

JESUS THE VICTIM

(Hebrews 9.11-15 and Mark 15.33-40)

How graphic can you get without the benefit of a camera?

St. Mark's description of the death of Jesus – our gospel reading – paints the picture vividly.

- Darkness lasting three hours
- Jesus anguished, shouted, question – *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*
- The sponge with the wine vinegar lifted to his lips.
- Jesus' loud death cry
- The temple curtain torn in two from top to bottom
- The spoken conviction of the centurion

The death of Jesus – the victim.

Did he know he was destined to be a victim? Did he tell anyone?

A man with two red ears went to see the doctor. The doctor asked him what had happened to his ears – they looked as if they were burnt. The man explained 'I was ironing a shirt and the phone rang. Instead of picking up the phone, I accidentally picked up the iron and stuck it to my ear' 'O dear', the doctor exclaimed in some disbelief. 'But what happened to your other ear?' 'The phone rang again.'

That level of comprehension was about the level of comprehension of Jesus' disciples. A couple of weeks ago John Lambert emphasised their very limited ability to understand and take in what Jesus said to them. Do you know how many times Jesus told them he was going to die an unnatural death? In Mark's gospel alone no fewer than six times and there are other instances recounted in the other gospels. They did not understand and they did not believe him.

An example of Jesus' certain knowledge that he was going to be a victim is this passage from Mark 10.32-34.

Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. *We are going up to Jerusalem, he said, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the gentiles who will mock him and spit on him and kill him.*

And what do the disciples do? They argue about their order of precedence – who is better than whom?

So Jesus knew he was going to be a victim even if his closest friends could not understand or accept it. But a victim of whom?

Of the Teachers of the Law (who used to be called Scribes) – certainly. They demanded absolute obedience to what they taught, greater even than that expected of a son for his father. They were the people who were up in arms when Jesus told the paralytic let down via the roof in Mark 2 that his sins were forgiven. *Who can forgive sins but God?* was their cry.

Who else? The Pharisees – literally ‘those who were separate’: the top dogs in Jewish society. They too were zealous in upholding the religious rules – remember, *This man is eating with tax collectors and other sinners* and the business of picking and eating ears of corn on the Sabbath? You’ll find both in Mark 2.

Who else? The Sadducees – similar to the Pharisees in their outlook and zeal but with different beliefs. Interestingly they held the majority in the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ruling council. In Luke 20 they tried to trap Jesus with a complicated question about who was married to whom after the resurrection – the resurrection which they did not believe in.

Who else? Caiaphas the High Priest who we find leading the tendentious questioning of Jesus in the Sanhedrin in Mark 14.

Who else? Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who, scared stiff of losing his job if there was a riot and despite his belief that Jesus was not guilty of what he was accused of, condemned him to a cruel death in Mark 15.

Who else? The Roman soldiers who mocked and beat up Jesus before crucifying him – Mark 15 again.

Jesus – the victim of all these people. All these people took their part in St. Mark's vivid description of Jesus' death. Let's look at it again in detail.

Listen to this spoof newspaper article of the time: *Clearly an earthquake cut the power supplies*, said a spokesman. When it was pointed out to him: *We do not have power supplies*, he said *Oh!* When asked what was causing the darkness, the Chief Weather Prophet said: *It's probably just an area of very low pressure. In the old days they would have attributed it to the wrath of God. Thank heavens we're all a bit more sophisticated these days.*

The darkness was not an eclipse. The Passover happened at full moon so the moon would be in the wrong part of the sky. It was a cosmic event. In the story of creation in Genesis, *Darkness was over the face of the deep* before God created the light-giving elements. Is this darkness saying that what was happening would in due course become something that would bring new and transforming light to the world? We do not know for certain.

Certainly, Jesus was not only in agony but in deep spiritual darkness. *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani – My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?* The heartfelt cry of man who had been so close to his loving and beloved Father – at one with Him - for so many years and had now become separated from Him and right then could see no way back.

Someone, I guess out of compassion and pity, runs off to get a sponge and stick it on a staff to offer the suffering Jesus a drink.

Then that last loud cry of agony and Jesus dies.

And then....the curtain described in another spoof newspaper of the time like this: *... the huge curtain in the temple was split in half. The curtain guards the most sacred place – the Holy of Holies – from ordinary unholy people. Did he tell There was chaos: the priests were trying to stick the curtains back up before anyone could get a look. Luckily somebody rushed in shouting 'Let me through, I'm an interior decorator' and the situation was saved.*

Finally we have the centurion, a non-Jew, the Roman soldier in charge; standing there, there seeing and hearing all that had gone on, *Surely this man was the Son of God* or, in the more colloquial words of the Message Bible, *This has to be the Son of God*.

So where does all this leave us?

We've made fun of the disciples as not accepting what Jesus told them but are we alert to and accepting of what Jesus the victim says to us through his Holy Spirit. What is Jesus saying to each of you and me today - this week. He will be saying something so let's listen up.

We've noted, probably feeling uncomfortable because of the grim circumstances, the imaginary, but not untypical, cynical treatment by the journalistic community of the death of Jesus the Victim and the surrounding circumstances. Generally the Church of that Jesus gets short shrift in today's media of all kinds. Can we in our conversations with our non-Christian friends do something to counter that?

Can we, as we read about, and almost hear, that cry of Jesus the Victim, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* and take in his last, loud death cry, can we understand – really accept - that this God was also and completely also man and all that that implies? Do we stand with that centurion – *This has to be the Son of God?*

We've puzzled over the matter of the darkness and the temple curtain. Can we see them as a sign of the breakthrough of the new covenant, the new promise, of Jesus the Victim fulfilling God's promises in the Old Testament?

We've heard about the compassionate bystander going to the trouble of running for a sponge, soaking it with something for the dying Jesus to drink. Can we ignore the persecution and cruel deaths of his disciples in many, many parts of the world and not do something – if not with cash at least with prayer – about it?

Earlier we made a list of those who made Jesus their victim – The Teachers of the Law, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the High Priest, the Romans, Pontius Pilate. That list is incomplete. Something, someone is missing – me and you

and the rest of humanity who, however hard we try cannot live up to the standards of a Holy God. We deserve his condemnation. What stands between us that condemnation? Nothing less than the death of Jesus the Perfect Man, Jesus the Victim.

We've concentrated on our reading from Mark but let me remind you of the reading from Hebrews. After talking about the old forms of sacrifice, the writer goes on:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.

And our response? We have sung it a few minutes ago:

Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!