The Crucifixion
Luke 23:26-49

One of the things we enjoy doing as a family is hiking in the mountains. The girls just love it! And the steeper and harder and longer and more sweaty the climb the better – they just love walking uphill. Especially in the rain. And when we do that, one of the things they want to know is 'Dad, where are we going? Where's the top?' Which is French for 'when's this agony going to end?' And so to keep those little legs going, sometimes I'll have to point out a marker – that ski-lift, or that outcrop of rock, or that hut – that's where we're heading. And from then on, that object dominates the horizon, that's what they're aiming at. And woe betide Dad if he gets it wrong and that isn't the top!

Well, for chapter after chapter now, the cross has been that focus point for Luke. It's been dominating the horizon of this gospel. And as Jesus takes the road to Calvary – and Calvary is just the Latin translation of the Place of the Skull – it's a road Jesus has been travelling for weeks. Time and again He's warned the disciples and us that this is coming. He's dropped hints, He's taught parables, He's been direct and we've watched as the leaders have plotted it. Everything has been moving to this moment. And what happens now is the centre – the epicenter of this story.

And arguably of history. Which begs a question, why is the death of this man, on a cross in 1st century Palestine, the pivot point of history? Because, let's face it, 1000s of men met their deaths on Roman crosses. So why has the death of this one travelling rabbi become what it is?

Well, the crowd and the soldiers and the priests and the criminals crucified with Jesus, offer us a snapshot, a cameo of how the world responds to His death. And as we walk through it, Luke wants you to consider your own reaction. But the real answer to the significance of this death lies in the response of the Man in the middle of it all. So let's look this morning at Jesus.

Jesus Warns
Last week we saw Jesus put on trial – if you can call it a trial – for who He said He was. And it ended with Pilate, the Roman governor, handing Jesus over to be crucified.

And now Luke tells us in v26, that 'as they led Jesus away, they seized Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus.' Now Cyrene is in what we now call Libya. So this man Simon is some way from home. And he's probably come to Jerusalem for the Passover. But ask yourself, why is he press-ganged into carrying Jesus' cross. Why can't the prisoner carry His own cross? Are the Romans just being nice? No – it's because prior to crucifixion it was routine for the victim's back to be scourged with a multi-thonged whip with bits of metal and bone embedded into it. And so Simon is forced to carry Christ's cross, because by now Jesus is too weak, his back too mutilated to carry it himself. So this isn't kindness, it's expediency – they want to get on and crucify Him, but He keeps on falling over under its weight.

But Mark adds something else here in his Gospel. He tells us that Simon was 'the father of Alexander and Rufus' (Mark 15:21). Which, on the face of it seems a

useless, trivial pursuit bit of information. I mean, what have the names of his boys got to do with it? Well, the people Mark was writing his gospel to would have known Alexander and Rufus; most likely they went to the same church. And this is their dad carrying the cross behind Jesus. So this chance Friday morning encounter on the road to Calvary must have turned Simon's life and his family's life upside down. Simon saw something in this dead man walking that would forever change his and his boys' lives. But that little detail tells us something else as well. When we come to these gospels, and this crucifixion, we're dealing with eyewitness accounts. Mark can say, 'this is Alexander and Rufus' dad we're talking about. Go ask them whether these things happened.'

And as Jesus takes the road, Luke tells us that a great multitude were mourning and lamenting for Him. Do you remember how when the religious leaders were plotting Jesus' death they were worried about arresting Him in public because of His popularity? Well, sure they had secured the support of some sort of crowd at Jesus' trial to cry out for His crucifixion, but not everyone had swallowed their line.

And the multitude who are following Jesus see something of the tragedy of what is happening. And yet, Jesus sees things differently. His body is already torn and beaten, but He tells them that they are mourning for the wrong person; that it's for themselves that they should mourn: v28, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children." You see, the real tragedy is that the nation in general and Jerusalem in particular has mistaken who Jesus is; they have rejected the Messiah and as a result they are in deep trouble. So, on His way to the cross, Jesus is wanting their repentance, not their tears for Him.

And He warns them that terrible days lie ahead. Now, in that culture to be childless was a disgrace. But Jesus turns that on its head and says, v29, "the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore.'" And He can see AD70 and the fall and destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans coming; days when it would have been better not to have children than watch them starve to death in the siege, or be slaughtered when the Romans break through the city wall. And in those days, Jesus says, people will long for a quick death: v30, "Then they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' Even death, even creation collapsing on top of them would be better than the awful tragedy Jerusalem is going to face. And finally He says, "For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (v31). If this is what happens to a living tree, what will happen to a dead one? If this is how they treat an innocent man, how will they treat you and your children when the siege comes. If God's wrath is poured out on His son, what will it be like for unrepentant Jerusalem?

So, as Jesus staggers through the streets of Jerusalem, He warns the crowd, and by extension us: You cannot reject God and turn your back on His offer of grace in Jesus, and think that will have no consequences.

Jesus Forgives

They take Him outside the city and v33, 'when they came to the place that is called the Skull, there they crucified him.' As we saw a few weeks ago, to be crucified was an unspeakably awful end for a Jew. It was the same as being hung on a tree, and the law says that 'a hanged man is cursed by God' (Deut 21:23). And being crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem, put outside the camp of Israel, was the ultimate sign of rejection. And all the venom of the religious leaders and the soldiers pours out. Luke says, v35, that 'the rulers scoffed at him' and v36, that 'the soldiers… mocked him.' And v39, 'One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him.' And their insults and their mocking are all the same – they all ridicule Him for who He claimed to be: If you are the Chosen One, if you are the King of the Jews, if you are the Christ, the Messiah, save yourself. Some sort of saviour you are! Nothing much changes does it? People still ridicule the idea that a suffering dying saviour can save anyone today.

But how does Jesus react to all this bile? They have mocked Him, and beaten Him. They have brought false charges against Him and robbed Him of a fair trial. They have scourged Him and insulted Him. And now they are executing Him in the most horrible way they knew how. But how does Jesus respond?

He prays for them; He intercedes for them: v34, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." They don't understand, they don't fully grasp who they are killing. Now, does that mean they aren't responsible for their actions? No. Of course they're responsible – if they weren't responsible, Jesus wouldn't need to pray for their forgiveness. But they don't understand the full measure of what they're doing. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven' (Matt 5:44-45). And here He is, in the middle of His own excruciating suffering, doing just that: praying for and loving His enemies.

You know, when you're wronged, the urge to get your own back is huge isn't it? When someone says something unkind, or mistreats you, or does the dirty on you, the urge to respond in kind is massive – you just want to strike back, to give them a taste of their own medicine, to wound in return. But Jesus' way is very different, isn't it? That's why Paul – a man who knew what it was to have enemies – could say, 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Rom 12:19). So pray for your enemies. It doesn't mean what they did was right, any more than what they did to Jesus was right – but pray for their repentance and forgiveness, and leave the vengeance bit to God - He'll do a much better job of it than you.

Jesus Receives

Earlier on in Jesus' ministry, James and John's mother came to Him and asked Him to give her two boys the best seats in the coming kingdom – to sit at His right and His left. And Jesus asked them – 'can you drink the cup that I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?' And they said sure – not having a clue what that would entail. Well, here is Jesus drinking the cup, here He is being enthroned on the cross, and the places of honour at his right and left are

given to two crucified criminals. What a picture of how honour works in His kingdom! How His kingdom turns the world upside down.

And Jesus is crucified as a lawbreaker, with lawbreakers on either side of Him. And for the religious leaders it's the ultimate proof that Jesus is not the Messiah. And first the leaders and then the soldiers and then one of the thieves mock Him as a failed saviour, and the thief cries out sarcastically, 'Save yourself and us!' (V39). And yet in the very process of Jesus hanging there, He does what they think He can't.

Because the other thief sees something. He hears Jesus pray; he sees the way He suffers; He hears the mocking; He reads the charge sheet nailed over His head, and he realizes He *is* the King of the Jews. He realizes He is who He says He is. What the priests and Pilate and Herod and these soldiers refused to see, this dying man sees. And believes

And just watch how he responds. V40-1, speaking to his colleague in crime, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds." He knows that he is guilty. However he pleaded in his trial, whatever excuses he had made up to this point, as he stares death in the face all pretense is gone. Now there are no excuses, no trying to wriggle out of his responsibility. He knows his guilt, he acknowledges his blame, he accepts his punishment. He deserves to die.

But then he does something remarkable. He is the only person in this whole spectacle to call Jesus by His name, v42, 'and he said to him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

He knows death isn't it. And as he fights for life, he realizes Jesus is the King and he wants to be with Jesus, his King in His kingdom. But listen to what he actually says, '*When* you come into your kingdom.' Because, like any fellow Jew, this man is expecting something in the future, for the Messiah to come in power at the last day. When you come like that Jesus, let me be on your side.

But look at what Jesus says, v43, 'And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Today! Not at some indeterminate time in the future, not some vague promise for the never-never, but today.

Now, does this thief deserve paradise? Does he deserve eternal rest? Does he deserve to enter the kingdom of the Messiah? Well, he doesn't think so does he – he knows he's guilty. He knows he is no better than his mocking friend on the other side. He knows he has nothing to offer, no worth to buy his entrance. But he knows he needs mercy and he calls out to Jesus. And that's enough. He does the only thing he can do – he throws himself upon the mercy of the King and The King receives him. Even on the cross, even at the extremity of death, Jesus is offering life to the underserving and welcoming them into His kingdom.

And that offer is available to anyone who knows their hands are empty. You see like the priests you can come to God thinking your hands are full; or like the guy

on the other cross you can mock the whole salvation thing in barely disguised cynicism. But real peace and real life is only ever found by calling upon Jesus. As Peter would later preach before the Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus, 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

But ask yourself, how can any of that be? How can the God of justice allow a man like this thief into His eternal kingdom; and how could Jesus ever pray that such a crime as crucifying the Son of God be forgiven? In fact, on what grounds can any crime or any sin – the thief's, or yours, or mine be forgiven?

Jesus dies – the innocent for the guilty

Throughout Jesus' trial, and now as He hangs dying on the cross, Luke has gone out of his way to stress Jesus' innocence. First, Pilate declares in 4 separate statements that Jesus is innocent, then Herod agrees and that makes 5, and now the dying thief says the same: v41, "This man has done nothing wrong."

But the final declaration of Jesus' innocence comes from the man at the foot of the cross, who has watched it all. V46-7: Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent."

Pilate knew it, Herod knew it, the thief saw it, and now as Jesus entrusts Himself to His Father, and gives up His spirit and breathes His last and dies, the man in charge of the execution party sees it too, the 7th and final declaration: He's not guilty.

But there lies the question: if it wasn't for His own sins that Jesus died, if it wasn't His crimes, His deeds, His sins of commission and omission that nailed Him to the cross – what did? If the Son of God was innocent, why does He die as one cursed by God, hung on a cross, outside the city walls?

Well, the events that Luke records around the time Jesus died give us some clues. Luke tells us that from the sixth hour to the ninth hour – from midday to 3pm, 'the sun's light failed' (v45). And whether that was dark storm clouds covering the sky, or something supernatural, God was blotting out the sun, as the life of His Son was being blotted out. And 3pm was the time the evening sacrifice was offered in the temple. And so here is Jesus, the Light of the World, whom John the Baptist called 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world', dying as the sacrificial lambs were being slaughtered in the temple. And as He dies, the sun breaks through.

And as Jesus died Luke tells us, v45, 'the curtain of the temple was torn in two.' And that's the curtain that divided the Holy Place, from the Most Holy Place, where God's glory dwelt. The curtain that only one man, the High Priest, could pass behind, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, carrying the blood of the sacrifice. It's the curtain that symbolized the unapproachable holiness of God and the stained sinfulness of man, a potent symbol of humanity's separation from

God our Heavenly Father. And as Jesus died, the curtain was torn in two. Because the ultimate, once for all, atoning sacrifice for sins had been made.

That's why the apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 3:18: 'For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.' That's why Paul wrote, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21).

And that's why everything in Luke's gospel has been leading up to this point. Because it's through the cross that all the characters we have met as we've gone through Luke, tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers and sinners and prodigal sons, and Samaritans, and disciples who fail and fall flat on their faces, and crucified thieves, and Roman Centurions, and you and I, might have our sins forgiven and be reconciled to the Father and enter the Kingdom of the King. Because the King has died in our place. Because the price has been paid.

And that's why it's Jesus' death, and not the death of any one of the other thousands of crucified men, that's the pivot point of history. And why it's this death that has the power to change your life for ever.

And yet… whilst this cross is the centre-point, as we're going to discover next week, it's not the end. Because, if Jesus is who He says He is, God is going to have to vindicate Him. And He does.