



I was there!

Matt 27:27-61

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. It's not quite the same as the great Welsh teams of the 70s who conquered all, but people in Wales are pleased that at last they've got a side that are winners. In the 70s there was a real rugby culture, typified by comedian, Max Boyce. People loved Max Boyce and his rugby humour. He 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 9 points to 3 in 1975. It was Max Boyce's badge of pride. He was there. He had seen what was then the greatest rugby team in the world beaten by a Welsh town team. It was the equivalent of Ipswich Town beating the Brazilian national side!

It was a day to remember and still fondly spoken of by the people who live in West Wales. The minnows beat the giants and history was made for Welsh rugby fans. There were many boys down the valleys that were inspired by Welsh rugby in the 70s. For them it wasn't soccer that they followed but rugby – inspired by "I was there" moments.

You will recall from our reading of the story of that First Good Friday that as Jesus hung on the cross there were people standing there rather like Max Boyce in his Llanelli Rugby shirt. They were spectators to an execution. In those days, there was nothing like a good execution to bring the whole town together! It seems ghoulish to us that people would go to watch an execution but in countries like Iran, people still do just that.

The strange thing about executions was that it was almost like a sporting event. People were there for different reasons. For example if you go to a rugby match, you'll find the home supporters, the away supporters, neutral people looking to see a good match and then there are those who are there just doing their job like the police and the St John ambulance. And the match will affect them in different ways – and for some people, not at all.

It's a strange thing to say, but that was rather like the execution of Jesus. It was witnessed by many people and each would have been affected by it in different ways. Of one fact we can be sure – nobody there except Jesus of course – understood that they were at THE defining moment of history.

So who was there? It was quite a surprising bunch really. There were those who were glad to see Jesus was going to be dead and buried. They were there to get their own back. He had humiliated them, drawn people away from them. He undermined their values. And who were these people? The religious people – the High Priests, Pharisees, the scribes, and a mob of people who were their supporters.

Matt 27:39 (NIV) Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "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!" 41 In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 42 "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.'"

Then there were those in Jesus own family and followers who were there. Actually most weren't. There is a saying "When the going gets tough, the tough get going". Not so the disciples – they forsook Him and fled. It was far too dangerous for them to be there. But *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. It's remarkable isn't it, that when the chips are down, you find out who really cares. And here were these women, present there as family and friends often were at executions – to try and be a comfort. We know from John's gospel that Jesus' mother was there as well as John himself. The risk takers.

Then there were those there just doing their job. The Roman soldiers. They didn't care who Jesus was or might be. For them and execution was an opportunity to brutalize a criminal and then make him suffer the worst death anybody at that time could think of. To them, Jesus was just another prisoner they were getting rid of. They did their stuff as we had read to us and then Matthew records *And sitting down, they kept watch over him there.* Spectators.

This morning we have come to remember again the execution of Jesus. I know that most of us have heard the same story many times. We have heard the same message year after year for many years.

I said earlier that the cross was the defining moment of history. And here were all these people – even those close to Jesus who followed Him – that just didn't have a clue that it was.

But that's just what the cross was. Here was God, the Son, dying – being killed by the people He had created. He was being rejected, falsely accused, beaten and cruelly killed by people who should be worshipping Him. Why? So that He could die in their place and take on Him the penalty for the sins they had committed.

Yet here was Jesus opening the way in which human beings, not just then, but now too could be reconciled to God, find forgiveness and know eternal life. But right at that moment, not even His followers could see that one coming. That didn't start to dawn on them until the third day! It's not that they hadn't been told about it. They had heard Jesus say it – they just couldn't or wouldn't see it. It was just a sad fatal moment for them.

So here we have it – THE defining moment of history and nobody came away like proud Max Boyce and boasted "I was there!" Except Jesus of course. Actually, there was one person there who did realise – it was one of the people most disinterested by the occasion – the Roman centurion responsible for the execution party. Everybody except Him saw a man dying – he saw in Jesus the Son of God.

Yet this was the life-changing event of history. And it still is today. Good Friday stands as a witness to the fact that God wants to know us – his created people. A people who like most of the people on that day have rejected God, don't want to know Him and are happy to live and die without Him. Yet Jesus died so that each man and woman could know God, to know forgiveness for the sins they have done, that separate them from God. We have an exciting and life-changing message. Jesus still brings hope to men and women. He still has power to heal, to change lives, to do amazing things.

And here we are, with the knowledge of 2000 years hindsight, to remember again that first Good Friday. Is the Good Friday Service 2008 at St Mary's Walton going to be something like the crucifixion was to the people there – just another event – or is it going to be something you are going to look back at and say "I was there". What? Me? Here?

If you've never trusted Jesus before, then this could be one of those days. Because of the death of Jesus, God offers you forgiveness for your sins, new life, new hope. Are you willing to trust Him? Follow Him? Do you want to know the presence and power of God in your life? Do you want to deal with issues in your life that are keeping you from God? Then you can do that right now.

Maybe you've been trusting Jesus for years. The problem is that we become so familiar with our religion that we lose the wonder of Jesus and the significance of just how the cross was THE defining moment in history. We forget how amazing Jesus is. We can become cold, wrapped up in our own issues and don't see His power and presence in our lives. And hearing this again challenges us. If knowing Jesus is so life-changing, then how life changing is it to us - now? Do we see His power in our lives day by day? Or is Jesus someone for Sundays and special occasions?

The people that most wanted to see Jesus dead, weren't the evil Roman soldiers, but the religious

people of the day. Why? Because Jesus challenged them. They had religion. He had life, hope, power. Those who followed Him saw it, experienced it and after Jesus rose from death, took that life changing power and changed the world with it. And have been doing it ever since.

And Jesus still wants to do that in our lives. As His people, He wants us to be life-changers, world-changers, Felixstowe-changers. And that Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead is at work within us. And God wants us to have that encounter afresh with His Spirit this morning as we are faced again with the cross so that we don't walk away from the cross as the religious people did – thinking that by leaving Jesus dead that they had done themselves a favour. Or like Jesus' close friends who walked away as failures and defeated. He wants us to walk away, filled with His Spirit, ready to do His work, ready to bring Good News to people we know, and people we don't. Ready to change and be changed?

Is that you this morning? Do you need a fresh challenge? Let's pray.

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