

Mark 15.25-32: KING JESUS

Chelmsford 16 March 2008

*Not a fatter fish than he
Flounders round the polar sea
See his blubber – at his gills
What a world of drink he swills...
By his bulk and by his size
By his oily qualities
This (or else my eyesight fails)
This should be the Prince of Wales*

Royalty has not always had the best of presses, as this early 19th century ditty clearly portrays. For the most part the British have never idolized the royal family. In my own family, some of us are staunch monarchists, while others are of a more republican bent.

On this Palm Sunday, however, I want to preach about a king to whom all of us should give our most heartfelt allegiance: viz. his Most Majestic of Majesties **KING JESUS!** But rather than focus on the triumphal entry of Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, I want to focus on Mark's account of the final sufferings of Jesus. For, strange as it may seem, in Mark's Gospel the trial and crucifixion of Jesus are a kind of coronation ceremony. In the words of one commentator: "*His throne is a cross, his courtiers two robbers, and his public the enemies who kill him*" (Lamar Williamson).

I find it significant that here in the 15th chapter of his Gospel Mark makes much of the title King of the Jews. So we read:

- When Jesus was brought by the Jews for trial before Caesar's representative, Pilate asked him: "**Are you the king of the Jews?**" (v2);
- When Pilate presented the crowd with the choice between Jesus and Barabbas, Pilate asked: "**Do you want me to set free for you the King of the Jews?**" (v9).
- When they shouted for Barabbas to be released, Pilate asked: "**What do you want me to do with the one you call the king of the Jews?**" (v12).
- Once sentence was given, the soldiers made fun of Jesus by clothing him in a cloak of royal purple and by putting on him a crown made of thorns - and "**they began to salute him: 'Long live the King of the Jews'**" (v18).
- When Jesus was finally crucified, they nailed up the inscription of the charge against him, which read "**The King of the Jews**" (v26).
- And as Jesus was hanging on the Cross dying, the chief priests and scribes taunted Jesus by shouting out: "**Let us see the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him!**" (v32).

Six times in Mark's account Jesus was addressed as King.

What kind of a king was Jesus? What significance was meant by the term?

At his trial Pilate asked him "**Are you the king of Jews?**" (v2): i.e.

- "Do you Jesus have any claims to power?"
- Are you out to set up a break-away kingdom?"
- Are you a rival to Caesar?"

At that time there was no longer any Jewish king.

There was only a "**tetrarch**" of Galilee who ruled with others as a vassal of Rome over the land which had been divided into several parts.

True, the Jewish people followed the ancient custom and still called this person "**king**" (6.14). But "**King Herod**" was a puppet king. He had no meaningful power.

He was but a sidekick of the Romans.

But for anybody else to pretend to be "**King of the Jews**", that was another matter.

If someone who had not sworn allegiance to Rome were to usurp this title, then it would have amounted to high treason.

And so Pilate asked Jesus, "**Are you the King of the Jews?**"

Jesus did not deny it - but nor did he affirm it.

"**So you say so**", he replied. I.e. "*Yes - but not you're sort of a king.*"

"*I have no political pretensions. I am no populist messianic figure*".

In John's account Jesus goes on to say: "**My kingdom does not belong to this world**" (Jn 18.36).

Jesus claimed to be a King - but a King with a difference.

So what kind of a King was – and indeed is - Jesus?

1. THE SINNERS' KING

"*Jesus was crucified not in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves*" (George F. MacLeod).

v27 "**They also crucified two bandits, one on his right and the other on his left**".

Who were these "**bandits**"? these "**robbers**" (REB/NIV)?

In all likelihood these two men were no ordinary criminals - rather they were probably associates of Barabbas, they were freedom-fighters, 'Zealots'.

NB v7: "**At that time a man named Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder in the riot**".

They were the paramilitaries of their day - rough and ready men who were happy to stick the knife into the back of any Roman; and probably not too concerned if occasionally they got the wrong man instead.

It was with such men that Jesus was crucified.

How ironic when you consider the kind of life Jesus had lived. Jesus was everything that these men were not.

Jesus, said Peter in his first letter, was like a lamb - "**without defect or flaw**" (1.19)!

Jesus was as upright as they come. Although he shared in our flesh and blood and "**was tempted in every way that we are**", he "**did not sin**" (Hebs 4.15).

If ever a man deserved not to die, it was Jesus. The cross was a total frame-up.

And yet how appropriate that Jesus should die with such men.

For here we find the meaning of the Cross.

There on the Cross Jesus identified himself with sinners.

Throughout his ministry Jesus had been known as the "**friend of sinners**". As he went about preaching and teaching, he had associated himself with the outcasts of society – crooked business men and ladies of the night, people who would never have been allowed to darken the door of a place of worship.

But now on the Cross he fully identified himself with those who had broken God's laws. As you will see from a footnote in your Bibles, some MSS add the words: "**In this way the scripture came true which says, 'and he shared the fate of criminals** [literally: law-breakers]" (v28).

The Scripture in question is Is 53.12: "**He willingly gave his life and shared the fate of evil men. He took the place of many sinners and prayed that they might be forgiven**".

Jesus, in dying on the cross, not only lined himself up with these two "**bandits**", but also with all of us. For all of us are law-breakers – not in the sense that we have necessarily broken the laws of the state, but in the sense that all of us have offended against God's holy laws – many of us may appear to be respectable and upright citizens, but the fact is that none of us can claim to be without sin.

Jesus, in dying on a cross, took upon himself the sin of the world – yours and mine.

The two bandits were representatives of sinful humanity.

Jesus is the sinners' king.

Jesus in dying on the Cross claims the allegiance of all who have sinned and fallen short of God's standards.

2. THE PEOPLE'S KING

Walter Bagehot, the 19th century economist & constitutionalist once wrote: "*Royalty is a government in which the attention of the nation is concentrated on one person doing interesting actions*". Certainly as far as the present-day media is concerned, the antics of the royal family provide wonderful copy for the titillation of the nation.

But Jesus was a people's king - in the sense that his life was totally bound up in the lives of his subjects. His concern was for others - and never for himself.

We see that concern above all on the Cross.

As Jesus hung on the cross, the physical pain of crucifixion was compounded by the pain of taunting and misunderstanding.

- He was mocked first by ordinary passers-by: Mark tells us that "**People passing by shook their heads & hurled insults at Jesus: 'Aha! You were going to tear down the Temple and build it up again in three days! Now come down from the cross and save yourself!'**" (v29). The scoffers assumed that Jesus' primary objective would

have been to save his own life; therefore his failure to do so must be proof that he lacked either the power or the opportunity. To the mockers the logic of their challenge was irrefutable: crucifixion was the crowning proof of self-deception.

- Then the chief priests & the teachers of the Law came along: "**He saved others, but he cannot save himself! Let us see the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him!**" (v31,32). But as General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, once said: "*It is precisely because he would not come down that we believe in him*".
- Finally, Mark tells us that the two men who were crucified with him "**insulted him**" (v32). Luke in his account says that one cried out: "**Save yourself if you are the king of the Jews**" (23.37).

As is so often the case, Jesus' opponents unwittingly spoke the truth.

Jesus could have saved himself - even at that last minute he could have called upon the heavenly armies of his Father and have been delivered.

BUT had he come down from that cross, he would never have been able to save us.

Instead he remained on the cross - Jesus had no thought for himself, but rather he had thought for others. He was a true people's king - a king who had the welfare of his subjects uppermost in his heart.

Here we see something of the limitless love of God. There was nothing in all the world which the love of God was not prepared to do for you and for me. God even gave his Son.

3. THE WORLD'S KING

v26: "**The notice of the accusation against him read, 'The King of the Jews'**."

It was the custom of the Romans to display a notice indicating the crime for which the person was being executed. I'm told that this would have been a wooden board whitened with chalk on which letters were written in ink specifying the crime.

The words of the inscription make it clear that it was a messianic pretender that Jesus had been condemned – "**The King of the Jesus**".

Yet ironically the way in which the inscription was worded, made it clear that he was no ordinary messianic pretender. For, as Luke and John tell us, this inscription was written in three languages - "**in Hebrew, in Latin and in Greek**" (Jn 19.20)

No doubt these three languages were chosen to make sure that everyone in the crowd should be able to read and understand – for at Passover time, Jerusalem was packed with visitors from all parts of the world.

But from our perspective, the very tri-lingual nature of this inscription points to Jesus' universal significance. He is not so much the Jews' king, as the world's king.

Jesus' earthly ministry may have been confined to Israel, but his death on the Cross was not for one group of people, but for all.

"**When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself**" (Jn 12.32).

Yes, in a way which was far beyond Pilate's intention or understanding, the inscription points to Jesus' claim to the world of the Jew, the Roman and the Greek.

In the words of James Stewart, Scottish preacher of a past generation: "*Greek was the language of culture and knowledge; in that realm, said the inscription, Jesus was King. Latin was the language of law and government: Jesus was king there! Hebrew was the language of revealed religion: Jesus was King there! Hence even as he hung dying it was true that 'On his head were many crowns' (Rev 19.12)*".

OUR KING?

But we cannot leave it there.

We need to apply what we have learnt to ourselves.

For the death of Jesus to have any significance for you and for me, we need to acknowledge that he died too for us.

For Jesus - the sinner's king; the people's king; the world's king - died for you and me.

The question each of us need to face is this: "*Is he our King? Is he my King?*"

The story is told of how William Temple, then Archbishop of Canterbury, was conducting a mission to Oxford students in the 1930s. The students were singing the hymn, "*When I survey the wondrous Cross*" - but Temple stopped the singing before the last verse, saying:

"These are tremendous words. If you mean them with all your hearts, sing them as loud as you can. If you mean them a little, and want to mean them more, sing them very softly".

There was a dead silence - and then Isaac Watts' words were whispered by 2000 young men and women.

*"Were the whole realm of Nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all"*