

**Preaching Christ....  
...by the power of the Holy Spirit  
...and the authority of the Word of God**

Date: 12 Mar 2023  
Services: *Across the diocese*  
Series: Jesus Christ – death and resurrection  
Title: Crucifixion  
Passage: Luke 23:26-49

**Outline: A tragedy for us  
The real king revealed  
What Jesus' death reveals**

History is filled with the stories of leaders who did not live up to their promise.

I don't know your political persuasion, and the risk of offending in regards to politics is pretty great so I won't name names here, but I suspect you won't have to think too hard before you can come up with your own examples of leaders who have started strong, but ultimately failed.

Whether they promised economic overhaul, or protection from overseas enemies, or a radical social agenda, all of us have seen leaders come and go, leaving nothing but disappointment in their wake.

So far in our series, we've been looking at the meaning of Jesus' death in the Gospel of Luke (and in the next part, we'll look at the meaning of his resurrection).

This week, in our final week considering the meaning of Jesus' death, we come to Luke 23, the crucifixion.

From one perspective, this story of Jesus' death may seem just like the story of so many failed leaders. A figure rises to prominence, with a compelling message, gaining devoted followers (and some detractors). He paints a picture of a different, better, world, promising blessings that will flow to all who join him.

But when it comes time to follow through on his promises, he is exposed by the people who saw him for who he really was - as nothing more than a fantasist or a liar – and in the end he is conquered by his opponents and their superior power.

For a story that stands at the very centre of Christian faith, that we mark as the turning point of human history, it should strike us as intriguing at the very least that Luke chapter 23 depicts such a dramatic downfall for Jesus.

Luke 23 is the story of a saviour who needs saving, a king at the moment he appears to be conquered.

At least, this is how it seems to Jesus' opponents and doubters.

What we'll see as we walk through this passage is that what is unfolding is actually the opposite – it is the revealing of another kind of king, and another kind of hope. A better one, the one we need more.

We'll look at this in three parts:

1. Verses 26-31 – Jesus' death is a tragedy – for us
2. Verses 32-39 – The real king revealed

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3. Verses 40-49 – What Jesus' death achieves

**1. JESUS' DEATH IS A TRAGEDY – for us (vv. 26-31)**

We start with Jesus being led to his death, and verse 27 tells us that amongst the large number of people following him, were a group of women who mourned and wailed for him.

Quite often in the Gospel of Luke, it is women who demonstrate particular insight into what is happening. And this is no exception. These women rightly judge that something horrible is happening, something worth mourning over. And unlike many others, they are on Jesus' side.

And so Jesus' response to them is a surprising one: Verse 28 'Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say "Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!"'

Jesus is saying these women are *right* to mourn, but *wrong* to mourn for *him*.

It's themselves they should feel sorry for, in other words.

Jesus is referencing Isaiah 49 and 54, but he is completely flipping the tone of those passages. In those passages, God's people Israel is depicted as a woman who had previously been barren but to whom God promised to give many children. This metaphor signifies that Israel would have a hopeful future, because of God's merciful intervention.

But here in Luke, Jesus is saying that what is about to happen is an indication of a world so broken that to have brought children into it is a cause for grief, not joy.

A tragedy is unfolding now, one that evokes the language of Hosea 10:8 and its prophetic message of judgement on God's people: 'they will say to the mountains "fall on us!"'

Jesus is about to be mocked, tortured and killed, and yet, he says, this event will be worse for the world watching it, than it is for him.

How could this be?

We've come now to our second section, verse 32-39, the real king revealed.

**2. The real king revealed (VV. 32-39)**

I've been thinking about how I want my loved ones to die.

To be clear, before you call the police or my bishop, I'm not thinking about how I want to *cause* their death.

But just, I guess, which scenario would afford us the most time to say goodbye properly, to get their affairs in order, to tell each other that we love each other, that kind of thing.

I know it's morbid – it's just my anxious brain trying to confront something big and terrible, and make it less big and less terrible.

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I suspect that for most of us when we think about death – whether it's our own, or those of our loved ones – our priority is the maximising of comfort. We want death to be gentle. We want it to happen surrounded by people who love them and are caring for them. We want it to be 'dignified'.

What we expressly *don't* want, is for their death to be humiliating, painful, and lonely.

We would do anything we could to avoid these things, and yet as we read in verses 32 and 39 we see that this the sort of death that Jesus had.

Why? What is going on?

Let's have a look.

In verse 32, Jesus is led out to the place of execution, along with two criminals.

One writer says 'Societies have various ways of publicly removing the honor of certain persons and labelling them as social deviants who can be abused. ...Execution...It is the final act of social rejection of one who is so dishonored that all kinds of verbal and physical abuse are permitted.'

That's certainly what we see:

Verse 35: 'The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."'

The soldiers also mock him, verse 37 "'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.'"

Then one of the criminals joins in, verse 39 tells us, hurling insults at him, 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

Here we have a weird kind of unity between three groups who would normally be at odds with one another: the Jewish leaders, the Roman soldiers who oppress them, and a criminal whose crimes must be so terrible that they justify this cause of death.

Do you notice the particular character of this mockery?

It all centers on this idea that Jesus is the King of the Jews. The Messiah – the one who comes after King David, who is promised by God, anointed, or endorsed by God to lead his people.

They all say, if – if you are God's messiah, if you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!

They say *if*, but it's clear that they are certain he is not.

They're demanding that Jesus prove himself, but really, they think this very situation proves their point exactly.

Jesus CANNOT possibly be the king of the Jews, if this is the situation he has found himself in, and he cannot get out of it.

You can think about it this way:

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Imagine you're swimming, and you realise you are caught in a rip. This is scary and overwhelming, but there's one hope for you. The beach is patrolled by a lifeguard, and he is looking your way. So you wave to him, and he gets in the water and starts out towards you. Except as soon as it gets deep enough, he is flailing. He looks out of control, he, too, has become caught in the rip, and he, too, is stuck.

The one who came to save you, now needs saving himself, and you're still in trouble.

Like a lifeguard who can't swim, or an ugly model, or a chef who can't cook, Jesus seems to have failed at the most basic parts of the Messiah job description.

He has not taken down their Roman oppressors.

He has not laid claim to a throne.

He has not managed to keep and build on his followership.

And he has not reached any impressive status – in fact, he is now marked as a criminal, not a king.

This scenario seems like proof of the clearest possible kind, that what he promised to do, he has not done, and now cannot do.

But what Jesus' mockers don't know is that not only *can* Jesus save himself, he is choosing not to.

And that by choosing *not* to save himself, he is choosing to save THEM.

To understand this, we need to move on to **part 3**:

**3. verses 40-49, what Jesus' death achieves.**

Amongst the mockers, there is one who sees the situation differently.

Verse 40: 'The other criminal rebuked him'. Verse 41 'We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'

Then, verse 42, he said "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Commentators have pointed out that this criminal is looking for royal clemency. Just as in the United States the President has the power to pardon certain criminals, so too did the King in those days.

This man knows that his sin is as clear as day. His sin is being held up – almost literally – before everyone. And yet he trusts that he will find mercy with Jesus.

That Jesus might grant him a place in his kingdom, despite what he has done.

It is probably not an accident of any kind that the person who sees the kind of King Jesus is most clearly is an outcast, himself a rejected person, guilty as sin.

And Jesus' answer is: yes. Verse 43: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

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I said earlier that Jesus' opponents and doubters could point to all sorts of apparent failures to argue that he could not possibly be what had claimed. Perhaps they were closer to the truth than we might have thought.

Jesus was not the king they were expecting.

He is the kind of king that only God Himself could have sent – a king who is merciful.

Make no mistake. Just as Jesus walked on water, he could have walked away from the cross. Just as he healed the sick, he could have healed his own wounds. With a word he could cast out demons, and bring life to the dead.

With his power, and his words, he could have done anything, and yet with some of his last words he offers mercy to the criminal, and calls out for forgiveness for his enemies - 'Father, forgive them,' he prays.

Far from being just another one of those leaders who make promises they can't keep (and perhaps never had any intention of keeping), Jesus had promised exactly this kind of death – a death for sinners, a death that brings forgiveness.

He achieves everything he set out to.

So, where do you find yourself in this story?  
How do you find yourself responding to it, to Jesus?

Are you, like the mockers, demanding Jesus do something other than what he came to do? Or are you, like the second criminal, just grateful he welcomes you?

If you want to be congratulated on your goodness – look to a different king.  
If you want to be forgiven for your sin – look to Jesus.

If you want to distance yourself from people who make you look bad by association – criminals, and obvious sinners – look to a different king.

If you want to be welcomed into a kingdom where all people are united by grace – look to Jesus.

If you want to be protected against any kind of inconvenience or discomfort – look to a different king.  
If you want to be shown how hope can triumph even in darkness – look to Jesus.

What we ought not want, and absolutely ought not demand from Jesus, is for him to be a king like the kings of the world.

We already have enough of those, and if that was all we needed, the world would be in a much better state than it is.

To demand a king who conquers his enemies, rather than saves them, is to fundamentally misunderstand who Jesus is and what he came to do, and it misunderstands who we are and what we need from him.

What we need is a king who forgives sinners, who welcomes them into his kingdom.  
We need a king who is vindicated by his mercy, not by his might.

We need a king who prays for his enemies, at the very moment they are enacting their greatest cruelty towards him 'Father forgive them', because that king is praying for us, and that king can save us.

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