

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Mark chapter 15

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Sunday 18th November 2012

V:1-15

If you had to choose a friend, which would you choose? Jesus or Barabbas? If there was an election - like the U.S. elections that are just over - who would you vote for?

Barabbas - a prisoner who had been arrested for being one of a group who had committed murder - for a political cause, which he probably thought justified it, but who had been involved in killing someone all the same. OR Jesus: who had gone around healing people, giving good advice, even providing for their hunger. Which would you vote for?

But the people voted for Barabbas. Why? The Chief Priests told them to. I wonder how many would rather have asked Pilate to release Jesus, but thought they had better go along with what the majority seemed to want? I wonder how many were scared that if the Chief Priests saw that they didn't do as they were told they would find things difficult for themselves later?

We are not asked to vote for Jesus. But in a way we are, every day. Not by shouting in a crowd, like the people in the Bible. Not by putting a cross in a box, as people do when they vote in an election, but by the way we live: how we treat others; how we stand up for what we know is right, even if it is hard; how we spend time in prayer; how we don't put ourselves first. Vote for Jesus! Will you?

V:16-32

Simon carries the cross.

Once, teaching his disciples on a mountainside, Jesus had said, "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." (Matthew 5:41.) When you start to think about it, it is remarkable how much of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount teaching becomes very relevant in the time of his trial and death. Or maybe it is not remarkable at all. Surely it is when he reached these most critical days of his life and ministry that what he said and believed about turning the other cheek and loving your enemy should become most relevant. It is when our lives are at breaking point that what we really think and believe and base our lives upon becomes obvious.

The Roman soldier could force anyone to carry his load for a mile. But in this case it is Jesus' load which Simon is forced to carry. The soldier would not be willing to carry it himself, because it was usual for the person carrying the cross - or its cross-piece - to be the criminal. No soldier would want to be associated with the treason that crucifixion punished. But if Jesus could not carry it - and he had been sorely punished already - they would make someone else do it. So they picked on Simon and he had no choice but to be associated with Jesus' "crime". Simon may have been picked out because of where he was from: Cyrene was in Libya, and as a north

African, Simon would have looked just a bit different. For some people that another is just a little different is enough to make them fair game to be picked on. And so Simon is singled out to share the shame of criminality, to be misunderstood by the watching crowds.

To follow Jesus is to be misunderstood, even as he was misunderstood. People who have had some exposure to the faith, often at second-hand, are liable to think they know not just what we believe, but how, what one way, that belief should show itself in our lives: sometimes they are right, of course, but often the understanding falls down in the area of why we should act as we do or should.

Jesus was misunderstood. We saw that as we read of his trial last week. He made no protest about it. Simon now is to be associated with perceived criminality - treason - and he has no way of saying no, or of protesting to the onlookers he toiled past "I am not the criminal here: they just made me carry this thing." He had to bear the cross, its weight and its shame, in silence.

Silence is a bit feature of the trial and death of Jesus. Jesus is silent before his accusers, and does not respond either to those who even taunted him in his agony on the cross. They have returned to the old accusation that he did not respect the temple - this, not any supposed rebellion was what mattered most to the religious leaders. This man, they felt, and they were right, did not feel or think the way they did about their holy building. It was because of the building, which was just stone set on stone, although with spiritual significance, that they were prepared to condemn and taunt and kill an innocent man. They believed, as we do, that all life is holy: but they thought that one inanimate building was more holy than the blood, the life, the God-force in one man, any man, let alone Jesus. But Jesus did not point this out to them: he went on saying nothing.

When an idea, an ideology, a set of beliefs, leads a person, or more often a group of people to think that what they believe is worth killing for, worth taking even one life for, then something has gone wrong. I know that Christianity has in the past been the reason for thousands of deaths, even deaths of fellow-Christians, who believed and worked out their faith in Jesus just a little differently. History does not make a thing right. Each time the innocent have to suffer in silence, each time a person's life is taken from them, then something of God is killed, and so then Jesus' crucifixion is enacted over again. We see it every day on our news screens. The fact of its frequency should never blunt our sensibilities about what we are witnessing.

V:33-47

And so Jesus died, turning his attention from those who had brought him to this place of torment, to God alone. He felt abandoned by God, but he did not cease to turn to him, did not cease to act on the faith which had given shape and meaning to his whole life. There is so much that we can learn from the death of our Lord, and faithfulness to our faith in God is just one lesson. He died still misunderstood by those who thought that he had turned to Elijah, not to God himself in his extremis.

He died watched, not, as Mark records it, by his disciples, the twelve who had run away in the garden, but by the women. Which of the twelve would have predicted that? These strong, brave men who were always closest to Jesus, always at his side; who promised that they would never desert him- how would they ever have foreseen that it was the women who worked quietly in the background, who provided for the needs of the group, who also were always there, but with little fuss and no fanfare: how would the twelve have foreseen that when the end came, when the

hardest time of all came, it would be the quiet faith of the women which would be the stronger and the braver? This is not to make a point about gender difference, far less gender superiority. But it does teach us something of the nature of faith. It reminds us that the faith which makes a loud noise and draws attention to itself and the person who professes it, is not always the strongest or the most durable. The parable of the sower and the seed comes to mind, where the seed sown on the rocky soil sprang up quickly, but also withered quickly, because it had no depth of root. It is only when difficult times and trials to our faith and faithfulness arise that it becomes obvious whose is the faith that will last.

Of course the disciples were going to come back to their faithfulness, ashamed but more determined, if they had not we might have had no church, no spread of the gospel in the world. But in the meantime it is Joseph, whose faith up till now has been un-guessed-at by anyone, who has the courage to take Jesus' body and treat it with honour in burial.

Or it may be that Joseph did not at that time have faith. Maybe it was his humanity which was stirred by the death of Jesus, and which wanted to see his human remains treated with respect, and not left hanging as a warning for the birds to peck at. Faith comes in different ways to each of us. Some must believe, firmly and fully, without question, before they will act. But others will act and in action will find that they discover what they believe. Joseph, we are told, was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. Something in Jesus life and death moved him to want to act as he did, and it is from this time that tradition places him among the first believers.

In the church, which was called into being by Jesus' death and which seeks to follow in his ways, we should not be too choosy about who is allowed to join in. One of the historic faults of the church, in most of its branches, including the Church of Scotland, is that they have tried to make the faith exclusive. Creeds and catechisms have been devised, and used not as a guide to what we believe, but as a test; used to keep out those who were at a different place in their faith until they might match up to the norm. But Joseph took Jesus' body, because he was a seeker, because he was on the journey. That action brought him within the community of faith, and it is from within the community, not from being kept outside, that we learn best what it means to believe. And so as a church we reach out, and allow all who will to act with us in seeking to bring in the kingdom of God.

Jesus' death speaks to us on so many levels, and we will return to thinking about it again next week. This is the core of our faith: that God should love us so much that he sent his only Son, that Jesus should be so faithful to his Father and to his calling and to us, that he should go unresisting to the cross to die for us. To return to where we began with the children: let us remember him, and in our lives, our words, our actions and our attitudes, let us vote for Jesus!

Amen