



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church Good Friday, March 25, 2016

Luke 23: 13-25

Just as for Peter, the crowd rejects Jesus three times. Whether at the urging of the religious leaders, the thrill of the mob or for what they saw as an offense to the Temple, the people scream rejection; “Crucify him, crucify him!” There is a strong sense in scripture that this is Jerusalem rejecting Jesus; the build-up of allusions and images make the case that this is the big city rejecting the country prophet. He’s too religious, too moral, a threat to the Temple industry and out of touch with the reality of being a city in the Roman Empire. But all of that is put to the test and judged by the reality of the cross. The words from the cross, the actions of all the players and the disturbing lack of spectacle leaves the crowd in a very different place when the crucifixion comes to an end.

The Seven Last Words of Jesus

Word 1

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” – Luke 23: 34

Peter, the guards, the Sanhedrin, Herod, Pilate, the crowd; there is no shortage of people to include in ‘forgive them’. Jesus has not just been rejected by the mob, everyone in the story holds some part in the crucifixion and Jesus includes them all in this great cry of forgiveness.

Word 2

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” – Luke 23: 43

Then one man recognises this rejection, the most unlikely of men, and we see that the cry of forgiveness is not some passive aggressive outburst. Forgiveness, acceptance and inclusion are genuine and available, even for someone who feels they don’t deserve them. This thief on the cross feels that he deserves death, and yet Jesus includes him in the grace of God.

Word 3

“Woman, here is your son”, “Here is your mother” – John 19: 26 - 27

The eldest son, abandoned and alone in the midst of such abuse and violence sees his mother standing with one of the disciples. In a wonderful touch of humanity, Jesus acknowledges his place and his duty and creates a new family grouping. Some may see this as a bit of a rebuff and insult to James and the other brothers of Jesus, but it is a sign of the new community being inaugurated. A community that will be family for many of the members.

Word 4

“My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?” – Mark 15: 34

For many this is a point of theological confusion. How can the One who is God on earth, the Son of God, be forsaken by God? And yet, for others this is the point of connection with Jesus the man, Jesus the crucified. Here is the universal “Why?” for all who have suffered, for all who have felt abandoned, abused and suffering in innocence. Here Jesus gathers all those people to the cross and shows that the love of God goes through and beyond all such suffering. Paradoxically, you are not forsaken, but embraced by God.

Word 5

“I am thirsty” – John 19: 28

In another touch of humanity, Jesus acknowledges that he is indeed suffering on the cross. Suffering in a way that we can all associate with; when we are lost and oppressed in the spiritual wilderness of this world and feel thirsty for God, for presence, for inspiration, for purpose, we can see Jesus as a fellow traveller. He thirsts; the one who offered living water to the woman in Samaria, he thirsts.

Word 6

“It is accomplished” – John 19:30

Rather than an unfortunate occurrence at the hands of cruel people, there is purpose in the cross and that purpose comes to the fore. More than “It is finished” or “This torture is ended”, Jesus' death accomplishes three years of ministry. All the teaching, healing, leading and miracles led to this; the Son of God goes to the cross to die. Rather than failure, this is the goal, the glorification of a God who loves enough to suffer for us, even to death.

Word 7

“Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit” – Luke 23:46

And yet, the cry of accomplishment is not the last word. The love that sends Jesus to the cross, to death, sees a way beyond death. With God, there is a way through death to something else, to being with God. The mission is accomplished but the story of God and Jesus, God and all people is not finished. This death is not an end but a sign post to something more; into the hands of God.

All those words and their import have an effect on the crowd; no more shouting, no more anger and thirst for blood. They now feel something else:

Gospel Luke 23: 47 – 49