



Sermon

Easter Sunday, 20th April 2014

Risen Lord and Saviour

Mt 28:1-10

© 2014 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

Tenebrae

On Good Friday in the evening, we held a service of *Tenebrae*. It is a service in which a series of readings leads us through the gathering shadows over Jesus' life in the last 20 hours before his death. We heard from Psalms which so amazingly prefigured his suffering and death. Psalm 22 describes the situation of a crucified man, but was written before crucifixion was a common practice:

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. ... a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.¹

From the gospel we heard the account of betrayal, abandonment, denial, rejection, the emotional, spiritual and physical suffering and finally his death.

After each set of readings, we extinguished a candle until just one was left. With the account of Jesus' death that last burning candle was placed behind the altar, hidden, but throwing a shadow of the cross onto the wall. However, the last reading from Psalm 16 carried a hint of hope:

I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.²

Death would not have the last word over God's Anointed One. He would not be abandoned to the grave. His body would not decay. There was to be joy beyond the agony.

Despairing Disciples

For the disciples, Jesus' life appeared to have ended on the Friday with total defeat. He had been acclaimed as a prophet, a priest and a king earlier in the week. He had come into Jerusalem humbly but with great cheering of the people. He had somehow deftly avoided the threats of the authorities who wanted to destroy him. He had made strange remarks about needing to suffer, even to die. Matthew records five instances³:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.⁴

¹ Psalm 22:14-18

² Psalm 16:8-11

³ Mt 16:21; 17:22; 20:17, 28; 26:2

⁴ Matthew 16:21

We learn more details from the subsequent times he warned them: He would be mocked, flogged and crucified; he would give his life as a ransom for many. And over and over again, Jesus told them he would rise on the third day. But it made no sense to them – they could not absorb it.

Having fled when the soldiers came to arrest him, they hung around anxiously, afraid they too would be arrested. How they must have mourned – mourned the man they loved who now had suffered so terribly – mourned the hopes he had engendered which now seemed so empty and meaningless.

On that Friday, the word around Jerusalem was “Jesus defeated.” Two days later, the women going to the tomb learnt the full truth: “Jesus defeated the enemy.”

It was women who went to attend to the burial customs. Women would not be suspected of terrorism. It was thus the women who encountered the angel who caused the tomb to open and revealed that Jesus had gone. “He has risen!”

The guards and women are terrified. Raw spiritual power does that to people. However, the angel reassured the women telling them not to be afraid and that Jesus had risen. He would meet his disciples soon. Then as they ran to tell them, they encountered Jesus himself. And their response: “... they worshipped him.”⁵ They had no doubt now and he accepted that worship. All through the Bible, no one except God is entitled; apostles and angels refused it indignantly. But Jesus accepted their worship as the Son of God.

Hearing again the accounts of his trial on Friday, I was struck afresh by the accusations of blasphemy made against him. The irony being that his words were truth not blasphemy, and their words which they thought were righteous were blasphemous.

The High Priest said, “I charge you under oath by the Living God: Tell us if you are the Christ the Son of God.”

“Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Then the High Priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy!”⁶

No, he had spoken the truth! And now his resurrection, his return to life, proved it. We too, will in the future see him sitting at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven. Will it be a welcome sight of the one we love and serve? Or will it be terrifying because we have lived a life in opposition to him? Either way, this is our God!

Sin Offering

Two weeks ago, we considered the account of the raising of Lazarus. Jesus’ friend had died; Jesus came four days later, gave the command and Lazarus was restored to life. This caused many of the people who say it to put their faith in him.

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.⁷

The High Priest had prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

⁵ Verse 9

⁶ Matthew 26:63b-65b

⁷ John 11:47-53

Thorns and crown of thorns.

In the account of the Fall of Man in Genesis, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, death was introduced. But there were curses too as the consequence of their disobedience to God. To the man, God pronounced the earth would no longer readily support him but it would require hard work and bring forth thorns and thistles.

In dying on the cross, Jesus deliberately chose to carry the sins of humanity. By the innocent one suffering a death penalty he was able to free the guilty from their penalty.

Just as the first sin of humanity resulted in death, so God in Christ, chose to suffer that penalty to give us life. Just as the first sin resulted in suffering in work and birth, so God took the very symbol of suffering, the thorn bush and worn it as a crown at his death. Nothing imposed on mankind would not be suffered by God himself.

As Peter says in the passage from Acts 10: He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."⁸

Jesus died in our place to carry all the sin, all the curses, all the separation from God. He died to be our rescuer, our saviour. His resurrection showed that offering was sufficient and effective. Death could not hold him.

I present Jesus before you as God, as Lord, as Saviour. We celebrate his rising to life again at Easter. Will you acknowledge him as your Lord and God? He allows you not to; but he calls each of us to follow him. He calls you to obey him. He offers forgiveness and peace of heart; peace with God.

Have you will you submit to him? You may like to pray after me a short prayer of commitment.

Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner. Thank you for dying for me on the Cross and paying the price for every sin I have ever committed. I turn from that sin now and ask you to come into my life as my Saviour, Lord and friend. Thank you for hearing this prayer. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

I want to offer you two things. If you prayed that prayer for the first time and meant it, I would like you to take one of these little booklets – it will help you understand better what Jesus has done for you.

The other opportunity is a series of evenings starting in May when you can explore what Christianity is about; where no question is considered silly or rude. It is called the Alpha course and we would love you to take part. It is free; it is enjoyable and well worthwhile. Invitations are available as you go out at the end of the service.

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

⁸ Acts 10:42-43