

The place of the skull: Mark 15.1-39

*The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built over the traditional site of the crucifixion, **the place called Golgotha**. The city has grown up around it, but in Jesus' time it was a quarry and a rubbish tip outside the city, a short walk around the walls from the Roman HQ where Jesus stood before Pilate. Underneath the gold and glitter, testimony to centuries of Christian devotion, pilgrims kneel to reverence the bare rock, **the place of the skull**, a place where terrorists, criminals and people of no importance were taken for execution. Here Christians have been coming for centuries to pray at the spot where Jesus was crucified. `this is the place where God's love meets human violence — and from the darkness of defeat, snatches a victory that changed the world forever. Thanks to Robin for today's TFTD.*



Last night, our Maundy Thursday service at St Philip & St James ended with a sense of foreboding. The church was stripped, and we left it in darkness and in silence.

And today we gather at the foot of the cross and we are lost for words. There is very little preaching goes on today. We re-read the account of the passion and death of Christ and resort to other words of Scripture and the words of hymns and prayers that the church has reached for over the centuries.

Every year we contemplate the cross and we still can't fully understand it. Pontius Pilate tried to get a handle on Jesus. 'Are you the King of the Jews?' he asked. Jesus answered, 'You say so.' Pilate was searching for a definition to enable him to place Jesus in a category; put him in a box, but he simply didn't have the words to understand who Jesus was.

In the end, Pontius Pilate categorised Jesus as 'rebellious slave'. The ritual execution of crucifixion was designed to be so horrible a death, performed in public, that even slaves living the most awful lives would accept their fate and continue to serve their masters in ways that denied their humanity because the fate of rebelling and being captured was even worse.

Jesus obediently accepted this fate and thereby entered into the self-inflicted pain of humanity. There will be a point today when I contemplate the horror of the crucifixion and remember that horrors such as this are perpetuated all over the world today on a grand scale. People have this kind of suffering inflicted upon them today. And people endure terrible suffering without resisting for fear of even worse suffering being inflicted upon them. Jesus entered into this pain when he entered Jerusalem and walked to his place of execution.

We will also read about the soldiers today who mistreated Jesus. For them flogging Jesus, mocking him, leading him to Golgotha, crucifying him; this was their job. It was an everyday matter. They had done it many times before. Their presence in the narrative and the presence of the crowd whipped up to demand Christ's crucifixion, reminds us of the way the sin and brokenness of the world draws people in and takes control of them. It draws us in and takes control of us.

And so when we contemplate the cross we see the pain and suffering of the world and our own share of it; the pain and suffering which we endure; and the pain and suffering which we cause because sin and brokenness has become part of us and controls us.

Jesus cried out from the cross. The words recall Psalm 22. Jesus cried out to God as we do but these words also remind us that God has not deserted us in our suffering. But Jesus is misunderstood by those who are present. People had been misunderstanding Jesus the whole time and even moments before he died, somebody was asking whether he was calling for Elijah.

And then he died. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. By this we know that the moment Jesus died is the moment when everything that stood between humanity and God had fallen away. God himself ripped down the barrier, accepting the pain of the cross as the price to be paid for the ransom of many.

And at that moment understanding replaced misunderstanding, starting with the leader of the execution squad himself. The centurion said, 'Truly this man is God's Son!'. Finally, somebody shouted out what nobody had hitherto been prepared to

accept. And of all people to shout out the truth, it was the centurion, for whom perfecting cruelty and executing slaves had been a life's work. The truth exploded right in the heart of the beast. The transformation had begun.

And so now nothing stands between us and the love of God.

Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8: 38-39)

And nothing is left untouched by the power of the cross.

It is transforming all of us. We can leave our pain and suffering at the foot of the cross.

And the power of the cross is transforming the world.

We don't have to inflict pain and suffering any more.

God has done it. It is done.

Robin Pye

Good Friday, April 2nd 2021