

Mother, here is your son.

John 20:19-25

This week I was reviewing some pictures for our Maundy Thursday communion and it led me to pictures from The Passion of the Christ. It's a gory film – perhaps too gory, but it's director Mel Gibson, who was a devout Catholic, wanted to emphasise the sufferings of Jesus: in fact it opens with the verse from Isaiah 53 *But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*

And it is this day every year when we tackle the subject of death. It's not a subject that many like to discuss. Some people feel uncomfortable about it – particularly if they have lost someone precious recently. Others are comfortable with it, particularly Christians. Some of the most moving and enjoyable funerals I have been at are Christian ones where we can celebrate a life. I remember when we lived in Waltham Cross, one of our friends died and she insisted no-one mourn at her funeral. To stop this, she got her son-in-law, a stand up comedian to tell as many funny stories about her that would make the congregation fall off their seats with laughter! He didn't do a bad job of it either – and probably still tells people that it was the strangest gig that he ever had to play at!

Why do I say this? Because in all the suffering of the cross, Jesus' words were remarkable rather than expected. Of course there wasn't any humour, rather His words reflected His love and humility right to the end. They weren't the usual words of a crucified man. The thing about crucifixion was that it was slow and painful and gave plenty of time for people to come along and hurl insults at the victims – and for them to hurl insults back!

Jesus had every right to complain about His treatment: the death of Jesus was public, very public. It had the superficial legality of being a Roman execution, but in reality it was a mob execution, instituted by corrupt men, sanctioned by a weak judge and driven by an organised mob.

And how did He deal with the false accusations and mocking of His accusers. Let me quote you some more of Isaiah 53: 6 *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* 7 *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*

We know why He did it, because in that awful death, He took on the the penalty and punishment for our sins as He faced the most awful injustice and suffering that His age could foist on anybody – and He did it with the minimum of words. There was no cursing, no condemnation. The interesting irony is that the people who were responsible for His death called the curse on themselves: Matt 27:24 24 *When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"* 25 *All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"* They never gave Him the opportunity to say "I really don't think saying that seriously is a good idea!"

That said He did have an opportunity to speak to His executioners as they nailed Him to the cross. These were Roman soldiers who didn't know anything about Him and they were just doing their job. The men executed with Him – and actually the mob – had no time for Roman soldiers and they just got all the vile comments that the Jews reserved for their occupiers.

His words for them in their hearing were: Luke 23:33 *When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals--one on his right, the other on his left.* 34 *Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* We know that Jesus' words and actions made an impact on at least one of them.

Even more remarkable are Jesus' words to people who He loved who had come to say goodbye. Here they are again: 25 *Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.* 26 *When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son,"* 27 *and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.*

It was quite normal then, as indeed it is now for close family to attend an execution. And here are a named group of people being given access to the cross to be in speaking range of Jesus.

Rather than just saying goodbye; in the midst of His sufferings, Jesus took time to make His mother's domestic arrangements. He didn't have to. On His death, the responsibility for his mother's care would fall to His younger brother James and the rest of the family. Jesus on the cross decides to show His love and care for His mother by entrusting her to the beloved disciple – whom we presume to be John. Why John and not his younger brothers? Presumably he trusted John more than anyone else to ensure His mother's safety. He was there at the cross sticking his neck out with her to come and say goodbye. But it was unusual to entrust the care of a parent to someone who wasn't kin.

Or was John kin? Some have said that if you compare the lists in John's gospel with those in Matthew and Mark who also give lists then we could be seeing the same people being described in different ways. Let me give you the list of named people – actually all gospels mention an unnamed group of women at the cross from Galilee. All but one of the men may have scarpered, but the women were still there!

John: Mary the mother of Jesus, her sister (unnamed), Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene
Matthew: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the wife of Zebedee
Mark: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joseph, and Salome

There are two people who can't be confused with anyone else – Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene – Mary Magdalene is in all three lists. There's the third Mary. John calls here Mary the wife of Clopas, but is she the same as the Mother of James and Joseph? Probably. Which leaves us with our problem. In John's list is the sister of Mary, mother of Jesus, in Mark's a lady called Salome and in Matthew's the wife of Zebedee. Are they three different women, or are they the same person. If they were the same person that would make Salome, Mary's sister and Jesus' aunt, and it would make Zebedee Jesus' uncle and John, Jesus' cousin.

I leave all the keen Bible students with following that one up. If that were true, it would help to explain why these people were so close to the cross – they were probably all kin. It would explain how Jesus was so close to John and why He gave the responsibility of His mum to him.

What can we learn from Jesus through the actions we have looked at today.

First, Jesus taught us to love even when we are dying. Jesus could have been so overwhelmed by his own pain and suffering that he would not have thought of others. Not so for Jesus. In the midst of dying, he was still thinking of others. He was forgiving the Romans, He was ensuring His mother's care, He was thinking of His friend John. Christlike relationships are sacrificial ones: in the midst of all the stresses and strains of our own life, love still reaches out to others. What seals our relationships with others is often determined, not by how much we have helped them, but how much it has cost us to do it.

Second, Jesus taught us how to die. We learn things from so many people as we walk through life. We learn how to garden from others; we learn how to do DIY from others; we learn how to have a baby from others; we learn how to cook from others; we learn about the details of life from others. That is just the way it is. One generation passes its knowledge on to another generation. And one important thing we learn in life is how to die. Yes, how to die. We learn how to die from other friends and loved ones. As a minister I see the difference between those that know Jesus who die and those that don't. Jesus died to conquer the horror and uncertainty of death – to make people right with God, to deal with their sin, to bring us into an eternal relationship with Him. And of course we all enter into that through personal faith in Him.

Finally, Jesus didn't choose the way he was going to die and we won't either. That is, there are a lot of things in life we don't have choices about and most of us don't have the choice as the way we are going to die and when we are going to die. All we know is that life is 100% fatal. The question is – are we ready? Jesus was ready. It didn't mean that He liked the idea very much – read His prayer in Gethsemane. But the end equipped Him for the event: Heb 12: 2 *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Let my close by giving each of us the challenge on this Good Friday – is joy set before us; or something else. God wants each of us to know that joy this morning. If we're not following Jesus – to accept Him this morning. If we are, to remind ourselves of that joy that is set before us in Christ.

Let's pray

*Preached by Mark Reid, St Mary's Walton
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