

Good Friday, 2024

There is something exceptional about Jesus.

I don't know what you might like to call it

His self-possession, confidence, certainty about what is going on.

Maybe His courage, or His kindness

What ever you call it, it is there to be seen in his behaviour - his actions and responses - in the 24 hours before His death recorded in Luke 22-23, the passage you have heard read today.

It is Jesus who plans the Passover meal, directing his apostles to the house with the guest room big enough for them all. [22:7-13]

And at that meal it is Jesus who speaks of His coming suffering and its purpose [22:14-23], and who tells His disciples that He will be betrayed by one of them.

Think about that.

Jesus knows He is about to die, and for Him his death is not some kind of abstract idea, some distant possibility.

We see in the garden, in His prayer to the Father

⁴² "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me—nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."

And the intensity of His prayer

⁴⁴ Being in anguish, he prayed more fervently, and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground.

We see in that prayer he felt the reality of his coming death, felt its horror

But never once does He seek to flee from it.

He is the one who addresses Judas when the mob arrives

The one who quashes his followers' armed resistance. "no more of this" He says to them

When he is on trial he never pleads for his life, never argues that they have got it wrong, never denies that He is the Christ, the King

Before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of state, He is asked

⁶⁶ *When daylight came, the elders of the people, both the chief priests and the scribes, convened and brought him before their Sanhedrin. ⁶⁷ They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us."*

He knows their questioning is not sincere. They do not want to know, they only want a reason to kill Him

But he said to them, "If I do tell you, you will not believe. ⁶⁸ And if I ask you, you will not answer.

But He does not back down one bit – in fact makes the most exalted claim about himself and the ineffectiveness of their opposition. He speaks of the glorious Son of Man who from now on

⁶⁹ *But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.*

They get the hint

⁷⁰ *They all asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?"*

And he said to them, "You say that I am."

And Jesus answers in the affirmative – with distance.

He is the Son of God, but not the kind of Son of God they are thinking of.

He does not deny, but He will not endorse their understanding.

You say that I am

But it is enough for them

⁷¹ *"Why do we need any more testimony," they said, "since we've heard it ourselves from his mouth?"*

It is the same with Pilate

³ *So Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"*

He answered him, "You say so."

⁴ *Pilate then told the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no grounds for charging this man."*

He is the King of the Jews, but not the kind of King Pilate would be thinking of, and Pilate recognizes that whatever kind of King Jesus may think himself to be He is no threat to the power of Rome

But Pilate cannot persuade Jesus' accusers He is no threat, and in the face of their insistent accusation, with His life on the line Jesus mounts no counter argument, doesn't beg for his life.

Jesus seals His fate by His determined, resolute, faithfulness to His understanding of who He is, His commitment to do what He understands to be the Father's will, His commitment to the path laid out in the Scriptures for Him, what is written of Him.

And this death He knows will come through the betrayal of one of His own followers

But again, there is no attempt to flee, to slip out into the darkness and head back to Galilee, or to take Judas out in a pre-emptive strike.

It is all so different from what we expect.

Wouldn't you argue your innocence? Even as a point of principle, hating a false accusation?

Wouldn't you seek to head off your betrayer, in your anger seek to frustrate or eliminate him?

Knowing what was coming wouldn't you exert yourself to escape?

Or wouldn't you resist, make use of your followers willingness to fight?

Not Jesus

And that self possession, that character, is also seen in His interactions with others

He knows Peter, one of His closest disciples, will deny him, yet he doesn't berate or distance himself from Him. He prays for him, and assures Him in advance of a purposeful role for him when he turns back.

To have such thoughtfulness for others, including those who will add to your grief by their failure, and such confidence that you know how it will turn out when you are facing your own death is extraordinary.

But it is in Jesus' conversations in his last hours that his self possession stands out.

Handed over now to the will of His enemies [23:23], beyond all human help and hope, walking to the cross he can warn the crowd of what his death will mean for them, to be concerned about their own fate, not His [23:27-31].

Don't weep for me, weep for yourselves and your children

Crucified, hanging from the cross, unjustly condemned, with the soldiers callously playing dice for his clothes – when I think we would be overcome with pain, shame, anger at the injustice, in a torment of doubt about whether we had followed the right course, He prays for their forgiveness.

³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." And they divided his clothes and cast lots.

And then, even as His enemies are mocking His claims, challenging Him to save Himself

He, with no hesitation, assures one of the criminals He has been crucified alongside of entry to paradise, to the blessed and peaceful presence of God.

³⁹ Then one of the criminals hanging there began to yell insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰ But the other answered, rebuking him: "Don't you even fear God, since you are undergoing the same punishment? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, because we're getting back what we deserve for the things we did, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

We glimpse in those words that would have been painful for Jesus to speak, having to push up from nailed feet for every breath, how exceptional Jesus dying on the cross is, and how different His understanding of what was happening in His death is from what so many others thought they were seeing as they stood in the gloom waiting for Jesus' last breath.

For Jesus the cross is not some shameful defeat. It is not, as His opponents thought, the absolute contradiction to His claims to be the King of God's eternal kingdom, the anointed One who would bring, in the words Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah at the beginning of His ministry, good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, the time of God's favour for all who would believe in Him [Lk. 4:18-19]. Jesus dying on the cross proved for His opponents that Jesus could never be that one

But in His words to the criminal we see Jesus knows the cross is the fulfilment of the purpose of His coming, will become the content of that good news, that gospel, for the poor, the source of the release, sight, freedom and God's favour He proclaims.

Jesus spoke later in the gospel, just before He entered Jerusalem for the last time, as coming to seek and save the lost [Lk. 19:10] – and this thief by His own admission was among the lost

⁴¹ We are punished justly, because we're getting back what we deserve for the things we did,

Matthew in fact labels this thief a brigand [Matt. 27:38] or violent revolutionary.

Who knows what his descent into violence had been marked by

Or How hard his life might have been up to this point

Perhaps he had been trying to escape a life of poverty, or his heart had been embittered by the oppression of the Romans and their allies

For whatever reason he had lived a life that put him outside the law, outside the community, probably even outside pity

Now dying painfully and slowly, dying to face the judgement of a God whose commands he knew he had broken – big ones – like theft and murder

Having lost all in this life, he is lost, far away from God and unable to find, to make, a way home for himself

But in acknowledging his wrong and crying out to Jesus the King for mercy – for his cry “Remember me” is a cry for mercy

He is casting himself on Jesus’ compassion, asking Jesus to be gracious to Him, for what else could he do

He has nothing to offer Jesus, no way of undoing his wrong

But in crying out to Jesus, he is found

Jesus will bring him home

By his authority as God’s King He opens the door of paradise to him

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

This thief is saved eternally by Jesus on the cross, the horror of his death giving way to living in the presence of God where there is no pain or grief

On the cross Jesus fulfills the purpose of His coming – the lost found and saved

Saved by that death He is dying amongst those evildoers

The Lord Jesus had said over a cup of wine at the Passover meal he had shared the night before with his disciples that His death would bring into being the new covenant.

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” Lk. 22:20]

In that new covenant people would relate to God by having their sins forgiven and in Jeremiah’s words ‘remembered no more’, never again called to mind by God for judgment, never again to be the source of exclusion from God’s presence and peace.

Jesus’ promise to this violent man tells us Jesus knew that His death achieved its purpose, brought that forgiveness, for it is only by being forgiven for things the man himself said were worthy of death that this convicted criminal could have any hope. Jesus, confident His death achieves His purpose, says from that cross his hope is sure

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

On the cross Jesus knows, even as He is dying, that He is fulfilling the purpose of His coming, saving the lost through forgiveness of sins.

Knows that His death is not a defeat, but a victory

Not a denial of His being God’s King, but its demonstration

Opening paradise, life in God's presence, to those who turn to Him for mercy

There is something exceptional, different about Jesus, and something different about what the cross becomes as He dies upon it in obedience to the Father's will

pause long enough to focus on it, and you see

In Jesus' humbling Himself to death there is a great reversal only God can work

Defeat becomes victory

His Shameful humiliation becomes his eternal glory

What was meant to ensure his obscurity, that He would be forgotten and the world move on untroubled, has guaranteed His undying fame, universal renown, as Jesus said it would.

Lifted up on the cross He said in John, He would draw all people to Himself [John 12:32]

And this is a great reversal those like the dying criminal who repent, confess their lostness in living disobeying God, and believe in Jesus as God's appointed ruler are caught up in

In repentance and faith in the crucified Jesus losers become winners

The excluded included

The guilty justified, freed from condemnation

The lost brought home

A great reversal that upends, threatens all our world's complacent trust in itself

By the world's standards the winners are those who get their way, like those who got Jesus crucified, or managed, like Pilate, a difficult situation without loss to themselves

But with God Jesus the loser become the winner, the one with authority to open heaven's door

The world says the smart are those who look out for themselves and their interests, who align themselves with popular opinion and power

The dumb are those who pay a price for being faithful to God

But the great reversal of the cross says the world's wisdom ensures its destruction, and that those who lose their life for God's sake are the wise who find eternal life

The world says the powerless who do right can expect to be crushed as the powerful get their own way, but Jesus, without the strength, the power to brush the flies from his drying blood, doing the Father's will dying on the cross, now has all authority in heaven and earth, authority to judge and save, authority to give the kingdom of God to those who suffer for righteousness sake

There is something exceptional about Jesus, something unique about His death on that cross – but then and now not all see it

There are those who didn't and don't want to see it. Like Jesus' accusers and mockers they are so focused on getting their own way, on protecting their own right to rule their own lives their way, that they dismiss all evidence of Jesus' difference before it can threaten them.

And then there were and are those like Jesus' followers on that day. They knew Jesus was exceptional, had experienced His uniqueness in His ministry, but are confounded by the cross and the events surrounding it.

Why? Despite what Jesus had taught them their expectations of what should happen with Jesus were so fixed that even when Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem on the way He had said was to His death [18:31-33], they thought the kingdom of God was going to appear right away, that they were about to share in a glorious reign. Their expectation of glory left no place for His humiliation so when Jesus' words are proved true in his arrest and death they fled, or even denied Him.

So close to Jesus, so impressed by Him, but unprepared for the cross.

There is a word here for those of us who are believers already. You can confess Jesus as exceptional but develop expectations about what it is to be a Christian that are shaped more by what you desire than what Jesus says, expectations of glory, of a good, together life where you get to realize the kind of life you want, a life where the cross no longer fits. Keeping company with Jesus and His goodness you have started to lose sight of the depth of your own sin and the need of the world

And so the cross no longer fits as the only source of your relationship with God, for you want to think of yourself as a good person whose good life secures your relationship with God, a good person who deserves good from God – and the cross that says you are a sinner like that thieving rebel whose only hope is the crucified Jesus' grace – is an uncomfortable embarrassment, not just as the source of your salvation, but as the way of life you are called to as a believer in Jesus

a life of humbling yourself before your heavenly Father to say like the Son each day Not my will, not the life of glory that I want where there is no suffering for righteousness, but yours be done.

You can think Jesus is exceptional, but still be confounded by, stumble, at the cross

But there are also those like the thief who see and believe that this exceptional Jesus on the cross is God's King, and their present and future is changed.

That thief had no illusions about his goodness and what he deserved

He knew he was lost because of the life he lived and he turned in his desperation to the exceptional Jesus, Jesus who knows His death brings forgiveness to those who trust Him, who came to save

I don't assume all of you here are believers

And I don't assume you are all know peace with the living God, with the thought of meeting God

You could be sitting there conscious that you deserve punishment for the wrong you have done, conscious of your own wretchedness.

If that is you, Call upon this Jesus, who came to save the lost, who knows His death brings forgiveness.

He lives and as he heard the thief, He will hear you

Ask the Lord Jesus to forgive you and give you His Spirit

That is All you need do, all you can do

And having asked, let someone know, for it will all be new, and new believers, like new born babies, need help

But there is one final observer of Jesus' exceptional last hours

The centurion who witnessed His death

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three, ⁴⁵ because the sun's light failed. The curtain of the sanctuary was split down the middle. ⁴⁶ And Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, **into your hands I entrust my spirit.**" Saying this, he breathed his last.

⁴⁷ When the centurion saw what happened, he began to glorify God, saying, "This man really was righteous!"

I don't know how many men that centurion had seen die.

It would have been a few, for that was his job

He had seen Jesus on the cross, heard his words, His trust in the Father until the end, and knew Jesus was different to what He had been made out to be

And so He formed his own judgment about Jesus, a different judgement to the authorities he served or his colleagues who mocked him

"This man really was righteous!"

But He did not know as yet what that meant, meant for Him

For that – he needed to know more

Needed to know the resurrection, and that the risen Jesus would say that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed on his authority to all, including to him

You may be like that centurion

You hear the gospel story and can't shake the impression that Jesus is different, exceptional, good

And are puzzled by His death, think it is more than just another good person getting crushed by the powerful, like Navalny by Putin

But you are not sure why

Can I invite you to find out why

There are ways you can do that

You can Read ahead into Luke 24, the account of Jesus' resurrection, the resurrection that witnesses to the truth of Jesus' understanding of His death

Or you can Come back on Sunday as we look together at that passage

Or Come and talk, think about coming to Christianity Explored where we work through a gospel and you can ask all your questions

For the centurion like the thief needed the forgiveness Jesus has the authority to give, and so do you

Jesus is exceptional, His death unique, and believer as you hear again the account of Jesus' suffering and death

Keep seeing the cross as Jesus sees it – the good news that He brings to the world, the source of our forgiveness as He dies for our sins, the key that opens paradise to those who know they deserve hell but call on Jesus for mercy

And keep seeing yourself as the cross reveals you to be

Both a Sinner needing saving with no grounds for boasting in yourself and your own goodness

And Saved, saved by the complete and forever forgiveness Jesus' death brings to all who call on Him

And in His cross See the life your Lord Jesus calls you to

For He has called all those who believe in Him to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. As He walked the path of trusting obedience to His Father so He calls us to daily trusting obedience to Himself, the life of dying to sin to live for righteousness [1 Pet. 2:24], of being willing to suffer to keep on doing the good He teaches us to do [1 Pet. 4:19].

But also know that the Lord Jesus who calls you to that path has shown you in the great reversal God has worked through His own cross that the way of the cross is the way of honour, of life, of victory, the only path to glory.