

Good Friday - I was there!

I'm sure that you can't have failed to notice that the title of Grand Slam has returned to the "spiritual home" of rugby football – Wales. What also pleased us Welsh was the way in which England came fourth in the championship. I noticed at the singing of the National Anthem that they got comedian Max Boyce to sing it with the singer Charlotte Church. It was Max Boyce that typified Welsh rugby in the 70s and coined a memorable phrase what will probably outlast him: "I was there". He was referring to the historic victory by Llanelli over the New Zealand All Blacks by points to 3 in 1975. It was Max Boyce's badge of pride.

You will recall from our reading of the story of that First Good Friday that as Jesus hung on the cross there were a number of people that Matthew recorded as being there. It was hardly surprising. It was common to crucify people in a visible place outside the city near the gates so that everyone could see.

At such a public execution it's not surprising to find a number of people there to watch. To us it seems a ghoulish thing to do but in those days an execution drew a crowd – even a Roman execution.

It's not surprising to find that at Jesus' crucifixion were what may be called the "normal" people you would expect – the executioners, the accusers, people standing around, people passing by, the family of those being executed.

◆ The Executioners – The Roman Soldiers

And sitting down, they kept watch over him there.

Here were men just doing their job. They had probably already executed hundreds. Just another execution. Just another prisoner to bully, beat and inflict pain on. It's well known that soldiers often regard their victims or their oppressed as sub-human – not worth the dignity of humanity. To them, Jesus was a condemned man requiring the worst death known. And they did their job and sat down. In other places we read how they shared the clothing of the condemned and drew lots for His clothing. Cruel men who were just doing their job.

◆ Chief priests, Elders, teachers of the Law

"He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

These were the men most directly responsible for Jesus' death in human terms. They had plotted, they had paid Judas, they had decided that one man must die for the people. They had manipulated Pilate. For them, victory was sweet. They had got rid of whom they regarded as a "blasphemer".

◆ Crowd

49 The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

◆ Passers by

40 "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

◆ Robbers

44 In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

Both the crowd and passers by were just there. The robbers couldn't help being there. They just joined in with the usual heckling and angry shouting associated with an execution. They didn't care that they may have listened to Jesus, watched His miracles and the rest. In a crowd mentality, you don't do as your conscience feels, but as circumstances direct. You do what the crowd thinks is right. Crowd mentality is not concerned with truth but with prejudice and what seems a good thing at the time. People always gather to watch someone else's pain. If there is an accident, people gather to watch. Why is it that on the news we only see the suffering? Why is it that politicians and newspapers demonise certain groups for their own ends? It's the mentality of the crowd. And crowds can be easily manipulated. We live in a land where

politicians and press manipulate us. Remember that fact over the next few months and ask whether that you are being told is truth or manipulation.

◆ Family and Friends

55 Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. 56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

For family and friends, this must have been an awful time. They did not realise He would rise again from the dead. For them, this was the end. Hope was dashed. The cause was lost. All they could do is perhaps be there to say goodbye and perhaps try to be a comfort if they could.

The whole tenor of what these onlookers saw was defeat. The great teacher, the rabbi who did miracles, had been brought low and defeated. His opponents mocked in victory (or so they thought). The crowd, the passers by and the robbers all just mocked Him as well – so much for this Messiah! The executioners just did their jobs – just another crucifixion. The family and friends just looked on helplessly.

Are you one of those people this morning? Or like them. Jesus was a good man – but? Or aren't you bothered? So what if Christians believe Jesus died to bring us into relationship with God. I'll go with the other 97% of people in Britain and ignore it.

Or maybe you are a believer. You've heard His words spoken in Church. You've read the Bible. Yet as a believer, you live your life in defeat. Jesus makes no difference in your life. You are beset by the problems of life, pressures, stresses – and don't feel Jesus is there for you. That was the feeling in those close to Jesus who watched on that day.

But in this story there are glimmers of hope.

- ➔ Centurion etc .– for the centurion at the foot of the cross and his soldiers, watching on, the whole thing realised this was no ordinary execution: *54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"* These were the pagans – the outsiders. The Jews were supposed to be able to recognise their Messiah, but the ones that saw who Jesus really was were Romans. Let's consider the cross again this morning and look and see the One who was the Eternal Son of God dying in our place, for our sins – and let's worship Him, let's thank Him, let's honour Him as we remember His broken body and shed blood.
- ➔ Penitent Thief. Luke makes an observation about one of the robbers that Matthew doesn't. *Luke 23:39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."* In the hours that they hung there, one of the thieves also understood who Jesus was too. He was the most unlikely one. But yet in his dying moments, He found in Jesus that which he had missed all his life.

What are we learning here on this Good Friday morning? Firstly the ones that found salvation weren't the people you would expect – the religious people. The ordinary people who considered themselves to be blessed as the people of God didn't find salvation either. The ones that found it were those who were open to what God was doing.

We are going to come around the communion table this morning. We are going to remember that event again. We are going to break the bread and we are going to drink the wine. We are going to be onlookers – or perhaps more poignantly, we are going to be participants at Calvary. We weren't there but this morning we are in one sense going to be there - like Max Boyce and his rugby match. The question is, which of the onlookers are we?

You may find that question a bit of an insult but what the actual story showed was that most of the people there failed to see God in what was happening. Maybe we are self-righteous, religious Christians. We think we know it all or at least we know where we stand. We have the Bible sewn up. We are here to affirm what we think of Jesus. And we are affirming that.

Maybe for some of us, it's just another Communion. And we are here to "remember" the Lord. But that's all we'll do. We'll have remembered.

But at the cross, two lots of lives were transformed because they saw God in it. They saw that Jesus was doing something and was doing it for them. As we come to the table again this morning, where is Jesus? Is He the Saviour in what you have experienced and learned about in the past from Bible teachers you consider finer than me so you don't need anything new or different? Is he the Saviour you are remembering because that's what you do at times like this?

**Where is Jesus this morning?
What's He doing?**

He the living Saviour that lives in you by His Spirit and who is present at this table this morning who wants to bring each of us into a deeper relationship with Him.

Let's exclaim – this is surely the Son of God – our Saviour, our Redeemer, our Friend. Let's come before Him in penitence like the thief, the robber did. Let this be a life-transforming Easter.

**In Jesus' name
Amen**