross and still think that money or

coercive power are the most important commodities in the world? How can we carry this sign and still want to be respectable and respected, still seek to be mainstream, honourable, and inoffensive? Christ crucified is the very epitome of powerlessness and shame. To follow the way of the cross is to know that 'the world-order [has been] overturned, from the highest political power, to the deepest cultural pattern' (Myers). In a world where every other revolutionary system seems to have failed, we bear the most revolutionary mark of all.

But there is another reason why we need to remember the bleakness of this Markan crucifixion scene, and that is because Jesus here identifies with the very deepest of human failure and despair. If we gild this cross, if we wrap it in pious cotton-wool, we are bound to forget that Jesus here sank to the very depths of the human condition, not just death (because death can be noble, even heroic), but the brokenness of confusion, isolation and despair. I don't think we should cover over the horror of Jesus' final words on the cross, a cry not of victory or assurance but of despair: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It has caused Christian theology all kinds of problems to come to terms with that cry, but we gain little, and lose much, if we try to tone it down. Abandoned by his disciples, mocked by his executioners and fellow victims, humiliated by the onlookers, Jesus at the last sinks to the lowest point of despair and feels abandoned even by God. This is where I tremble to tread, but it surely means that there is no-one so lost, no-one so confused and helpless, no-one so distraught, so depressed and so despairing as to be beyond the heart, beyond the knowledge, beyond the experience of the Son of God. In this pit of darkness, Jesus has entered to the very depths, and he has carried that reality to the very heart of God. I carry in my prayers today several friends

who are deeply immersed in such a pit of darkness, and I dare say we all know people in some such plight. Jesus knows them too.

And here is the deepest truth of the cross of Jesus – that it is out of the very depths of this darkness that something glimmers with the strangest light. Mark is sparing with his detail, but he tells us that two things happened when Jesus died: the veil of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, and the Roman centurion, the chief of those who executed Jesus, reacted to that death with an extraordinary confession of faith: ‘surely, this man was the Son of God’. We are not entirely sure what is symbolised by the tearing of the temple veil: is this a sign that the era of the temple is over, or a sign that the God once hidden behind that veil is now revealed, made visible in the world, precisely in the absurdity and weakness of the cross? But we do know that, for Mark, the centurion’s statement is a genuine confession of faith – echoing the divine voice at the baptism and the transfiguration of Jesus – and we are forced back into the gospel by this remarkable confession to find what it might mean. And there we find, tucked into Jesus’ predictions of his death, two brief but arresting statements: first, that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (10.45); and second, at the Last Supper, which we remember and re-enact today, that his blood would be poured out for many (14.26). When we first heard those words we might never have guessed that this ‘many’ would include a Gentile, and certainly not that it would have included the very Roman centurion who cruelly oversaw the very death of Jesus. But this is surely what Mark is saying, and with more than just a hint: that in this death of Jesus is released a tidal wave of grace, an avalanche of divine love that sweeps over every boundary of race, every limit of culture, that enters every human condition and washes out every sin.

There pours out from the self-giving of Christ a love that embraces even the Roman centurion, and through him and beyond him every friend and enemy of Christ, every nobody and somebody, every human story of success and every broken, crumpled human failure. Mark gives us this hint not in an abstract doctrine of atonement, which we might debate with every theological refinement, but in a human story, the story of a Roman centurion, the very person one would least have expected to be affected by this death. And he tells it in this way, I think, because in the last resort this is the only way we can know the strange, saving power of the death of Christ, in the experience of lives touched, rescued and transformed. Of course we will be able to say more about that on Easter Day, but even on this side of Easter, there is a dark light that emanates from the bloody crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, a light that allows us to cling to the hope that his life was given for us, that this scarecrow on the cross embodied and enacted the deepest and the strongest love of God, that the mastery of death and despair has been, and can be and finally will be overmastered by a grace so wonderful it can remake broken lives and redeem the wounded, the lost, the slumdog and the abandoned. If we bear the sign of the cross, we bear also the knowledge, deep-down, that that love has met, embraced and welcomed us – and that it presses on insistently through us to embrace every other human being. Thanks be to God.