

30 March 2018

A Man Discarded (Mark 15 & Psalm 22)

Good Friday

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A lot has happened since our time in the garden last night. According to Mark, after his arrest, when his disciples had all deserted him and fled (Mark 14: 50), Jesus was taken to the high priest's house where all the priests, the elders, and the scribes assembled. There they questioned him hostilely and relentlessly, and many gave false testimony against him. After a cruel, a grueling session, they pronounced him deserving of death and began to spit on him. They blindfolded and struck him, then handed him over to the guards who also beat him. As soon as it was morning, he was bound and handed over to Pilate before whom he was once more accused 'of many things'. There came a brief possibility of reprieve – when Pilate offered the crowd to release a prisoner as was supposedly customary during the festival – but it was snuffed out almost immediately. Once more Jesus was handed over to be flogged and dragged off to be crucified – abandoned and reviled.

It is a nightmare story, fantastical. It's hard to know exactly how it did happen – Jewish law would have condemned outright the midnight trial and Roman governors did not offer to release their prisoners like this.¹ But Mark is telling the story from the perspective of its victim, and when victims of totalitarian tyranny tell their stories, they sound very much like this. No one explains, no one justifies what's going on; false witness, arbitrary process and misrepresentation abound. It's a world of naked light globes glaring in your eyes, brief flashes of your tormentors' faces, no time to think or make sense. It's a world captured in the chilling and terrifying fiction of Franz Kafka and Rowan Williams suggests: 'Perhaps we understand Mark a little better if we recognize the echoes of Kafka's account of what it is like to be locked

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), p.57.

into the workings of a meaningless, nonsensical, but completely irresistible system of power, devoted to your destruction'.²

But two things stand out. The first – it's in the midst of this nightmarish sequence, that Jesus finally says unmistakably, unambiguously who he is. You'll remember it's been a feature of Mark's gospel that Jesus tells those who recognise him *not* to reveal his identity – it's called 'the Messianic secret'. Those who have been healed, the demons who've been cast out – all are commanded 'to say nothing to anyone' (Mark 1: 44). Jesus hasn't wanted to be identified because he hasn't wanted to be known as a miracle worker; he hasn't wanted the power of God in him to be misunderstood, conceived of as dominating, controlling, wand-waving, magical.

But now – there's no danger of that. And so it is only now, when the high priest asks, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed? (14: 61), that Jesus replies: 'I am'. For the first time, he lets himself be known, the Messianic secret is revealed. Writes Williams: 'The placing of this claim, this breaking of silence, is all-important. It is when Jesus is stripped of all hope, all power, when he stands alone in the middle of this meaningless nightmare, with no hope of life, it is then and only then that he declares who he is. And he does so in words that evoke the Divine Name itself', the name God uses to identify himself to Moses – I AM.³

What this means, second, is that God is not who we imagined, maybe not even who we wanted God to be. All along, Jesus' disciples and the crowds who followed him have been looking for a God to restore their national pride, to gratify their longings for power and security. But that God is not putting in an appearance; that God turns out to have been an idol. And after his declaration before the high priest, Jesus lapses again into silence, as if only by this silence, only 'by this failure of all that has been fantasized and longed for can he at last "say" what is to be said'. It's as if, says Williams, 'the silence of his dying is the only rhetoric for his gospel'.⁴ It's the only way the true God can be made known.

² Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, pp.57-58.

³ Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, pp.58-59.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.270.

So there is God, the Creator of the universe, 'I Am' – hanging discarded, rejected, making nonsense of our projections ... There is God, utterly identified with the wretched of the earth, with the despised, shamed, condemned ...

What is it like to belong to this God? To be One with this God as Jesus is?

It hurts. It's hard to embody this loving solidarity, this self-emptying power, in the midst of a fearful and uncomprehending world. It's hard to keep believing that it changes anything, effects anything. It's hard to give up the fantasy of rescue and to consent to this exposure ... 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Yet faith proclaims that this apparently powerless, self-emptied, love poured out is the very life of the world ... it is the source of creation, the means of redemption ... And that despite everything, despite suffering violence and death, this life is even so unquenchable and this love unkillable.

To wait at the foot of the cross is to gaze on this mystery ... it's to open ourselves to be changed by it, as our hearts are joined to the heart of the crucified, which is the heart of God.