Christ Crucified
Mark 15:1-39

When you see the world going in a direction you don't like, there's a temptation to use power to change it. That could just be 'he who shouts loudest and longest wins' - and you get the politics of rage. It could be through conventional political power and you look to this person, or that party as the answer. Or it could be violence.

At the heart of Christianity there's something very different. And it's a paradox. Because Christianity absolutely wants to change the world. It looks at the world and our lives and says, things are not right, this needs to change. But it doesn't use power to do it. Or not in the way we tend to think of power. Instead, it says that it's in weakness that you find strength, it's in giving up that you get, it's in dying that you live.

But nowhere is that world-changing paradox greater than in today's passage. You see, Cicero, the Roman statesman, described crucifixion as, 'This cruelest and vilest penalty.' And yet, what the Bible tells us is that it's through the horror of the cross and Christ becoming totally weak, that God has unleashed a power that does far more than just change the world in generalities. It has the power to change the daily realities of your life.

Look how it begins. Because an event full of paradoxes begins with one. Mark tells us that after Jesus' trial before the religious leaders, v1, 'they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate.' And so the one who's hands threw stars into space has his hands bound and is given into the hands of the Roman powers.

And as he is, Mark wants you to see four things about him.

He's the King

Now, as Roman governor, Pilate would not have been interested in the religious arguments that had bothered the Sanhedrin. So they knew that if they wanted to secure a guilty verdict they needed to reframe the charge around one Pilate would understand.

So Mark tells us, v2, 'Pilate asked him [Jesus], "Are you the King of the Jews?"'

And that's a title Jesus never used of himself, or one the early church used for him. So this isn't Mark making this up or writing this back into the account. This is how the religious leaders have explained the term Messiah or Christ to Pilate: 'you need to deal with this man because he's claiming to be the king of the Jews.' You see, under Roman law, the only people who could call themselves kings were people Caesar gave that title to, men Caesar *allowed* to be king. Anyone else claiming to be a king was guilty of sedition, of insurrection, of rebellion.

And so Pilate asks Jesus, is that who you are? Is that what you're claiming for yourself. And Jesus replies, v2, "You have said so." Now, is that a 'yes' or a 'no'? When the high priest asked him, 'are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed?' Jesus was unequivocal: 'I am'. But here there's no 'I am'. Why not? Because is Jesus the King of the Jews? Yes! But when Pilate hears those words he thinks of power - of political and military might. Of splendour and riches. Of a man who sees others as expendable. And Jesus is not that kind of king. But he is a king. And so it's as if he bats the question back to Pilate: 'Am I the king of the Jews? That's for you to decide.' But as so often in this gospel it's also for us to decide. What kind of king is he? What is the nature of his power?

But then silence follows. And into that silence the chief priests threw accusation after accusation, v3, 'And the chief priests accused him of many things.' And in his gospel Luke fleshes them out:

he's spreading false propaganda, he's telling people not to pay taxes to Caesar, he's claiming to be a king, he's stirring people up to rebel.

So, Pilate asks him, v4, "Have you no answer to make?" I mean, the crime you're charged with carries the death penalty. Your life is in my hands. Have you got no defence to make? And Mark says that rather than join in the politics of rage, rather than try and shout louder than his opponents, v5, 'Jesus made no further answer' And in face of that silence, 'Pilate was amazed.'

And Pilate's a man who's seen it all. He's probably had men in this very room begging him for mercy, furiously denying all charges against them, offering him anything to escape with their life. What he's never had is a King like Christ.

What would this have meant for Mark's first readers, facing their own Pilates, facing their own opportunities to deny being followers of the King of the Jews and the 'depraved superstition' of Christianity? How should they respond?

Well the apostle Peter writes to tell them. That, 'Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly' (1 Peter 2:21-23). But of course, we're also living in a time when, to a much lesser degree, being a Christian carries a stigma. And when that's the case, it's not the shock jocks or the grenade lobbers of the twittersphere, who are to be our example, it's Christ.

And faced with that example, Pilate tries to release him. But in doing so reveals something else about Jesus.

He's the Substitute

Now, as a way of winning favour with people, Roman governors would sometimes declare amnesties at times of public celebrations. And for Pilate, what better time to do it than Passover, when the Jewish people remembered being set free from the prison of Egypt. So, when the crowd formed, demanding he do it again, Pilate plays his card, v9, "do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" You see he knows, v10, that 'it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.' And envy is that resentment you feel when someone's more successful than you. And the leaders have watched Jesus' popularity and seen his power over sickness and demons and death, and they're envious. And experienced politician that he is, Pilate can recognise envy at a 100m.

What he had not banked on was the leaders' ability to fire up the crowd.

Verse 11, 'But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead.' And Barabbas was, v7, 'among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection.' So the very thing Jesus is accused of, of being a rebel, of inciting insurrection, Barabbas was guilty of. And this was the day of his execution.

But look at his name: *Bar-abbas*. Son of the Father, maybe because his dad was a rabbi. But his name also spells out the choice the crowd faces and Pilate face. The innocent or the guilty. The son of the Father or *the* Son of the Father. Which one does the crowd want? Which one will Pilate

choose? Which one will they let loose: the one who's used raw power to get what he wants, or the Prince of Peace?

And yet, if the leaders are driven by envy, and the crowd manipulated by the leaders, what's Pilate controlled by? The crowd and his desire to please the crowd. And he stands as an example that to make moral decisions based on what the crowd thinks, or shouts, is to walk on dangerous ground. And to try and win the favour or popularity of the crowd, by doing what you think it wants - release a prisoner, or behave a certain way, or hold certain views, leaves you compromising your integrity. And Pilate thinks he can use the crowd to get what he wants, but it's him who ends up being used.

So he tries another tack - the direct appeal. Verse 12, "Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" And Mark tells us, v13, they cried out, "Crucify him."

Now, they could have picked any number of lesser penalties - but they don't. They pick the worst. They pick the penalty reserved for runaway slaves, insurrectionists, for the scum of the earth, of the accursed. A penalty none of them would ever have wanted for themselves.

It's why Pilate pleads for him, v14, "Why, what evil has he done?" 'I mean, give me a reason! He's innocent!' But they can't give Pilate a reason, because there is no reason.

No reason except one. You see, if the religious leaders are controlled by envy, and the crowd controlled by the leaders, and Pilate controlled by the crowd - the only person not controlled by anyone else is the man on trial. The man who stands there in silence. The man who's in control of everything.

You see, back in chapter 10 Jesus had said that the reason he had come was to give his life as a ransom for many. And now, if only he defended himself, Pilate could free him. But Jesus doesn't defend himself. It's as if he wants to be condemned. Because he does. Because he is going to drink the cup the Father has passed him. Because the man standing there bound and chained is the freest man of them all.

So, v15, 'Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.'

Imagine you were Barabbas. Would you have slept much last night knowing that today you would be crucified? But now it's early morning and the guards enter your cell and drag you out and into the courtyard. And you see the crowd come to witness your death. But then the guards tell you, 'you're free. The man Jesus is being crucified in your place. Go.'

What would you think?

But listen, you are Barabbas. We all are. Sure you're not imprisoned under the power of Rome, but what does have a hold on you? What controls you? Envy, like the leaders? Or the wrong choices of the crowd or the moral compromises of Pilate? Those habits you can't get free from or the bitterness of the past you can't escape from? And just like him, we all stand under the sentence of death - of separation from God as penalty for our sin.

But just as Jesus takes Barabbas' place, he takes ours. As Peter says, 'the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God' (1 Pet 3:18).

So, what would you have done if you were Barabbas? Whatever you think you'd have done, Barabbas plays no further part in the story. And rather than anyone come and express gratitude, or even pity, Jesus stands alone.

He's the Forsaken

Now, one of the remarkable things about the way the gospels describe Jesus' crucifixion is… they don't. None of them sensationalise the physical horror of what Jesus undergoes. Instead, Mark's emphasis is not on the brutality of the cross, it's on the shame.

And before being crucified Jesus was scourged: a punishment whose pain was matched only by its degradation. And having been handed over to Pilate's soldiers, Jesus is taken inside their headquarters, and Mark describes the mocking he endures in a mock coronation. Verse 17, 'And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him.' Purple, the colour of royalty, and thorns in place of the gold of Caesar. And, in place of 'Ave Caesar!' v18 'they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Then, v19, 'they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him.' A reed, Matthew tells us, they'd given to him as a fake sceptre, the emblem of royal power. And this is the one before whom every knee will one day bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.

But now, after his flogging, his body was too weak to carry his cross, so Mark tells us, v21, that 'they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene… the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.'

And Simon was most likely a north African. But why mention his sons? Because when Paul writes his letter to the church in Rome, at the end he mentions a Rufus who's a member there. And Mark's writing this gospel for the Christians in Rome. So this is Mark saying, this is Rufus' dad.

But having brought him to the Place of the Skull, Mark says, v23, 'they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.' Was this an act of mercy on the part of the soldiers - offering him something to numb the pain? Maybe, but if so, Jesus refuses to be anaesthetised to our sin or our suffering. More likely it's just another way of mocking him. Because myrrh was used as a perfume and a flavouring. And so the soldiers are offering the king the finest of wines.

And then Mark simply says, v24, 'And they crucified him'. And their usual practice, to maximise the humiliation, was to crucify criminals naked. Whether they did with Jesus we don't know. What we do know is they stripped him and gambled for his clothing. And as they did they fulfilled the words of the innocent sufferer in Psalm 22 'they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots' (v18).

But they also had to give a public reason for the execution. So, v26, 'The inscription of the charge against him' the charge nailed above his head 'read, "The King of the Jews"' And then Mark says, v27, 'And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.'

Now, does that remind you of anything? Do you remember back in chapter 10, how James and John asked Jesus that when he came into his kingdom they wanted the two most important places, 'one at your right hand and one at your left' (10:35). But who gets those spots? Condemned criminals - the very people Christ has come to save. Because this is Christ's enthronement, crowned with thorns,

his title nailed above his head, and sinners seated on either side of him. It is the exact opposite of everything Pilate, or we, would ever think of as royal, or powerful.

And it's why, as he hangs there, he's mocked by three groups of people. First come the passers by, who say, v29-30, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In other words, 'You claimed to have all this power and authority, to destroy and rebuild the temple, but now look at you! You don't even have the power to get down.' But it's here, on the cross, that the temple of his body - the place where heaven and earth met - was being destroyed. And here where he was beginning the building of the new temple, the one combined people of God.

Then came the priests and the scribes, saying, v31-32, "He saved others, but he can't save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." And yet it is by hanging there and not coming down that he fulfils his mission as king. It's in not saving himself that he saves all those who do believe.

Then, thirdly, Mark tells us, v32, that even 'those who were crucified with him also reviled him.' So even the condemned, even those everyone else would have thought of us scum and accursed, mock him. And Jesus plumbs the depths of what it means to be ridiculed, and treated like you're worthless.

And yet, he goes lower still. Verse 33-34, 'And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"'

Now, at the very first Passover, in the plague before the death of the firstborn, darkness came over the land of Egypt. It was a warning of what was to come. And here, at Passover, as the Passover lambs are about to be sacrificed in the temple, and right before the death of *the* Firstborn Son, darkness descends.

And Jesus hasn't spoken since he answered Pilate, but now, out of the darkness he cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" He's quoting Psalm 22 - it's the God-forsaken cry of the innocent, righteous sufferer. And in the darkness, as the wrath of God against all our sin was poured upon him, God the Father turned his face away.

And hearing him cry out, people think he's calling Elijah. Because after all, Elijah's supposed to come before the messiah, and maybe Jesus thinks Elijah will come rescue him. But Elijah doesn't come, Because Jesus isn't calling him. Instead, v37, 'Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.' And he dies, utterly forsaken and alone.

And it would be a tragedy, if it weren't for what comes next.

He's the Son

Because as Jesus dies, Mark tells us something dramatic happened: v38, 'The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.' And that's the curtain that divided the Most Holy Place - the place where God's presence dwelt, the place where only one man, the high priest, could go once a year, on the Day of Atonement, from the rest of the temple. It's a curtain that said 'no entry', 'access denied', tresspassers enter at their own risk.

But as Jesus dies it is as if God reaches down and tears it. Why?

Firstly, it's a foreshadowing of the total destruction that will come on the temple. Because as Jesus dies in the place of Barabbas and us all, the full and final sacrifice for sins has been made, and there's no need for any more temple or sacrifices.

Secondly, Jesus has torn down the no entry sign. It's as if God is saying, 'that barrier that divided you from me is gone.' You see, here we see the charge sheet nailed above Jesus head, but if you were to sit down with a piece of paper and write out a charge sheet against yourself, what would go on it? What could be pinned above your head? How long might the list be? All those things we haven't done that we should and all those things we did that we shouldn't. But writing to the Colossians, Paul tell us that it's that charge sheet, that 'record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands' the charge sheet that Satan accuses you of, Christ took upon himself, 'nailing it to the cross' (Col 2:14) and at the cross, he cancelled every single one of them. Because he paid for them all.

And he became sin that we might become the righteousness of God. And he was stripped that we might be covered. He was flogged that we might be embraced. He was mocked that we might be loved. He was brought to the lowest place that we might be lifted to the highest. He was crowned with thorns that, as Peter says, we might receive 'the unfading crown of glory.' (1 Peter 5:4).

And in the darkness, he was forsaken that we might be accepted. And as God the Father tears down the curtain he's saying, 'Come, enter my Most Holy Place Look upon me and live.'

But thirdly, it tells us one last thing of who Jesus is. You see, there's one other place Mark uses the same word as here for something being torn open. It's right back at the beginning, at Jesus' baptism, where Mark tells us, Jesus saw 'the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."' (1:10-11).

And now, as Jesus dies, it is as if that scene's repeated. Except this time it's the curtain barring the way to heaven that's torn open. And instead of the voice of God, it's the voice of a pagan soldier who declares who Jesus is. Verse 39, 'And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

He has likely watched multiple men die by crucifixion, but this man, covered in blood, crowned with thorns, and with 'King of the Jews' nailed above his head, is different. And a gentile outsider sees what the religious leaders refused to see: He is the Son of God.

But it's through the paradox of the cross, of the weakness and shame of the cross, that God's power to change the world - and your life in the world - is unleashed. Because at the cross we see that life-wrecking, world-wrecking darkness is real, but Christ has triumphed over the darkness. We see he's the king who gave up glory that we might share it. He's the substitute: who dies the death we deserve that we might live; he's the forsaken, abandoned that we might be accepted; and he's the Son who makes it possible for us to be sons and daughters of God. And it's that gospel that can change our hearts and so change the world, because it's only that that has the power to both humble us - as we see our sin for what it is - and lift us up. And he's done it through the weakness of the cross.