

CRUCIFIED, DEAD AND BURIED

(Mark 15.21-47)

We usually omit the 'Crucified' bit and use the expression "Dead and Buried" to describe the end of an event or a project; so easily has this saying become part of the lexicon that we never pause to think of its actual origin.

For the disciples, this was the end of the road, things have gone pretty pear shaped very quickly and at this point in time and they were scattered in hiding wondering what to do next, the project seemed over and doomed.

The wonder of this story is that no one would make anything like this up and then broadcast it. Many Jews, possibly including Judas Iscariot, had hoped Jesus would call fire from heaven and drive the Romans into the sea, that was the kind of Messiah they were waiting for but to all and sundry it seemed the Romans had just executed and killed the man many had pinned their hopes on for re-establishing God's kingdom on earth through Israel.

Crucifixion was a practice and technique learned by the Romans from the Carthaginians during the Punic wars (264-146 BC). It was the most brutal form of execution and was practised for around 500 years by the Romans. While in our history books de-capitation or even hanging might be quick and more humane methods of execution (in context), crucifixion would guarantee a lingering and unimaginable way for a human being to die.

It became a symbol of imperial power to terrify and subdue the inhabitants of where the Romans ruled (in the year 4BC alone, Varus governor of Syria ordered the crucifixion of 2,000 Jews). In modern time we also have sadly heard of our fellow believers being crucified for their faith.

What I am trying to lay out clearly is this was not some form severe punishment that Jesus might recover from, this was a death sentence of the worst order. I remember at Grammar school many decades ago along with other pupils trying to torture and undermine the school Chaplain with questions about "did Jesus really die or was he just unconscious for a short while before coming back to life?"

This is something that the disciples would know for real – Jesus was going to die before he came off that cross and also this would sit alongside the fact that this was not meant to be the way it ended!

Jesus arrived at Golgotha in a state of exhaustion. He had been up almost 24 hours and had undergone a severe beating, humiliation and torture leading up to his crucifixion (if you ever think Jesus just received a few lashes on his back.

Can I commend Mel Gibson's - *The Passion of the Christ* to you? This shows in very graphic detail why Jesus was so weak on the way to Golgotha). Jesus was a prisoner of the Romans who had probably seen their own colleagues injured and killed by these hostile crazy Palestinians and weren't going to pass up the chance to mete out some of their own justice and revenge to a so-called King of the Jews, especially when not having to worry about the world's press or any human rights observers looking on.

Recognising this severe beating, even the Romans acknowledged Jesus was too weak to carry his cross beam to his execution site and compelled Simon of Cyrene to carry it for him.

Golgotha we are told was known as "the place of the skull." Tom Wright suggests this was more to do with the shape of the rocks there but its name certainly implied it as being a place of death where executions took place.

At the crucifixion Jesus was executed between two other men who we are told in this Gospel version both heaped insults on him. These are described as bandits or brigands who would not be ordinary criminals but more likely revolutionaries, possibly having tried to play a part in the hope of a violent overthrow of the Romans (Tom Wright - *Mark for Everyone* - SPCK).

This awful event was occurring on the Friday morning, the day of preparation before the Jewish sabbath on the Saturday.

Jesus, we read, refuses to mitigate his own suffering by drinking drugged wine (a thoughtful concession from the Romans!) but instead chooses to drink the dregs of the cup his father has given him after pleading a few hours earlier to not have to do this in Gethsemane. Unlike medieval art portrayals prisoners executed by crucifixion would be naked to add to their final humiliation.

Nails driven through his feet and arms secured Jesus to the Cross and he was hauled upright and would now be left there till he died.

Professor F.P. Retief of the University of Bloemfontein stated in the *South African Medical Journal* that in crucifixion death would be by asphyxiation from severely impaired respiration. Anyone hanging suspended by the arms (with or without nails)

would have the volume of air going in and out of the lungs reduced by 70% within a few minutes (proved in studies on students).

We are familiar with the story of Jesus crying out on the cross – “My God my God why did you abandon me?”

Jesus shouts out and then, “breathes his last” (that other saying we use without reference). The temple curtain we read is torn in two from top to bottom and the Centurion states, “This really was the son of God”.

These events signify two things; firstly, that the Temple curtain being ripped in two shows that the purpose and role of the temple as God’s resting place among men has now finished. The curtain separated man from the Holy of Holies but now through the death of his Son access into the presence of God would be open to all.

Secondly despite Jesus’s claims to be the Son of God but rejected by all the religious leaders and Jews, it is a battle-hardened Centurion (who would have witnessed many young Jews dying on crosses) who affirms Jesus as the True Son of a God and confirming that Gods Kingdom has come.

We have read that the land at midday was also covered in darkness for three hours. This has been sometimes linked to an eclipse but most scholars think this unlikely as Passover always took place at full moon placing the moon in the wrong part of the sky for such an event to occur.

From this cosmic darkness and earthquake, like in the creation story, comes the very beginning of God’s new creation of a world the way it was meant to be, headed by his son and followers but as we know yet to be completed. At times like this it seems very far off but let us currently cling to the hope and belief that God is in control and working his purposes out, no matter how hard that might be for you to do at the moment.

The symbolism is amazing not only the start of a new creation discussed above but in the last 24 hours we have seen the Passover meal replaced by the eucharist and the lifesaving blood above the gateposts of the Israelites replaced by Christ’s blood spilt at Calvary. This is the new Passover and the new Exodus! The old has gone and the new way and hope of rescue will shortly be open to all peoples through Jesus Christ- Hallelujah.

Jesus died on the cross and would rise as we know 3 days later but his dead body now hung on the cross. In a very dark and sickly irony it would be the right thing to do to bury his body before the Sabbath the next day.

The Jewish leaders who, with the help of the Romans, had essentially killed God for daring to say he was God would not now want a corpse left out in case it offended God and broke the laws of ritual cleanliness.

Regardless, step forward a very brave man determined to do what was still the right thing. Joseph of Arimathea was probably a secret believer and up to this point had followed Jesus from a distance, now he took his faith in both hands and asked Pilate for the body of Jesus.

Again, note how Mark records that before agreeing, Pilate first checked with the Centurion at Golgotha that Jesus was dead. Pilate and the centurion were subject matter experts in death and dealing out of death in the same way that our own trades and professions are, or have been, to us in our own working lives.

While for some reason Pilate seemed surprised Jesus was dead (after what he had been through!) he knew that if the centurion had said Jesus was dead - he was dead, and Mark clearly records this for posterity and absolute clarity.

Joseph had now identified himself with Jesus and by handling his body would have made himself ritually unclean and unable to partake in the sabbath the following day.

When Joseph got home, he might have some explaining to do as to where he had been and also telling his wife that the cave tomb they had prepared and bought for themselves after their death had already got someone in it! His actions would be noted by the High Priests and their spies and he would be now marked out as a follower of the Nazarene trouble maker, again a very brave man.

Finally, Joseph places or rolls a stone against the entrance to the tomb, we assume this is a large stone and wonder if he had help to do this, but we are not told. What we are told though is that the two Marys (Magdalene and Jesus' mother) see where Jesus is buried and again Mark wants us to have no doubts that when they go looking for him in 3 days they know exactly where he was buried!

Finally, I would like to use the Message Bible version of our Isaiah reading, starting at verse 7, to show how God's promise and prophecy given around 700 years before in the book of Isaiah was fulfilled through Jesus's death on the cross.

When we talk of God's righteousness, we immediately think about how righteous God is and how sinful we are? (not untrue) but what this is more descriptive of is actually that God sticks to the promises and covenants made with his people (unlike us).

*He was beaten, he was tortured,
but he didn't say a word.
Like a lamb taken to be slaughtered
and like a sheep being sheared,
he took it all in silence.
Justice miscarried, and he was led off—
and did anyone really know what was happening?
He died without a thought for his own welfare,
beaten bloody for the sins of my people.
They buried him with the wicked,
threw him in a grave with a rich man,
Even though he'd never hurt a soul
or said one word that wasn't true.
Still, it's what GOD had in mind all along,
to crush him with pain.
The plan was that he give himself as an offering for sin
so that he'd see life come from it—life, life, and more life.
And GOD's plan will deeply prosper through him.*

Jesus is the true Messiah, the Shepherd who didn't leave his sheep when the wolf came and lays down his life for those he loves (all mankind if they choose to follow him). He is the true king (unlike Herod) and not the false prophet some people had said he was (Peter- cock crowing). He is the son of the vineyard owner who the tenants killed.

As he predicted, he would be vindicated by his death and resurrection and would rebuild the temple (God's dwelling with man) in 3 days.

Our western, individualistic and Protestant theology has a strong focus on our own personal redemption but we need also to remember that Jesus' victory on the cross signifies the overthrow of the world powers/idols that have kept the human race in its grip.

Israel was the place where the weight of the world's sin lay heavy. Rome the ruling power of the world of the time was a military idolatrous regime that claimed its

rulers were God's. Israel the chosen people had lost sight of God's ways and was bent on violent revolution which Jesus had warned them would end in disaster, as it did in AD70, as he prophesised, with the "sacking" of Jerusalem.

Death was, and unfortunately still is, the currency and threat of the powerful and wicked but Jesus would defeat it and pass through it and come out of the other side alive, starting and proclaiming the revolution had begun and God's rule had come from the future to be re-established in the present with his people on Earth. Amen.