Westlake Church Lausanne

Crucified King
Mark 15:6-15, 21-39

Imagine you're applying for a place at university – for a masters or a PhD. What would you think of a university that made the failure of its students a selling point? 'Come to us: More of our students fail than any other university, anywhere.' Or imagine you want to buy a new vacuum cleaner. What would you think of a company whose advertising said, 'buy this machine: its guaranteed to break down.' Would you buy it? Or what would you think if you received one of those Christmas newsletters, and instead of all the usual stuff about how wonderful their children are, this one read, '2016 had been a great year! One of our sons got caught cheating on his final exams; another got sent to jail for fraud, and the third beat up his girlfriend!' And you're sat there reading it thinking: why are you making public stuff that you should be ashamed of?

So why boast in failure? Why give pride of place to something shameful?

And I ask you that because that's exactly what the Christian gospel does. In Jesus' day, to be executed by crucifixion was a horribly shameful way to die. It was considered so shameful that it was forbidden for Roman citizens to be crucified: it was reserved for slaves or foreigners, never citizens. And for Jews, death by crucifixion was a sign that you were cursed by God.

So why would you make the crucifixion of your main person, the main thing? Why make something so awful, so shameful, such an apparent failure, the thing you build everything on. Because that's what the four gospel accounts of Jesus' life do. They give way more time, proportionally to the last week of his life, and they move to the crescendo of his death. It's what the apostles did in their preaching. Interestingly, they didn't emphasize the Holy Spirit, or his gifts, or church growth, or how you can have your best life now, they put main and centre the bloody crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Listen to the apostle Paul, 'I decided to know *nothing* among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor 2:2). So, right up at the front was the shame, the horror, the seeming failure, of the cross.

Now why? Because that's not what other religions do, is it? Islam presents you with the 5 pillars: do these, and you can be accepted by God. Buddhism gives you the 8-fold path to enlightenment: do these things and you'll be free. Hinduism gives you the four goals of life: pursue these and you'll know true fulfilment.

And Christianity? Christianity gives you a man, beaten, insulted, spat upon, stripped naked and nailed to a Roman cross, dying in ignominy. Why?

Your Substitute

We call the day Jesus was crucified *Good Friday*. And for Barabbas, that very first Good Friday, was certainly good, wasn't it? There he was, in a Roman prison cell, on death row. And he was there, Mark tells us in v7, because he was a rebel 'who had committed murder in the insurrection.' And when the cock crowed and dawn broke that Friday morning, Barabbas woke knowing that this was his last

day, that within hours he would be experiencing the agonising death of crucifixion. Imagine what he must have felt as the fear rose within him.

But then he hears the crowd outside crying for him to be released! And instead of nails being driven into his hands, his chains and manacles are released and he's free! Free to go! Then imagine how he must have felt as this other man, this Jesus of Nazareth, this travelling preacher, who he had heard so much about, took his place. He, Barabbas, was free, as Jesus was forced to step into his place. What must Barabbas have felt? What did he do that day? Did he get out of Jerusalem as fast as he could? Or did he go stand in the crowd and watch as Jesus carried the cross that had been made for *him* to carry? Did he follow the crowd to the Place of the Skull and watch as Jesus was nailed to the cross, with the nails forged for him? Did he stand and watch as that cross was dropped into the hole dug for him?

What did it do to him, to know that that man, Jesus, was dying in his place?

But the extraordinary thing is that he wasn't just dying in Barabbas' place. Have you ever thought what that name Barabbas means? Bar Abba - Son of the Father. And Jesus, *the* Son of the Father took the place of the son of the father. The innocent, taking the place of the guilty. The one representing us all, everyone of us bar-abbas: sons and daughters of the father.

It's why we talk of Jesus' death as being *substitutionary*. You know what a substitute is. I mean, imagine you're watching a rugby match, and there's one player who's really bad, he keeps missing his tackles and every time he's passed the ball, he drops it. And you'd think he was French, except his name is Andy. And the coach watches this, and finally decides 'enough is enough, we need to replace him, we need someone else to take his place, a better player, a much better player, we need a substitute'. Let's call him Martin. He may be older but he's so much better. And the one steps into the place of the other. That's a substitute.

Well, if that's trivial, the Bible tells us that at the cross, Christ became your substitute. That just as in the Old Testament sacrifices, an animal took the place of the person; that just as at Passover feast, the lamb took the place of the firstborn; so at the cross Christ took your place, just as surely as he took Barabbas's.

It's what the prophet Isaiah said would happen: 'He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned - every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Is 53:5-6). And so Good Friday wasn't just good for Barabbas, it was good for us all.

Well, 'sure' you say, 'but why? Why such a horrific death? I'm not a rebel, a murder, an insurrectionist! I'm not Barabbas. Why the need for me to have a substitute? Why did Jesus need to die for me?'

Cursed for you

One of the most unnerving cries Jesus makes from the cross is recorded for us by Mark, v34, '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?"

What was going on that made Jesus cry out like that? Here was a man who had enjoyed such a close relationship with God that he called him 'Abba', Father, Daddy. So what is going on at the cross that leaves Jesus crying out, "Why? Why have you forsaken me? Why have you abandoned me, God?"

Some people will answer that by saying, 'well, Jesus wasn't *really* abandoned by God, he just *felt* that way. You know what it's like – you go through hard times and it feels like God's a long way off, that's what Jesus felt like.' Except the Bible tells us that during those dark hours on the cross, God really did turn his face away from Christ. That this man who had known such unbroken and unlimited contact with God, God the Son incarnate, was separated and cut off from God the Father, and abandoned by him to death.

Where do I get that from? Well, look at what Paul writes to the Galatians: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"' (Gal 3:13). So Paul says that the law of God carries with it a curse, and that you and I deserve that curse, but that Christ redeemed us, rescued us, from that curse by becoming a curse for us, and taking it upon himself.

Great, but what is the curse of the law he's talking about?

Well in any ancient covenant between two parties, the covenant spelt out the duties of each party. The king promised to protect the people and the people promised to obey and pay their taxes and fight in battle. And then the covenant would spell out what would happen if either side failed to keep the covenant. If you keep it, the king will do all this good for you; but if you break it, all this bad is going to come crashing down on your head. It's the blessings and the curses of covenant.

And in Deuteronomy 28 the blessings and curses of the covenant between God and his people are laid out. And the curses culminate in exile: 'If you break covenant with me, if you fail to keep my law, if you fail to love me and serve me with all your heart, then you will be sent in to exile from the Promised Land, you will be cut off from my people, you will be cut off from my presence.'

And that's what Jesus was experiencing on the cross for you. He was experiencing God-forsakenness, the curse of being cut off from God for all the times you and I have failed to keep God's law and love him with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves. Jesus didn't just *feel* abandoned by God, he was abandoned by him, because that's what you and I deserve. But instead of you experiencing it, he stepped into your place and went through that for you.

And the Old Testament set the scene for that. On one day a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would confess all the sins of the people and transfer them on to the head of a goat – the scapegoat. And that goat would be led out into the desert, never to return. It was sent into exile, carrying the people's sins far away, so the people didn't have to face that themselves. But one of the extraordinary things of the scapegoat ritual concerns the person who was chosen each year to lead the goat away. He's described as being a marginal figure – maybe someone who lived on the edge of the camp, outside, someone who was unclean, or defiled by sin, someone on the very edge of exile and being cut off from God and his people. And he would be chosen to take the goat out to the wilderness. But having done that, this man was then allowed to wash, and change his clothes and be readmitted to the camp. The goat had taken his sin and his alienation far away, and now he could come back in, a forgiven man.

And that is what Jesus has done for you. He was sent away by God, he was forsaken by God, he became your scapegoat. God the Father turned his face away, that you might be welcomed in, and welcomed back and have the Father turn his face towards you.

But the cross doesn't end with Jesus crying out, it ends with him dying.

Died for You.

Mark 15:37, 'And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.' I've been present at the bedside of a number of adults and babies when they've breathed their last. But no death has ever been like this one. Here is the man, hanging upon a cross, who breathed out and stars and galaxies exploded into life. Here is the man who took up a handful of dust and from it created man and breathed into him the breath of life. Here is the man, with nails through his hands, through whom and for whom all things were created. The man whose words could cleanse lepers, and heal the sick, and raise the dead. The man with blood running down his face, with a crown of thorns on his head, by whose powerful word all things hold together, the Lord of Life, and he breathes his last upon a cross of shame.

Why? Because, as the prophet Ezekiel reminds us, 'The soul who sins shall die' (Ez 18:20); because as Paul tells us, 'the wages of sin are death' (Rom 6:23).

Yes, but he didn't sin! Isn't that the whole point of Jesus? That he lived the perfect life you and I have failed to live; that no one ever spoke like him, or lived like him. So why is he dying the death of a criminal? Because he is dying it for you.

He was without sin, but you and I are not. And he stepped into your place to take the punishment for you. As Paul writes, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' As Peter says, 'For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God' (1 Peter 3:18). It's why we talk about the cross in terms of *penal substitution*. Jesus stepped into our place to take our penalty, he stretched out his hand to take our wages, the wages of sin, and the full force of God's penal code fell upon him.

Will you still die? Yes you will. One day you too will breath your last. But when you die, if you have put your trust in Jesus and what he has done for you, you don't need to fear it, or what lies beyond. He has already faced that for you.

Before we hit the last point, did you see the sign they nailed above his head? Verse 26, 'And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And he hangs there, the King enthroned upon the cross, crowned with a crown of thorns. And who is at his right and his left? Who are in those places of honour that his disciples, James and John, had so recently fought over? Two robbers. Two sinners. People like you and me, the very people this King has come to save.

To Save You

Now calling us *sinners* is not exactly politically correct nowadays, is it? We're supposed to say how wonderful we all are, and how pleased God should be to have us on his side. And what an asset we are. And talk of sin and being in need of saving runs totally counter to the spirit of our age.

But just imagine you have a bank account. And in that account you have a certain amount of money. It's not a lot and you need to live carefully to make it last. But instead, you get yourself a credit card and you start living the high life, and you spend and spend and spend. And you end up in debt up to your eyes. You owe the bank money, and they don't just say, 'o it doesn't matter!' They keep a record of debts against you.

Or imagine you have a friend, and you love this friend, but over time they keep letting you down. They say they'll do something, but they don't. In fact, they do stuff that hurts you. And they say stuff to your face that hurts you. And they spend time with people you don't like. And you discover that they keep telling lies about you behind your back. And deep down you know you still love them, but your relationship with them is in tatters. It's ruined. Instead of friendship there's this gulf between you, and it hurts all the more because you love them.

Or imagine you move to another country, and it has a certain culture and certain rules. But you think, 'stuff that, I'm not going to live like that, I'm going to live the way I want to live. I'm not going to obey their stupid rules.' And each time you break a law, you get fined and your criminal record, your crime sheet grows.

And the Bible uses all of those examples to try and bring home to us the seriousness of our situation. We are in debt to God through our wrong living, and we can't pay him back; our relationship with him is broken down and there's this relational gulf between us, yet he loves us. He is the King and we have broken his laws and our record of sin stands against us, accusing us.

So who can save us from ourselves? Who can pay your debt, and bridge that gulf and get rid of that record against you? Jesus can. And that is the supreme irony of the cross. Just listen to how the religious leaders mock him as he hangs there, v31, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe" (Mark 15:31-32). But it was precisely in him not saving himself that he was saving us.

You see, God is righteous, and he is holy, and he is angry at sin. And at the cross, Christ took that anger for you. God turned it away from you and directed it towards himself. Why? Because he loves you, because he is good, as well as great. And Christ paid your debt, and the charge sheet against you was nailed to the cross, and the great gulf between you and God was bridged.

Think about it: what was that loud cry that Jesus let out just before he died? John tells us, probably because he was nearer the cross than the others. John 19:30, "It is finished." What's finished? What has Christ finished at the cross?

Your exile. The list of sins against you and their penalty. Your debt. It's all been finished and dealt with. And Mark tells us, v38, 'The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." The physical representation that you and I cannot enter God's presence; the physical representation that you and I are cut off from God; the curtain that closed off the Most Holy Place where God dwelt, was ripped in two, and the way to him was opened. The gulf was bridged.

So the cross tells you just how much you need saving; but it also tells you how much God wants to save you. It tells us just how bad we are, but it also tells us how loved we are. And now there is no need to stand far off from God, all can come and find forgiveness and love, because the King was crucified for you.