

Good Friday: The Message in the Darkness

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[0 : 00] Do just have that passage from Mark's Gospel open in front of you, if you would. It's all about the message in the darkness, the darkness of those hours on the cross.

That's just your interpretation. That's a common saying today, isn't it? In our world, increasingly, we like to think that our interpretation of something is just as valid as somebody else's.

Just because something's true for you, doesn't necessarily mean it's true for me. That's all there is to it. We certainly come across that sort of thing a lot today, don't we, when we speak about religion.

That's just your interpretation, people say. Mine's quite different. There's nothing else to be said, really. I wonder if you try that next time you get stopped for speeding.

Excuse me, sir. Did you realize you were doing 70 miles per hour and the speed limit is 30? Oh, that's just your interpretation, officer. I don't think I was going very fast at all.

[1 : 10] Not in my opinion. Well, alas, even the most convinced relativists want plenty of time, won't they, to reconsider the objective reality of the truth, according to Strathclyde police speed cameras, as they sit on the bus for the next year waiting to get their license back.

Because when we put all that philosophical mumbo-jumbo aside and come back to planet Earth, we all know that in the real world there is such a thing as true truth. But what is the true truth, the true interpretation and meaning of the death of Jesus Christ?

Certainly, there are many, many interpretations on offer today. If you listen to the documentaries, if you read the articles, it will always appear about this time of year in our newspapers. Many interpretations.

Many people consider Jesus to be, well, a very great man, a great teacher, who died tragically young. Some people, and I believe that this is the belief taught by Islam, some people believe that Jesus didn't actually die at all, that magically a doppelganger was somehow substituted for Jesus and the real Jesus escaped.

I personally find it very hard to believe how any intelligent person in touch with real history can believe that, but apparently many millions do. And also, I'm afraid, there are many, even within the Christian church, who are very confused, it seems, about what Jesus' death was really all about.

[2 : 46] So I want to ask this today, this Good Friday lunchtime, is it just a matter of my interpretation and yours? Can we have different, can we have even conflicting interpretations of the Bible's account of the death of Jesus?

What I want you to see is that Mark, who wrote this gospel, very probably the earliest gospel account, that Mark, in fact, gives a very clear and authoritative interpretation of what the death of Jesus is really all about.

He's writing with the authority of the Apostle Peter's eyewitness testimony to Jesus' life and Jesus' teaching. And what he does is he not only narrates the events of Jesus' crucifixion, he clearly, in this passage right in front of us, he clearly interprets for us its meaning and its significance, just as all the apostolic writings do in the New Testament.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul sums it up in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 3. Christ died, he said. Now that much is indisputable, verifiable, historical fact.

I mean, really, let's be honest, denial of that fact is just not credible at all. Christ died. But he goes on. Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

[4 : 20] And it is those extra words that make Jesus' death not tragic bad news, but as the whole New Testament testifies, it is triumphant good news.

And I want you to see that in these verses right in front of us on this sheet today from Mark's Gospel, Mark, the evangelist, is telling us exactly that. As he proclaims in and through the events of

Jesus' death on the cross, the meaning of that death on the cross, a death for sins according to the Scriptures, the prophetic words of the prophets long before.

So what is then the message that Mark is proclaiming in the darkness of Jesus' death? Well, as always, the answer lies directly in the text of Scripture itself.

Look at it. As you can clearly see, Mark has centered his whole account around these two cries that are heard in the thick darkness that covered the whole land from the sixth hour from midday until the ninth hour, 3 p.m.

What caused the darkness? Well, we don't know. A storm, an eclipse, whatever it was, we're not told. It hardly matters. The clear implication, though, is that it was supernaturally ordained by God.

[5 : 37] But the obvious point is that, of course, in the darkness you can't see. But your ear is very especially attuned, isn't it, to what you can hear? You can listen.

And Mark records for us these two cries from the cross, verse 34 and again in verse 37. But as well as recording the cries, he also gives us for each cry a clear interpretation and a vivid response to these cries of Jesus.

There's two cries, two interpretations and two responses. That's the message that Mark wants us to hear in the darkness surrounding Jesus' death.

So look at the first cry, verse 34. Mark is telling us plainly that this cry is a cry of anguish that speaks about abandonment by God.

At the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice. Well, they had nailed him to the cross at the third hour. He'd hung there for six hours of agony after his scourging and beating. So no doubt there was real physical anguish in that cry.

[6 : 47] But of course there was far, far more than just that. Back in Mark chapter 14, you can read about the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus' anguish. He was greatly distressed, we are told.

He was troubled in spirit. Not physically, but with the spiritual agony and torment of what he knew lay ahead of him. He was fearful.

He was shrinking in fear from the cup that he was to drink. And he begged his father to take it from him. But not my will, but thine, he cried.

Now this cry on the cross is far, far more than a cry of physical anguish. It speaks of the terrible and the terrifying reality of abandonment by God, of judgment and punishment at the hand of God himself.

That's the unavoidable interpretation that Mark gives us so clearly in these verses because this cry of Jesus is interpreted for us both by the sign of the darkness and also by reference to the scriptures in these pregnant words that Jesus himself utters from the cross, quoted as they are directly from one of the Psalms, Psalm 22.

[8 : 07] He's interpreting the meaning of this cry. Now darkness, especially darkness in the middle of the daytime is an unavoidable sign of God's presence in judgment, in his anger.

The Old Testament's full of that. Think back to the Exodus when for three days the plague of thick darkness covered the whole land of Egypt just prior to the last great judgment of God as every one of the firstborn sons was put to death.

Or just think about the prophets who spoke of the coming day of the judgment of God on sin. On that day, declares the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon and darkness will cover the earth in broad daylight.

That's the prophet Amos. Listen to Isaiah. Behold, the day of the Lord comes with wrath and fierce anger. The stars will not give their light.

The sun will be dark at its rising. No Israelite would be in the least bit confused as to the significance of this darkness. It meant God's presence in judgment.

[9 : 19] And that's certainly what Jesus understood. That's why he cried out in these agonized words of Psalm 22, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

He's quoting the words of God's anointed one, his king, David, who was exposed to the mockery and the hatred of all at one time.

And worst of all, in the midst of that, he felt so keenly abandonment by God himself. What does Jesus' death mean, according to Mark?

Listen, he says. Listen to his cry. It means the real and the terrible anguish of the Son of God who has been abandoned by God because of God's real and terrible anger at human sin.

That's what it means. But how can that be, you say, because you only have to read through Mark's Gospel to realize that Jesus never did anything to deserve punishment at the hands of man, far less anything to deserve the wrath of God.

[10:29] He was perfect in all his ways. Yes, indeed he was, but remember his words. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

You see, his death on the cross is utterly incomprehensible unless we understand that, the words of Jesus himself. Unless we grasp, as Paul put it in Galatians 3, verse 13, that Christ redeemed us, he ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

Of course, many people can't grasp that. They can't grasp it now. They couldn't grasp it then. Mark responds for us, records for us the responses to Jesus' cry.

If you look there in verses 35 and 36, the response of complete ignorance. He's calling Elijah to come and save him, they say. There was some belief then that Elijah would come and save people in their distress.

But nobody seemed to understand what Jesus was really saying. The religious leaders, well, they mocked him and crucified him. The crowds mocked him. Even the disciples had all run away and left him.

[11:48] And this man in verse 35, was he mocking as well, giving Jesus sour wine to drink? Or was it just pity? Poor Jesus. He needs a rescuer, this Jesus.

He needs a saviour. That's how many people think of Jesus, isn't it? Pity. Often tinged with mockery. Poor Jesus. He's so passé now.

His cause is dying out. His church is dying out. It's being forgotten. Nobody's coming anymore. If you were listening to Radio 4, the Today program this morning, there was a discussion on exactly those terms.

Poor Jesus. He needs a helping hand these days. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth, could it? All over the world, the church of Jesus Christ is growing in leaps and bounds at a faster rate than ever at any time in history.

Even if in the West, it is true that increasingly people seem to be in the dark about Jesus. You see, that is what Mark is telling us here, that people who do not understand the cross of Jesus Christ and its message, they are in the dark still.

[13:00] But not everyone is in the dark. Look at the second cry in verse 37. Mark's telling us that this is a cry of accomplishment.

A cry of accomplishment that speaks of acceptance by God. Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. You see, Mark doesn't record his words. John does. It is finished, was the cry.

Or better still, it is accomplished. But it is Mark's way. He gives us the interpretation of Jesus' words in a much more vivid way. Look at verse 38. At the uttering of that cry, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Why on earth would he tell us about that? Why on earth take his vision off the cross and away back into the city of Jerusalem and the temple and what's going on there? Well again, it's plain as a pike staff to anyone who knows the Bible, to any child who's been to Sunday school.

That curtain is what separated the holiest place in the temple from everything outside it. Separated the place where God himself dwelled on earth and where nobody, nobody tinged with sin could ever possibly approach.

[14:10] It was a barrier that reminded everybody that even the Israelites, even God's chosen people were separated from God because of sin as they had been right from the very first rebellion of man.

The significance of that curtain goes right back to Genesis chapter 3 when man is expelled from Eden and you remember the cherubim with a flaming sword bars the way back to the presence of God.

Well that curtain had an image of that cherubim with its flaming sword embroidered onto it because that's what it represented. It was a curtain that said no access to God because sin separates you from a holy God.

but no longer says Mark in that cry of Jesus on the cross that curtain is torn open from top to bottom from heaven to earth and an opening is created and there is now access to God and acceptance with God through the death of Jesus.

We can enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way he has opened up for us through the curtain that is his flesh. That's how the writer to Hebrews puts it in Hebrews 10 verse 20.

[15 : 30] That's what Jesus' cry means says Mark. It's the achievement of access of acceptance with God for all of those that Jesus came to save as he gives his life as a ransom for many.

Paul puts it very succinctly writing to the church in Corinth for our sake he said God made him who knew no sin to be sin that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That's the great exchange that Mark is portraying for us so vividly in the way he makes us listen to the message in the darkness of the cross. Jesus Jesus is cast out of God's presence for us because of the awful reality of God's anger.

The verdict on Jesus at the cross is condemned separated but we we are welcomed back into God's presence through a new and living way opened up at the cross of Jesus.

For us the verdict is accepted and we have access at last to the God who made us for himself. Not just forgiveness so important to realize not just the negative doing away of our sin and our guilt but also fellowship access to the Father heart of God himself.

[16 : 55] Peter says Christ suffered for our sins once the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God. Can you see says Mark in the anguish of Christ's death that testifies to a real abandonment by God of his own son in that anguish is the achievement of Christ's death that testifies to a real acceptance of all of those he came to save.

It's when you begin to understand that says Mark that you grasp what the whole thing is about. And he shows that to us in the second response that he records in verse 39.

You can see the response of the Roman centurion. It's really the great climax of the whole of Mark's gospel. His gospel begins remember in the first verse the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

But all the way through the story of Jesus' life and his ministry no one has yet acknowledged who Jesus really is the Son of God. Not in response to his marvelous words.

Not even in response to his marvelous miracles. And yet now at last comes that great shaft of light light. But that light is only discovered in the darkness of the cross.

[18 : 23] Only there is the discovery of the true meaning of the cross. Only there in the midst of that anguish and that achievement of the Lord Jesus Christ will the true light shine into our own hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ the Son of God who became willingly the Son of Man to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

That's where we see the light about God. What does this mean for us? Many many things.

Let me just leave you with two to ponder. First this the message of the cross friends is what you need to hear. If you want to discover the truth about God Almighty.

If you want to discover the truth about life and the universe and everything and your whole meaning and purpose whether you're somebody who's searching for meaning and purpose whether you think that your search in life is an intellectual one or whether you're seeking peace whether you're someone who's tormented by your past by a consciousness of failure of shame of guilt even.

or whether you're haunted by the future full of worry whether you're crippled in your present life because of doubts and fears about the future. Whoever you are whatever your situation is what you need to understand above everything else in this whole universe is the message of the cross of Jesus.

[20 : 01] Because it's there that you find the truth about God. it's there that you discover a terrifying reality of a God who made you and who owns you and who rules you but is angry with the sin and the wrong in your life and a God who is just to punish that sin.

Where's the God of justice? That's a common thing that people say isn't it? When they want God to intervene and stop some wickedness or evil somewhere else not usually because they want him to intervene and stop the wickedness and evil in their own heart but at the cross of Jesus you see that. You see the terrible anguish of abandonment to hell that Jesus endured. And yet also it is at the cross of Jesus that you discover the extraordinary mercy of a God who so loved that he himself came in the person of his own son as a servant to give his life to bear his own terrible anger for those that he came to save from their sin.

It's at the cross that you discover the wonderful truth of a God who came to seek and to save that which was lost however great that lostness might be. great irony isn't there in Mark's account here

because it wasn't the religious people who thought they knew all about God and religion and that sort of thing.

It wasn't them who saw and understood was it? They're lost in their ignorance. They thought Jesus needed them, needed their efforts to help him and that's the tragic folly of all religion even some which calls itself by the name Christian.

[21 : 55] Christian can't understand and grasp the forgiving grace of God. He came not to be served by us but he came to serve.

He came to save us. No, the religious people didn't understand but who did understand? This soldier, this total pagan, no doubt a very tough man, perhaps a very rough man, very probably a hard drinking woman brutal, violent sort of man, certainly far from a socially respectable man.

But this man, verse 39, at the cross of Jesus, when he saw that in this way he breathed his loss, in this extraordinary, miraculous death of anguished accomplishment, accomplishment.

And he saw that God shined the light of heaven into his heart. And he saw the Savior for who he really was. I came, said Jesus, to call not the righteous in their own eyes, but sinners to repentance. repentance. It's the message of the cross, therefore, that every one of us needs to hear this Easter. Whoever we are, we're going to find the meaning and the purpose of life and of our own lives.

[23 : 24] We're going to find peace with God who made us. And so, second, it is the message of the cross that the church must always proclaim.

There's so many voices in our world today saying otherwise, that for all sorts of reasons, the church needs to be much more upbeat, needs to have a much more accommodating message, a much less offensive and narrow message than one about atonement for sin.

That's not new, that's always been so. The word of the cross is folly, said Paul to those who are perishing. He wrote that just the same time as Mark wrote this gospel. But to us who are being saved, he said, it is the power of God.

Yes, he said, there are many who just want spectacular signs and wonders. Yes, he said, there are others who just want intellectual titillation. But we preach Christ crucified.

It's a folly, he says. It's a scandal. But there, in the cross, and in understanding that it's in this way that Jesus died, to take the blame, to bear the wrath, that we might stand forgiven at the cross.

[24 : 45] It's there, and it's there alone that you can know God truly. And therefore, it's there alone that you can find this God truly, and follow him truly.

that's the message of the darkness, of that first Good Friday that Mark proclaims to us this Good Friday.

It's the greatest message in the whole wide world. And it's a message that's for every one of us here in this church today. I hope we'll listen.

Let's pray. But teach us, Lord, it's meaning, that cross uplifted high, and draw us to that place, to take our place at the cross of Jesus, that we also might see what your death accomplished for us, that we might make it real for us this Easter, for his glory's sake.

Amen.