

Palm Sunday

1st April 2012

Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Psalm 31: 9-18; Philippians 2: 5-11; Mark 14: 1 – 15: 39

John Dunnill

How appropriate that we should gather to hear this terrible, wonderful story of the Passion on April Fools' Day.

The tradition of playing jokes on other people on this day goes a long way back, certainly into the Middle Ages. In different countries people do different things: they, give each other fake messages, in France they stick a fish on your back, and so on. The jokes don't have to be terribly clever, so as they take you in, catch you out, 'make a fool' of you: 'April Fool!'.

In Spain when you've been fooled they cry '*Innocente*', 'Innocent' – what an accusation! Interesting that the word *cretin*, meaning a fool, is a corruption of the word *Christian*. To be simple, guileless, unsuspecting is admirable, in children maybe, and in saints in stained glass windows, but in the street it's a condition to make fun of. 'Fooled you!'

Peter was talking last week about the law of love that God writes in our hearts, the law behind all human laws and even holy covenants, the one thing we are called to trust in, in complete simplicity, to let God alone lead us.

As the psalmist says, 'For God alone my soul in silence waits; my salvation comes from him' (Ps 62: 1). But who can bear the challenge of that?

The Passion story is the tale of Jesus the holy fool, who came to Jerusalem with a mission to challenge the powers of Israel and Rome to do just that, to listen to the law of love written in the heart. What did they do? They mocked him to death.

After all those betrayals by his closest friends, and the trials that were not really trials, Jesus was sentenced to be crucified, and then the mockery, the April Fool's Game, began. In our day we tend to think a lot about the physical pain of crucifixion but that's not what Mark concentrates on. He knows about the pain, but what strikes him is the *shame of it*.

It begins before they get to Golgotha, with the mock-coronation by the soldiers in the barracks. The whole cohort, we're told. Imagine hundreds (or anyway dozens) of soldiers jostling you, stripping you, clothing you in mock-regalia, a purple cloak and a crown made of twisted thorns, and bowing in mock homage – 'Hail King of the Jews!' – before they hit you and spit on you.

From somewhere had come this story that Jesus called himself 'King of the Jews', Messiah, that he was there to raise a revolt and throw out the Romans. This wandering prophet whose straggle of followers were unarmed and without supporters

in places of power. The soldiers let him know what they thought about that. What a joke.

And when they got him to the gallows they continued the joke: stuck a placard above his head, 'King of the Jews'. The cross was a punishment for slaves and rebels. It was often thought especially good for rebels, people who had got above themselves – let's 'stick em up' on a cross. People joked about would-be king being 'enthroned' on a cross.

In fact there was sometimes a seat on a cross, a peg or small bench to sit on while you hung from your pinned wrists and your pinned or roped ankles. It was hardly a throne, and it wasn't put there out of kindness. It stopped you from suffocating straight away as your body weight pulled you down and closed your airways. So the bench kept you alive to experience the full awfulness of the torture, sometimes for days, with the unbearable pressure on your arms and chest, naked, exposed to the taunts of the passers by, pecked by birds and attacked by dogs, plunging into madness or despair.

Crucifixion is one of the world's most hideous inventions, and Mark is tight-lipped. He can hardly bear to say the word: 'It was nine o'clock in the morning and they crucified him.'

But the mockery has only just begun. The people passing by pick up the story that he claimed he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Herod's temple, still being built after forty years, rebuild it in three days? – what, him? That's a good joke.

And the scribes and priests pick it up. 'Saved others did he? He can't save himself. Show us your power now, O great messiah.'

Of course the sharpness of these taunts is that these things are true: he *has* saved others and will save more; he *will* raise up a temple in three days, the temple of his body (as St John explains, Jn 2: 19-22), and when these things are shown to be true the joke will be turned back on them. But right now they are signs of the darkness of the world's rejection of Jesus, and its rejection of what he stands for: the possibility that God works in a human life to bring salvation to others. What a fool, to trust God. That's what the chief priests and the religious scholars said.

And now the darkness deepens. All through Mark's Gospel there has been a holy war between Jesus, inspired by the Spirit of God, and on the other side Satan with his armies of demons possessing people's minds and bodies and driving them to do evil. Now that evil power becomes a darkness covering the whole land, or even the whole earth. A darkness to be felt, not necessarily to be seen. A darkness shutting out the heavens.

And in this darkness Jesus cries with a loud voice. This is no cry of triumph. In Mark it is only the demon-possessed who cry with a loud shout like this, like the man in the synagogue at Capernaum and the man with the Legion of demons (1: 26, 5: 7), and they shout to curse and drive Jesus away because he represents God.

Mark wants us to know that Jesus is now completely overwhelmed by the power of Evil, and what he shouts is his own challenge to God: *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani*?: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Strung up on the cross, shamed, mocked and tortured, Jesus faces the depth of horror, to find himself abandoned by his God.

That was the possibility he faced when he set out on this road. It was the possibility he accepted in Gethsemane: 'Not my will but yours be done'. If you put your whole trust in God you may find yourself alone. 'For God alone my soul in silence waits; my salvation comes from him'. Fine words, but what happens if God abandons you?

There was no answer to his question, only more mockery about Elijah coming to save him and another joke with a drink of vinegar. Jesus cries again, that demoniac yell. We have to face the possibility, as Mark tells it, that Jesus died feeling himself cut off from God, in complete despair.

So he really was a fool, then, to think he could throw himself against the might of Rome and the power of Satan and come through? He really was abandoned by God? – Except that there are signs all through, signs in the events, signs in the text, to show that whatever it looked like, and whatever he felt, God was there all along.

When Sheila Cassidy, a Christian doctor, was arrested and tortured by the secret police in Chile in 1975, she too cried to God for aid, and nothing happened. She said,

'I've no idea why God wasn't intervening. [But]History shows that God doesn't intervene in a lot of things, and there's nothing special about me. … The curious thing is that all that time that it was happening I *knew* that God loved me. Don't ask me how … it was a very curious clinical thing like God being present in an operating theatre.'

Did Jesus too know the presence of his Father-God even in the depths of the power of darkness? Was there a knowledge of God's presence deeper than the experience of despair? All we can point to is the signs in the Gospel story that show that this, *all of this*, was part of God's plan from the beginning.

Jesus had told the disciples, back in Galilee, that all this would happen, and they wouldn't listen: they resisted so strongly Jesus had to say to Peter 'Get behind me *Satan*'. Yes, that's where the resistance was coming from.

And the words of his cry, 'My God my God' are the first words of Psalm 22, which is the song of faith of a righteous sufferer, a psalm which Mark has already echoed twice: 'they divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my clothing' (Ps 22: 18), and 'all who see me laugh me to scorn' (Ps 22: 7). None of this is unforeseen.

Also the prophet Amos once spoke about a darkness coming at noon, as if the land was mourning for a *beloved son'* (Amos 8: 9f), and however unlikely it seems, Mark tells us that that truth is recognised by the pagan centurion who stands looking on: 'Truly this man was God's Son'.

Finally ‘the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom’. If that was a physical event it wasn’t one the centurion or anyone else standing outside the city walls could possibly have seen. But it is Mark’s testimony, that it was torn ‘from the top’, by God, just as he recorded that the heavens were ‘torn open’ by God at Jesus’ baptism when Jesus was filled with the Spirit and named God’s Son.

Here is where God is to be found: not in Heaven, not enshrined in the Holy of Holies or inscribed in books of Holy Law, but in the life-giving death of a young Jewish teacher who threw himself into the power of the God whose law he found written on his heart, the law of the infinite possibility of goodness and peace.

We know this, yet we can’t stop looking up to Heaven, making images of God, building shrines, compiling holy laws. Whenever we do this, we mock Jesus over again. What a fool, to think we could live by trust in God, or would *even try* just because we call ourselves his disciples.

As St Paul says, writing to the Philippians, it is not in these things that we find God, but in the mind of Christ: in his willingness to empty himself of whatever he had, take the form of a slave and humble himself in obedience to God – to the point of death, death (he says with a shudder) on a cross.

And it was he, this holy fool, ground into the dust like a rebellious slave – he was the one to whom God has given everything, *everything* in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

And so this is the one we celebrate, this holy fool, God’s Son. Here is where God is to be found. In a life in which we see the infinite possibility of goodness, peace and love made actual even in the depth of evil. Do we dare to go with him, this holy fool, clutching our flimsy palm-crosses? Can we allow the cross to become in us a sign of life for other people?