

Good Friday Sermon: Divided by the cross

The lasting image of Good Friday is the hill, The Skull, Golgotha, with three crosses – the larger central cross on which Jesus was crucified, standing straight, and two slightly smaller crosses, leaning slightly off to the sides.

And it's on those two smaller crosses that the two criminals who were condemned to death with Jesus were crucified. The scriptures don't tell us anything about the relative sizes of the crosses, but traditionally those other two are smaller, but the scriptures are quite clear on their relative positioning. "They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left." (Mark 15:27)

So on this Friday afternoon, outside Jerusalem, there were these three men, being ritually executed. Stripped, beaten, nailed and tied to crosses, and hung up to die in front of the crowds. Jesus, the apparently failed messiah, against whom Pilate could find no charge, crucified between two convicted criminals.

The chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." (Mark 15:31-32)

They were ridiculing Jesus. In the traditional Jewish understanding of the messiah, there was no way the messiah would have ended up like this. They would have been expecting the messiah to march into Jerusalem, throw out the Romans, and reestablish the kingdom as it was at the time of King David.

Mark tells us those crucified with Jesus also heaped insults on him, but Luke tells us more, and says that one of the criminals said "Are you not the messiah? Save yourself and us!"

Jesus didn't respond, but Luke tells us that, strangely, the other criminal did. "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

"You and I," he effectively says, "deserve to die, but this fellow – Jesus – doesn't".

This second criminal, traditionally called 'the penitent thief', has this remarkable awareness of what's going on. We deserve to die, he says to his fellow thief, but Jesus doesn't. And yet, here they all are, being crucified.

But his awareness doesn't end there, because then he addresses the man on the central cross – "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom".

So, the first criminal was saying "Save yourself and save us!", but the penitent said effectively, "Save me!". The tone couldn't have been more different. The mocking of the first criminal. And the faith, the trust of the second.

And Jesus recognised, and confirmed, the penitent thief's faith: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise".

What did the penitent thief do to earn Jesus' favour? Nothing.

What could have done to earn Jesus' favour? Nothing.

Hanging there on the cross there was nothing he could do. He couldn't do good deeds. He couldn't give to the poor. But he could put his trust in Jesus.

These two criminals, both guilty, both under sentence of death, in fact both dying at this stage, on either side of Jesus, are divided – and not just symbolically – by Jesus's cross.

At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.

With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. (Mark 15:33-38)

The temple and the tabernacle before it, had always been divided by curtain.

We first hear of the curtain, sometimes called the veil, when Moses was given instructions by God in the wilderness for constructing the tabernacle, the tent of meeting. It is recorded in Exodus 36:35 -- "They made the curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim woven into it by a skilled worker."

Over time, it became a feature of the temple in Jerusalem, just as it had been a prominent part of the sanctuary – the tabernacle – that Moses had built in the wilderness.

It was a big curtain – 28 cubits high, and 10 cubits wide. About 14 metres by 5.

We read in the book of Exodus (Exodus 26:33b) -- "The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place."

The Holy Place was where priests would carry out their duties of interceding in prayer for the people, serving there on a rotating basis, on allotted days.

But the Most Holy Place, often called the Holy of Holies, was on the other side of the curtain – the curtain kept this holiest of all places from the eyes of any person, and restricted the entrance of any person except one, the High Priest, and even then, he could only enter on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur.

The Holy of Holies was held to be the place where God himself was present. Originally, the ark of the covenant, the box containing the original tablets of the ten commandments, was kept in there.

The ark, though, had disappeared when the Jews were held captive in Babylonia, and so by Jesus' time, there was only an altar present for the High Priest to present a blood sacrifice each year for the sins of the people.

The curtain divided the people from God. And the people knew God as separate from them. They knew God was holy, as perfect, as almighty. Mere people were not fit to be in the presence of God.

And so the curtain was a divide. A divide that could not be crossed, but it was also visible. The lesser priests could see it – and they knew – they believed, that God's presence was on the other side. So near, and yet so far.

But we heard that, as Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Not just torn a bit, but torn in two, from top to bottom.

It was a sign that something had dramatically changed – that the curtain that divided God from the people was broken. People no longer needed to be separated from God – a new relationship between God and people had now been initiated!

Go back to the words of the prophet Isaiah (7:14) repeated at the opening of Matthew's gospel: Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel, [that is, God is with us].

Rather than God being separated from us, God is with us.

God tore the curtain. In Jesus' death, God gave up his son for us.

The division of the curtain has gone. Not through anything that we did, but through what God did in Jesus' death.

The division of the curtain has gone. But the division of the cross remains.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:18) "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

The cross divides. Not in the same way the curtain of the temple did, but the cross does divide. Those who, like the first criminal, reject Jesus, think of the gospel as foolishness, are certainly perishing. But for those, like the penitent thief, who admit their sins, and turn to Jesus in faith, are being saved. Today, they will be with Jesus in paradise.

But unlike the curtain which divided people from God, it is up to each and every person to decide which side of the cross they will be on.

To reject Jesus.

Or to accept Jesus.

Verse 37 tells us that Jesus, with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last..

His work was complete. The way to God was no longer through the system of rituals and sacrifices which culminated in the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.

The way to God was now – is now – only through Jesus. Through his sacrifice. Through his death in our place.

People today are divided by the cross.

Our choice is to laugh at and deride Jesus, as the first criminal did.

Or to turn to Jesus, and trust in him.

Amen.