

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 87”

Matthew 27:32-56

Our journey through Matthew’s Gospel has brought us now to this moment of cosmic destiny, to the turning point in human history, to the very heart of our faith – to the cross. The ministry and mission of Jesus, all that we have read in these chapters, all that has been prophesied and preached through the pages of the Old Testament, now reaches its climax. And that climax has at its focus an instrument of torture and execution. The symbol of our faith is not a manger nor a dove nor a palm branch, but a cross – an image of unimaginable suffering, and a unique and potent metaphor for utter desolation. In Chaim Potok’s novel *My Name Is Asher Lev*, the Asher Lev of the title is an artist and a Hasidic Jew who is exiled from his community because he paints a picture called *The Brooklyn Crucifixion* and he explains that he uses the image of the cross because he can think of no other symbol that speaks so eloquently of suffering. (*The Gift of Asher Lev* pp287f)

And, as I say, that cross has become the symbol at the very heart of our faith. It is there in our theology and our stories, but also in our architecture – the cross-shaped template of so many church buildings – in our hymnody, in our art, in our jewellery and our fashion, in our language. This episode is the crux of human history: “crux” is itself the Latin word for cross. It is the content of our preaching – as St Paul wrote in *1 Corinthians*, “*We preach Christ crucified*” and “*I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*”

The trouble is, we tend to overlook just how awful it all was. Our familiarity with the story and the images of Jesus on the cross have dulled us to what was going on here. It has all been domesticated. Look at this image (picture on screen) of the crucifixion. An almost unmarked body and a person seemingly in not too much discomfort. That’s what we’ve become used to. One of the images of crucifixion that I think speaks more realistically of what was going on is this sculpture (picture on screen) by the Brazilian artist Guido Rocha. We can catch something of the agony and humiliation of the cross here. The person would have been nailed to the wooden crossbeam, huge metal spikes through his wrists, and his legs would have been bent to one side with one single spike driven through both ankles. Some years ago a body was found dating from the first century and it is possible to work out just how this would have taken place. Sometimes the person was left for two or three days, slowly losing strength and blood. If it seemed as if it was going on too long – as with Jesus, they needed to get him off before the Sabbath started – the soldiers would smash the legs with a hammer so that whole weight of the person was hanging from the arms, restricting breathing and eventually suffocating him.

Not only was it painful, but it was also humiliating. The victim was crucified naked and it wasn’t long before he lost control of his bodily functions. It was so humiliating that later Jewish rabbis excluded it as

a form of capital punishment and even many Romans viewed it with horror, reserving it for the very worst criminals and lowest classes. Of course, among the Jews the revulsion was even greater because of *Deuteronomy 21:23*, which says that “*anyone who is hanged on a tree is under God’s curse.*” This was not a pretty or noble death!

And here is Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, being led out from the Praetorium to the place of execution. The crosses were set up on Golgotha – Aramaic for Skull Hill, so named because from a distance the hill looked a bit like a skull. (Calvary, by the way – which does not appear in the New Testament – is based on the Latin word *calva*, which also means skull.) Almost certainly the uprights were kept there and the condemned men would carry only the cross beams, which still weighed pretty heavily. Here is the King of Glory, now a vulnerable, fragile, hurting, human being, struggling along the dusty road in the warm Judean sunshine, through the clamouring crowds of the curious, up to the hill. He is about to become a focus for the forces of evil, a lightning rod for all the dark powers of the cosmos, channelling it all away from us. And as the story unfolds we see Jesus gradually stripped and emptied of everything possible.

First, **he loses his strength** (v32). The ordeals before the Chief Priests, King Herod and Governor Pilate have taken their toll. Jesus must have been emotionally and mentally drained. The mocking by the soldiers, the sharp pain of the crown made of thorn branches, the appalling flogging that he went through – all added to the agony. Records from the time show that for many prisoners the flogging alone was enough to kill them as the long whips with shards of stone and metal attached to them ripped the flesh from the back in great chunks. Then having to carry the heavy crossbeam out of the city would have been just too much, so a pilgrim from Africa, a Jew up for the Passover Festival, is forced to carry the cross for him. For Simon from Cyrene, this would not have been a gesture of solidarity or done out of pity: he really had no choice if a Roman soldier told him to do it. The fact that he is known and his sons are later identified as his suggests that the experience may well have led to his own conversion.

Secondly, **he loses his clothing** (v35). As we’ve said, the victims were crucified naked, adding to their shame and humiliation, so Jesus’ clothes are stripped off him and shared out among the soldiers. In fact, they draw lots to see who has what, which Matthew sees as another fulfilment of prophecy (although that second part of the verse isn’t found in all versions of the Bible). Throughout this whole episode, Matthew makes use of words from *Psalms 22*, further emphasising the thread that has run through this Gospel that Jesus is the culmination of what was predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures.

And, with his clothing, **he loses his dignity** (vv39-44). Hanging there totally exposed, with his control over his body quickly disappearing and the effects of the intense pain starting to become horribly apparent, Jesus is about as degraded as you can get. Remember, this is the King of Heaven, the one who

shared the glory of his Father's throne room. This is the one who created the tree from which his cross was hewn. This is the one who had restored dignity and worth to others during his ministry. He is now being totally destroyed. And the bystanders see that and mock, calling out their clever questions and sarcastic comments, jeering and laughing, poking fun at the man they see as another failed messiah. And it's not just the idle scoffers, who probably often come up to the hill to gloat over the public executions. The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders also mock him – a bit like the Mayor, the city council and the Police chief all coming out and having a laugh at the victims. In fact, even the two men who are crucified with him heap insults on him. Almost everyone there is gloating and laughing.

And then, Jesus also **loses all his support** (v46). This is the Jesus who less than a week before was lauded into the city by adoring crowds and accompanied by friends and disciples. The disciples have long gone, scared and bewildered by the turn of events. The few women who had been accompanying him stand at a distance, weeping and wondering, unable to make sense of what's going on. And, in probably the most tragic words in all history and literature, Jesus screams out in agony to ask his Father why he has abandoned him too – “*My God, my God – why have you forsaken me?*” Jesus is hopelessly alone, standing between humanity and the forces that would destroy it, the only one who can actually make a difference.

Finally, of course, **he loses his life** (v50). The pain, the shame, the astonishing ordeal that he has been through all combine to drain the last bit of life from him. He screams out one more time and then his battered and bloodied body slumps lifeless from the crossbeam. Matthew – indeed, all the gospel writers – stress that he really is dead. In v36 we read that the guards waited at the crosses just in case – there are a very few reports that some people (mainly due to the carelessness of the soldiers) did manage to survive after being taken down, and they don't want it to happen again.

Jesus is dead – beaten, humiliated, apparently defeated. He willingly gave up his place at his Father's side to come into this world and now he has lost everything else as well. As Charles Wesley put it, he has “*emptied himself of all but love*”. But why? What's the point of all this? How do we start to make sense of it all? It's not obvious here, is it? But as we read on through the New Testament, Paul and the other writers look back and explain what was going on. They set it all within the overarching plan of God's grace.

In *Hebrews 4:15*, we read that Jesus went through all this in an attempt **to identify with us**: “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tested in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.*” This is not the action of some remote deity who has simply tinkered around with our world, a god at arm's length or beyond who doesn't want to get

involved. God has come and lived among us in the form of Jesus, an identifiable human being, so he knows what we are going through, he sympathises with us and recognises the problems we have. We can trust him because he's been through it all himself – he's been through the very worst that a human can experience.

Jesus went through this ordeal **to stand in for us** (*Hebrews 2:14,15*). It was only as a human being that Jesus could effectively deal with the forces of evil that limit us and tyrannise us, those forces that mean death is something to fear and that deny us the opportunities that God wants us to have. Again in *Hebrews* we read this: “*Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*” Jesus took our place as he hung there on that cross. He took **your** place, so that you don't get caught up in the punishment that God will use to eradicate evil so that his everlasting Kingdom can be fulfilled .

And that means, then, that Jesus was there **to be our Saviour** (*Romans 5:8*) – “*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” As we have seen all through this Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is here to inaugurate the Kingdom of God, the renewed and restored creation that will be just as God wanted it to be before evil got in and generally messed it up. He offers those who want to commit themselves to him the opportunity to join him in it for all eternity. Those who don't commit, who don't believe, who aren't prepared to take that step of faith, will have their wishes respected and will be left out of it all when God finally brings it to fulfilment – they will spend eternity without him, consigned to the agonising oblivion of being forever left out. Those who want to commit – even though they're sinners at the moment – can be saved from that and can start participating in the life of the Kingdom, experiencing the peace and joy of it all, working with Jesus to share that with others, right here and now.

So, above all Jesus went through all that **to offer hope**, hope to a world that had given up on hope: hope that there is something more than this, something better than this, something more fulfilling than this. And it's the Biblical hope – the sure and certain knowledge that God is at work – not some vague, airy-fairy wish that things might turn out OK in the end. You see, even as Jesus hung there on the cross, even as the life ebbed away from his bleeding, naked body, things were starting to happen. This was no ordinary death. Look at vv52,52,54. Something is stirring. Powerful forces are at work other than the forces of evil. There's the suggestion that evil has not won. Even the guards pick up on it and recognise that this is something very special. Is this really the end? No, it's just the beginning – but we'll look at that when we pick up on the next bit of the story.

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- **He loses his strength** (v32).
- **He loses his clothing** (v35).
- **He loses his dignity** (vv39-44).
- **He loses all his support** (v46).
- **He loses his life** (v50).

Jesus is dead – beaten, humiliated, apparently defeated. He willingly gave up his place at his Father's side to come into this world and now he has lost everything else as well. As Charles Wesley put it, he has "*emptied himself of all but love*". But why?

- **To identify with us** (*Hebrews 4:15*)
- **To stand in for us** (*Hebrews 2:14,15*).
- **To be our Saviour** (*Romans 5:8*)
- **To offer hope**

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Questions for discussion

- 1) Do you ever stop to think about what crucifixion is really like? Have we sanitised it because we can't cope with the horror of it or is it simply familiarity? What difference would it make to you if you really knew what it was like?
- 2) The evidence – Jesus apparently defeated and powerless – seems to suggest he wasn't who he said he was. Imagine how the leaders, the women and the disciples must have felt. With whom do you identify?

3) Had God really abandoned Jesus? Why/why not?

4) What to you is the most important reason for Jesus' death? What difference does that make to you?