

# **THE PASSION NARRATIVE**

**Mark 14:1 - 15:39**

### **Introductory comment**

The many parallels in vocabulary and in theme between this and the previous section highlight the fact that for Mark the presence, the coming and the revelation of the Son of Man happen in Jesus' dying and being raised to glory by God. He is the one who comes to us. He is the one we are invited to see.

We have reached the climax for which Mark has been preparing us from the beginning of the gospel: Jesus' death on the cross. In the first section (14:1-52) we are given Jesus' own understanding of its significance. In the second section (14:53 - 15:39) we are invited to contemplate the unfolding of the drama till the point of ultimate revelation when a Roman soldier, (speaking, please God, for us all) says: 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

**PART A: Jesus offers himself (14:1-52)****The final conspiracy to arrest Jesus**

Jesus' death occurred during the period of the celebration of the Passover, and the events of his final days are placed by Mark within the context of the themes and motifs associated with that feast.

Originally Passover was a pastoral festival celebrated on the night of the first full moon after the spring equinox. The finest year-old lamb from the previous spring was offered in sacrifice to God by way of a prayer for a good season of new lambs. It took only a small step to use the festival to celebrate God's choice of Israel as his 'flock'. In their liturgical reliving of the Exodus, they re-enacted the rejection by God of the first-born of the Egyptians. God 'passed over' the Israelites and led them out of Egypt to begin their journey to the Promised Land. The slain lamb was called the 'Passover Lamb' (*pascha*). Its blood was poured out upon the ground, its life offered back to God, and its body was eaten in a communal meal, celebrating the familiarity of the people with their God.

According to the ritual, the Passover was first celebrated on the eve of God's saving act. From then on it was to be celebrated as a memorial, so that each year the community would re-enact the Exodus and receive anew the grace and the promises attached to it. The ritual text is found in the Book of Exodus:

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

– Exodus 12:11-14

Mark is preparing us for the new Passover Lamb, for the death of the new first-born, for our redemption from all that enslaves us, and for the new covenant that God will make with us as we journey towards the fullness of the promise. The festival of Unleavened Bread (*Mazzoth*) was originally an agricultural feast celebrating the beginning of the grain harvest (Exodus 34:18). It, too, was a spring festival, beginning with the first full moon after the spring equinox, that is on the 15th Nisan (Exodus 12:15-18). At some time prior to our historical records the two feasts were combined.

**<sup>1</sup> It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; <sup>2</sup> for they said 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'**

compare  
Matthew 26:1-5  
Luke 22:1-2

**<sup>3</sup> While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of *nard*, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.**

**<sup>4</sup> But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? <sup>5</sup> For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her.**

**<sup>6</sup> But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. <sup>7</sup> For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup> She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. <sup>9</sup> Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'**

compare Matthew 26:6-13

### **Jesus is anointed**

The contrast between this and the previous scene is striking. While the authorities are plotting to kill Jesus, an unnamed woman performs an extravagant action of love. Pouring perfumed oil over Jesus' head is a gesture of welcome (Psalm 23:5), but also of priestly (Psalm 133:2; Exodus 30:22-33) and regal (Psalm 45:7; 1 Samuel 9:16) consecration. The prophetic anointing received by Jesus at his baptism finds its fulfilment in the death for which he is now being prepared.

Jesus tells the bystanders to stop their angry outburst against her. There is more to what she has done than they realise. Though she does not know it, she is anointing his body for burial. She has also seen in Jesus the representative of the poor. Mark knows that measuring the needs of the poor in economic terms is not enough. True care for the poor will be expressed only if the focus is on the person of the poor, and, for Jesus' disciples, this will be enlightened only when they look at the poor in the light of Jesus himself, the Poor One in their midst.

The woman's adoring love for Jesus is precisely the stimulus for pouring one's life out for the poor. The proclaiming of the good news in the whole world will ensure that what she has done for Jesus will be done everywhere for the poor with whom he identifies.

In the light of the circumstances of Jesus' death and hasty burial, Mark sees this event as indicating a special providence of God, caring for his beloved son, even to the details of ensuring that he receives the proper ritual of anointing. It might appear that Jesus is simply the victim of the plotting of his oppressors, but, as this scene indicates, God is present to him, caring for him. Jesus is about to face the final trial as the forces of evil gather to destroy him, but, as Mark tells us in his prologue, God is caring for his Son struggling in the wilderness. This woman, in her love, is an example of the 'angels [who] waited on him' throughout his trials (1:13).

### Judas arranges to betray Jesus

In this and the previous scene, Mark captures the whole range of behaviour of those who follow Jesus: from extravagant love to betrayal.

The betrayal by Judas comes to the reader as no surprise, for already, when he was first introduced, Mark described him as ‘Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him’(3:19). Nevertheless, now when it happens, it heightens the dramatic tension. Up to this point we have seen Jesus rejected by the religious authorities and by the ordinary people. Now we see him being rejected even by one of his closest disciples. Step by step we see Jesus being abandoned by everyone, till he faces his bitter death in total isolation.

Though he mentions that they offered Judas’s money, Mark makes no attempt to enter into Judas’ motivation for the betrayal.

Let us not underestimate the pain this betrayal must have caused Jesus. When he chose Judas his heart must have been filled with hope for himself, for Judas, and for the mission which he saw Judas as being graced to share with him. Not even the pure and constant love of Jesus could prevent whatever sin it was that Judas allowed to cause decay in his soul.

In this, too, we see what it meant for Jesus to share to the full the weakness of our human condition. Love cannot force entry. Love cannot control. Love cannot ensure success. Love can only love and wait for the invitation of a free response to enter into and to remain in communion. If love is rejected, there is nothing love can do – except to keep loving.

**<sup>10</sup> Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them.**

**<sup>11</sup> When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.**

compare  
Matthew 26:14-16  
Luke 22:3-6

**<sup>12</sup> On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?'**

**<sup>13</sup> So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him,**

**<sup>14</sup> and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"'**

**<sup>15</sup> He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.'**

**<sup>16</sup> So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.**

compare Matthew 26:17-19

Luke 22:7-13

### **Preparations for the Passover Meal**

There appears to be a connection between this and the previous scene. Does Jesus' guarded language indicate his desire to ensure that Judas does not know where the supper is to be held?

There are also obvious parallels with Mark 11:1-6. The dramatic effect is to leave the reader with the impression that Jesus is somehow master of his own fate, acting in accordance with a higher divine design that transcends the evil plotting of those around him. He may appear to be the victim of other people's evil decisions; and in part this is true. But there is something else happening here as well. He remains free, and he is choosing to continue his mission in the face of the betrayal and its consequences. Convinced of his Father's love, he entrusts himself to God.

## Jesus speaks of his betrayer

A common feature in the New Testament is the attempt by the early Christians to search through the sacred Scriptures to find indications in God's word that would help them make sense of what happened to Jesus. Without explicitly quoting a Scriptural text, Mark states that 'the Son of Man goes as it is written of him' (14:21). He is probably meaning to take in the full sweep of references that had been built up within the Christian community by this time, which, on retrospect, were seen as speaking of the suffering of the Messiah.

The Son of Man is representative of the suffering faithful (see the commentary on 2:10). Mark's statement here presumes all that has gone before in the gospel since Caesarea Philippi, and the link that Jesus himself has made between the expression 'Son of Man' as applied to himself and the necessity of suffering (8:31; see the commentary on 10:32-34). Indeed, 'The Son of Man came . . . to give his life a ransom for many' (10:45).

More specifically, in the present context, he may be alluding to the following psalm:

Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.

– Psalm 41:9

Another similar text also has some bearing on the situation:

It is not enemies who taunt me – I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me – I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company.

– Psalm 55:12-14

Mark does not say that only the twelve were eating with Jesus. His mentioning the twelve twice highlights the awfulness of the betrayal. Notice that he does not name Judas here. Is he trying to ensure that the readers do not see all this as going on 'out there', but genuinely asks themselves: 'is it I?'

Jesus' lament over his betrayer is not a condemnation to hell. It is a judgment on the how awful it is to betray the 'Son of Man' — to betray the poor and the one who gives his life for them. Who of us has not been guilty of this?

**<sup>17</sup> When it was evening, he came with the twelve.**

**<sup>18</sup> And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.'**

**<sup>19</sup> They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely, not I?'**

**<sup>20</sup> He said to them, 'It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me.'**

**<sup>21</sup> For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.'**

compare  
Matthew 26:20-25  
Luke 22:21-23

**<sup>22</sup> While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.'**

**<sup>23</sup> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it.**

**<sup>24</sup> He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.**

**<sup>25</sup> Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'**

compare  
Matthew 26:26-29  
Luke 22:14-20

## **The supper**

This last meal of Jesus with 'the twelve' (14:17) is set, as has already been noted (see commentary on 14:1-12), within the context of the Passover (14:1; 14:12-16). There is no mention of a Passover Lamb, for Jesus himself is the one whose life is about to be taken, whose body is about to be broken, whose blood is about to be poured out.

It is at this supper that Jesus gives his meaning to the events which were about to overtake them all, expressing eloquently in word and symbol what he was going to give them the following day in the silence of his passion, when the 'kingdom of God' would come in glory.

He wants his disciples to remember, when his life is so brutally taken from him, that he is not just a victim of his enemies. He has always given himself for them and for 'many' (see commentary on 10:45). On the cross this self-giving will reach its consummation.

When he broke the bread this night, and when he shared the blood-red wine, he gave them a special meaning. They symbolise the final offering he was about to give.

When they took and ate this bread, he wanted them to know that it was his body they were taking. It was his whole person that he was giving, everything he was and everything he did in sharing the human condition: his weakness, his brokenness, his dying — and all as a gift of love to nourish their hearts and their minds, their bodies and their souls. When they took the wine this night and drank it, he wanted them to know that it was his life poured out for them, his Spirit given them, that they were drinking into their thirsty souls.

Jesus' last remark prepares us for the fact that the bride-groom is about to be taken away (2:20). They have tasted the Messianic banquet, but now comes the time for fasting. It will be brief for the kingdom of God is about to dawn.

His life was about to be taken from him, but he wanted them to know that he was giving it for them as his final act of love. All he had left now was himself, and he was offering himself to them in love.

This is the new Passover meal. It is the new meal of the covenant. The first covenant of Sinai was also sealed, symbolically with blood and was celebrated in a meal. As we read the ritual text in the Book of Exodus, notice (in our italics) the parallels with Mark's account of the supper:

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.' And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord.

He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up *twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel*. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of wellbeing to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, '*See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you* in accordance with all these words.'

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also *they beheld God, and they ate and drank..*

– Exodus 24:3-11

Like the Passover meal at the time of the Exodus, Jesus' final supper celebrates God's great act of redemption to be realised the following day. As in the first Passover meal, the covenant is sealed by the pouring out of blood (compare Zechariah 9:11). Likewise, the twelve tribes of Israel, symbol of the universality of God's saving action, are symbolically represented by the twelve, who behold God as they eat and drink.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews recalls the Sinai covenant (Hebrews 9:18-20). Recognising its imperfection, he quotes Jeremiah, who looked forward to the establishing of a new covenant (Hebrews 8:8-12:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt— a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

– Jeremiah 31:31-34

It is this new covenant that Jesus sealed when he poured out his life in love right to the very end:

He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

– Hebrews 9:26

## The last supper

Our earliest account of the last supper is found in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written from Ephesus in 54AD, more than ten years before Mark's gospel:

I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

– 1Corinthians 11:23-26

The meal, as we have just said, is a meal held in anticipation of the morrow when Jesus, the Passover Lamb, will give his life for the world. It is also held in anticipation of the final communion with God when the process of redemption and salvation of the world is consummated. It proclaims the Lord's death 'until he comes'. Already it is the beginning of the Messianic banquet promised by the prophets and celebrated in Hebrew poetry:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

– Isaiah 25:6

Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

– Proverbs 9:5

Paul's account reminds us that it is not only a meal held in anticipation of the redemptive act of God, but that it is also a meal to be continually re-celebrated so that the memory of what Jesus did will never be forgotten, and so that, in the ritual celebration, the fruits of Jesus' self-giving can be enjoyed by his disciples. The ritual meal celebrates the fact that Jesus is always with them. Jesus is inviting his disciples on the last night of his life to share this meal with him and to continue to share it together with him after his death.

We know that Jesus' disciples celebrated this memorial meal on the first day of the week in memory of the resurrection of Jesus and as a statement of their belief in his real presence among them, sustaining and nourishing them to carry on his mission in the world (1Corinthians 10:16-22; 11:17-34; Luke 24:30,35; Acts 2:42,46; 20:7,11; 27:35). It is still celebrated by the Church as the great Thanksgiving ('Eucharist') Prayer.

The beauty and heroism of Jesus' self-offering is highlighted by the two scenes on either side. The scene immediately preceding speaks of betrayal by one of the twelve, and the following scene speaks of denial and desertion. It is precisely to these weak human beings that Jesus offers himself. It is indeed broken bread for a broken people.

To eat his body and to drink his blood is to accept his self-offering and to take into ourselves his life, his love, and above all the intimate communion he experienced with God. It is also to accept a commitment to carrying on his mission. At the last supper, Jesus invited his disciples to do what he was about to do: to give their lives in love. Holiness, as is stated clearly in the Second Vatican Council, consists in tending to the perfection of love:

The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful, and so must it be. It is expressed in many ways by individuals who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love.

– Lumen Gentium, n.39

Moreover, as Jesus demonstrated throughout his life, but especially in the way in which he offered his life on the cross, to love is to offer oneself with Christ in the obedience of faith to God and in self-giving for others:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

– 1 John 3:16

The documents of the Second Vatican Council make it clear that sharing in the Eucharist means welcoming the glorified Christ into our lives so that we, as his disciples, may offer ourselves as he did:

Christ's faithful should be instructed by God's word, and be nourished at the table of the Lord's body. They should . . . learn to *offer themselves*. Through Christ the mediator they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and each other so that finally God may be all in all'.

– Sacrosanctum Concilium, n.48

All their works, prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit — indeed even the hardships of life if they are patiently borne — all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.

– Lumen Gentium, n.34

In the Eucharist Christians celebrate the self-offering of Christ as we commit ourselves to offer our lives with him. We are nourished by him, and so are able to carry out our mission of mediating between God and people. In this way is realised the reign of God's love in this world, as all are drawn to an eternal redemption and to fullness of communion with the living God.

Jesus will be alone

**<sup>26</sup> When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.**

**<sup>27</sup> And Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'**

**<sup>28</sup> But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.'**

**<sup>29</sup> Peter said to him, 'Even though all become deserters, I will not.'**

**<sup>30</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows *twice*, you will deny me three times.'**

**<sup>31</sup> But he said vehemently, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And all of them said the same.**

compare  
Matthew 26:30-35  
Luke 22:39, 31-34

### **Jesus' disciples will all desert him**

After the Passover it was customary at the time the Mishna was composed (c.200AD), and so possibly also at the time of Jesus, to sing the last three Hallel psalms (psalms 116-118), which praise and thank God for the wonders he has done in creation and in history. Mark may be referring to this.

The picture of Jesus, betrayed by a close companion, going out of the city, praying in sorrow, and crossing the Kidron to the Mount of Olives, parallels the story of David (2Samuel 15). The Mount of Olives, as we have already noted (13:3), is associated also with the final judgment.

We noted earlier (see Mark 11:1-11) that Zechariah's prophecy forms the literary background for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his clearing of the temple. In the present passage, Jesus quotes directly from Zechariah 13:7. The prophet is speaking of the final ordeal which is to precede the dawning of the Messianic age and the inauguration of the new covenant. God's representative, the one appointed by God to be the shepherd and leader of the people, will be struck down. In citing Zechariah, Jesus is warning the disciples that the final Messianic ordeal is imminent.

Jesus leaves them in no doubt as to the outcome of the ordeal, by referring immediately to his resurrection (see also 8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34). He has faith in the One in whom he has placed his trust. The disciples will lose heart, but he wants them to trust him as he trusts his Father.

It was in Galilee that he first called them (1:16). They have failed him before but he has always renewed the call: he made it possible for the disciples, who were 'deaf', to 'hear' (7:31-37) and for the disciples, who were 'blind', to 'see' (8:22-26 and 10:46-51). The final hour is imminent. They will fail him again, but he cannot and will not fail them. He will go before them into Galilee and call them again.

What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

– Romans 3:3

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

– Romans 11:29

After the intimacy of the Supper, this passage strikes the reader with tragic force and prepares us for the terrible isolation Jesus is to experience in the following scenes. We have already been told that one of the Twelve will betray Jesus. Now we are warned that Jesus' close disciples will all lose faith in him and desert him. Before the second cockcrow which heralds the end of the night and the rising of the sun, and in spite of all protestations to the contrary, Peter will deny him.

**<sup>32</sup> They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.'**  
**<sup>33</sup> He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. <sup>34</sup> And said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.'**  
**<sup>35</sup> And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. <sup>36</sup> He said 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.'** <sup>37</sup> He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?'  
**<sup>38</sup> Keep awake and pray that you may**

compare  
Matthew 26:36-40  
Luke 22:39-42

### **Jesus faces his bitter struggle alone**

'Gethsemane' is a transliteration of an Aramaic word meaning 'oil-press'. After the supper, Jesus goes with the disciples to a grove of olive trees on the Mount of Olives, on the eastern side of the Kedron valley facing Jerusalem.

He instructs them to wait, much as Moses instructed the elders to wait when he climbed the mountain to face God (Exodus 24:14). However, he does not go into prayer on his own. He takes with him the same three disciples who witnessed the raising to life of Jairus's daughter (5:37) and his own glorification (9:2).

In the house of Jairus, they witnessed his power over death. On the mountain, they saw him transfigured in glory, and heard God call him 'Son'. Here he seems powerless over death, and they see the full reality of his human weakness as he experiences shock and terror, his body shuddering and his soul plunged into an intense agony. No one can help him, for no one can understand or cope, not even the chosen three. He has to go into the agony alone as he struggles to discover God's will, and to conform his will to it (see 3:31-35). No response from God is heard.

God cannot will injustice, and what is about to happen to Jesus is clearly unjust. To imagine that it was God's will that Jesus be crucified is to distort the image of God that Jesus has been revealing throughout the gospel.

It is not for us to judge their motivation, but those who crucified Jesus rejected the good news which he was revealing. They did not listen to God's word coming to them through his Son (see John 8:37). They were not open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

This much Jesus knew. Hence his struggle. All his life he had longed only to do God's will. God had given him a mission, a mission that seemed far from being successfully accomplished. The religious leaders on the whole had not changed. Many of Jesus' compatriots were still consumed with hatred for their Roman oppressors. The ordinary people were still confused and caught between the security of listening to their religious leaders and the frightening freedom offered them by Jesus. Even the twelve were clearly not ready to be left alone.

For Jesus as for us, God transcends all aspects of human experience. Jesus knew the darkness of faith and the failure of all our human efforts to experience the divine or to conceive of God. Faced with human treachery and isolation, Jesus knew what it was to reach out to God and be greeted by silence.

Was part of his struggle also the fact that it was apparent to him that if he continued the way he was going he could no longer avoid death, and with death the failure of his mission?

That the agony persisted is dramatised by the threefold prayer and return. In his distress, Jesus cried out, alone, to God that he might be spared this 'hour' of life and death struggle with evil. He prayed that he might not have to drink the 'cup' of suffering (compare 10:38-39). Underlying his prayer, however, was his complete willingness to do God's will.

Finally, it became clear to him that he must fall back to a simple solution. God had told him to love; he would keep loving in spite of the fact that it appeared that to do so would bring about the failure of his mission. God had told him to challenge injustice; he would continue to challenge it. God had told him to speak the truth about God and about the proper human response to God; he would continue to declare it.

Praying to God as his 'Abba', an intimacy that was special to Jesus, and which became traditional among his disciples (Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15), Jesus continued to trust that somehow, if he continued moment by moment to do the will of God, God would achieve through him all that God wanted to achieve, for he knew that for God 'all things are possible' (compare 10:27). With the peace that comes only from total conformity to the mysterious will of God and total trust in spite of appearances, Jesus came back to his sleeping disciples and declared: 'It is over! The hour has come'.

We are reminded of the reflections of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews:

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

– Hebrews 4:15

**not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'**

<sup>39</sup> **And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words.** <sup>40</sup> **And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him.**

<sup>41</sup> **He came a third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?**

**Enough!** [It is over!] **The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.**

<sup>42</sup> **Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'**

compare  
Matthew 26:41-46  
Luke 22:44-45

## Jesus' Agony

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

– Hebrews 5:7-8

While the focus is upon Jesus facing his terrible struggle alone, there is a lesson here also for Jesus' disciples. Each one has to learn to do what Jesus did. No one can accompany us in our agony and no one can suffer it for us. On our own we cannot help another to go through it, for, like the three disciples, we 'do not know what to say'. Furthermore, on our own we cannot go through it ourselves for 'the flesh is weak'.

Jesus, however, reminds them that 'the spirit is willing'. He is referring to the Spirit of God that is eager to come down upon them, to encourage them and to grace them to come through their trial as Jesus has come through his. They are to call on God's Spirit who will breathe God's life and courage and energy into them. We are reminded of the prayer:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

– Psalm 51:10-11

This calls for vigilance, a theme that was prominent in the eschatological discourse (13:34-37). It is also clear that we are not capable of this prayer on our own. The focus throughout this scene is on Jesus' prayer: 'Sit here while *I* pray'. We have to wait for Jesus to invite us, as he invited Peter and James and John, to join him in *his* prayer. Our only hope of not failing in 'the time of trial' is to 'keep awake' and to enter with Jesus into his prayer. We cannot pray as Jesus prayed, but we can allow the Spirit of Jesus to pray Jesus' prayer in us:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

– Romans 8:26-27

Only through the power of the Spirit of God will we be able to accept Jesus' invitation to 'drink the cup that I drink' and to 'be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with' (Mark 10:38).

Jesus persisted in prayer; the disciples persisted in failing to be vigilant. This is the meaning of the threefold repetition (compare Peter's threefold denial, 14:68-71). When Jesus comes to them for the third time, he tells them that 'the hour' of confrontation with evil 'has come'. He also identifies himself as 'the Son of Man' (see 2:10 and especially 8:31; 9:31 and 10:33). God's final judgment is about to be revealed.

Jesus' last words to his disciples in Mark's gospel are encouraging. In spite of their persistent failure, Jesus persists in calling them: 'Get up'. They fail now, but Jesus knows them, and he knows that they will learn to stand with him against the powers of evil: 'Let us go'.

## Jesus' arrest

Jesus is the victim of treachery and betrayal, and he is powerless. All his main opponents are named (see also 8:31; 14:1-2). The sudden appearance of Judas comes as a surprise to the reader: we have not been told that he left the supper, and have no reason for thinking that he was not with the other disciples in the garden. Judas betrays him with a kiss. As we have been forewarned (14:27,29,31), all his disciples desert him and flee.

Jesus is utterly alone. However, we are reminded that the Scriptures are being fulfilled: there is a larger divine providence present in these terrible events. The presence of divine providence, however, does not change Judas, or the crowd or the authorities who sent them. It does not stop someone in the crowd lashing out with a sword (there is no indication that Mark is referring to a disciple here). Providence may not change anything, for providence is love, and love does not control. It invites, it makes possible, it forgives, but it always respects human decision, and human decision may, as here, resist grace. Providence does, however, guarantee the presence of grace, and it is grace that makes all the difference, for the one who responds to it. It makes all things possible.

Jesus must face the awful betrayal in the same way that we all must face it should it be our experience. He has only his trust in God to support him as evil works its chaotic havoc around him. He trusts that what is happening to him comes, somehow, within the designs of divine providence as revealed in the Scriptures.

<sup>43</sup> *Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders.* <sup>44</sup> *Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.'*

<sup>45</sup> *So when he came, he went up to him at once and said 'Rabbi!' and kissed him.* <sup>46</sup> *Then they laid hands on him and arrested him.* <sup>47</sup> *But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear.* <sup>48</sup> *Then Jesus said to them, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit?*

<sup>49</sup> *Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.'* <sup>50</sup> *All of them deserted him and fled.*

compare Matthew 26:47-56  
Luke 22:47-53

<sup>51</sup> *A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him,<sup>52</sup> but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.*

The naked young man is, perhaps, a symbol of us all, who would want to be Jesus' disciples, and to leave all to follow him (1:18), but, when faced with the test, leave all and desert him:

Those who are stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day, says the Lord.

– Amos 2:16

There is an interesting contrast, too, between this young man and the 'young man, dressed in a white robe' who appears in the empty tomb (16:5). The latter may well symbolise the newly baptised Christian, faithfully witnessing to the crucified and risen Christ.

## **PART B: Jesus' trial, passion and death (14:53 - 15:39)**

### **Jesus' testimony before the Jewish authorities**

Jesus is taken to the high priest. Having heard that all the disciples have fled (14:50), we are surprised to hear that Peter is following Jesus, even though 'at a distance'. Among other nobler motives, he is, perhaps, haunted by his earlier boast (14:29). The effect of mentioning him here, and of returning to him immediately after Jesus' trial, where we witness Peter's insistence on separating himself from Jesus, is to highlight Jesus as being utterly alone in bearing witness to the truth.

Mark portrays this night scene as a trial before the 'whole council' of the 'chief priests, the elders and the scribes': official Judaism, acting in the dark, is formally rejecting Jesus as its Messiah. It is likely that Mark was drawing on two traditions: one, that the Sanhedrin had passed judgment on Jesus (a scene placed earlier by John; see John 11:47-53); and the other, that there had been an investigation by the high priest on the night of Jesus' arrest (compare John 18:12-25).

Jewish law required that identical accusations had to be made by two independent witnesses for the accusations to be sustained. The nearest the Sanhedrin can get is the claim that Jesus threatened to destroy the temple. We already know that Jesus did foretell its destruction (13:2 - he was not the first prophet to do this, see Jeremiah 7:14; 26:6,9; Micah 3:12), but the accusation is 'false' because Jesus never said he would destroy it. Though this accusation will come up again in the taunts thrown up against Jesus while he is dying (15:29), even on this the witnesses failed to agree, so the Sanhedrin could not act.

The only hope for the Sanhedrin was that Jesus would testify against himself, for this would dispense of the need for witnesses. However, Jesus remains silent (compare Isaiah 53:7; 1Peter 2:21,23).

<sup>53</sup> **They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled.**

<sup>54</sup> **Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire.**

<sup>55</sup> **Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none.**

<sup>56</sup> **For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree.** <sup>57</sup>

**Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, <sup>58</sup> 'We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple ['sanctuary'] that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" <sup>59</sup>**

**But even on this point their testimony did not agree.**

<sup>60</sup> **Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?'**

<sup>61</sup> **But he was silent and did not answer.**

compare Matthew 26:57-63  
Luke 22:54-55

<sup>61</sup> **Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?'**

<sup>62</sup> **Jesus said, 'I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.'**

<sup>63</sup> **Then the high priest tore his clothes and said 'Why do we still need witnesses?'**  
<sup>64</sup> **You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?'**  
**All of them condemned him as deserving death.**

compare  
Matthew 26:63-66  
Luke 22:67-71

The high priest, therefore, puts to him a direct question: 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' This question, coming from the highest authority in Judaism, represents for Mark the central issue of debate between Christians and Jews at the time he is writing. That Jesus is the Messiah, and precisely as God's Son, is the central claim of the whole Gospel (1:1; 12:35-37; see also 8:29 in combination with 9:7; and 15:39).

On the evidence available, it seems likely that some of Jesus' followers, even during his lifetime, thought of Jesus as the Messiah. We have already seen Jesus' own unwillingness to accept the claim without qualification. In Mark's dramatic portrayal of this scene, Jesus chooses this moment to break the 'Messianic secret' (see commentary on 1:21-28), and to declare openly that he is the Messiah.

Jesus' reply, however, as rendered by Mark, carries with it overtones of a deeper mystery. Jesus' reply 'I am' reminds us of his words as he came to his disciples across the water (6:50). *egō eimi* identifies him with the Lord (Exodus 3:14).

Jesus goes on to refer to the first verse of the psalm used to proclaim the consecration of the Davidic king:

The Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'

– Psalm 110:1

His claim to be the Messiah is made in terms of the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13, the one 'coming with the clouds of heaven'. Jesus is the Messiah, but only because he is the one who represents the oppressed and who comes before God at the final judgment and is vindicated along with the oppressed against their oppressors. We cannot miss the irony. Jesus stands alone before his trial judges. Yet he claims that it is they who are on trial and that all those whom they have oppressed for their own benefit, including himself at this moment, will be vindicated by God while they stand accused.

Jesus' opponents have been attempting to catch Jesus out (see 12:13). Many aspects of his behaviour offended them, particularly his challenging their understanding of the Law and of the temple. Jesus is telling them that they will see him vindicated as the Messiah. He will share God's throne, for it is through him that God is achieving victory. The words Jesus has just spoken in their presence are seen as blasphemy, as insulting God by making arrogant claims for himself (compare 2:5-7). Under the law against false prophets who lead people astray (Deuteronomy 13:2-6; 18:20-22), they condemn Jesus to death (see 10:33).

Those of us who are in positions of organisational leadership in the Christian community have to see in the behaviour of the religious authorities a warning for ourselves. We ought not to assume that they were consciously acting in an immoral way. Presumably, they were upholding the rights of religion and therefore, in their mind, the rights of God, against someone whom they saw as a danger to the community.

They were so sure of their position that it did not occur to them to look at Jesus honestly and to listen to him. They too readily dismissed what they were not accustomed to and were not expecting. Was their problem that they too readily identified God with the practices and tenets of their religion? Were they too self-reliant to keep seeking the Lord with humble and broken hearts? Were they too afraid to face the radical insecurity that is part of being human?

**<sup>65</sup> Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, 'Prophesy!'**

***The guards also took him over and beat him.***

compare  
Matthew 26:67-68  
Luke 22:63-65

### **Jews abuse and mock Jesus**

There will be a parallel to this scene later, after the Roman trial (15:16-20). Here Mark focuses on the insults heaped upon Jesus by his own people. They mock what for them are his pretentious and blasphemous claims to be God's prophet. The irony is apparent. The reader is already aware of the fulfilment of Jesus' words about the betrayal by Judas (14:18) and the scattering of the twelve (14:27). As we are soon to discover, his other prophecy concerning Peter (14:30) is being fulfilled even as they insult Jesus. What is more, Jesus' words about the temple, and his claim to be God's Son, will soon be shown to be true (15:38-39).

The outrages to which Jesus is subjected recall the words spoken about himself by the prophet who tried to inspire the exiles to prepare for their return to Judah:

I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

– Isaiah 50:6

### **Peter denies that he knows Jesus**

Peter's first denial is a private one. It is followed by a cock crow which should have acted as a warning. His second denial is a public one. His third is accompanied by an oath calling down divine punishment on himself if his words are not true. This tragic and persistent (threefold) denial comes as a climax to the hardness of heart that has been so typical of the disciples throughout the gospel. It is a powerful statement of our inability to follow Jesus relying on our own strength or good intentions.

Mark is writing for Christians who knew persecution. He holds out hope here for those who had themselves, like Peter, failed under pressure. They should remember Jesus' words and repent.

Surely Peter is a symbol of us all. He wants to follow Jesus closely, otherwise he would not be there. He wants to be close to Jesus. He is too sure of himself. When the demand is placed upon him to be with Jesus and to take the consequences of this belonging, he is afraid and backs away.

Let us pray that at such moments we will do what Peter did and remember Jesus' words, for otherwise despair will come all too easily to us. Jesus' words will bring us, even in our sin, to look to him and not to ourselves and, like Peter, to repent. It is Jesus' love, and what he reveals of God that attracts us to him. And what he showed Peter is what he shows us: that God's love is faithful and God's call is irrevocable. Let us not forget it, however lacking in courage we find ourselves to be.

**<sup>66</sup> While Peter was *below* in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. <sup>67</sup> When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said 'You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.'**

**<sup>68</sup> But he denied it, saying, 'I do not know or understand what you are talking about.' And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed.**

**<sup>69</sup> And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, 'This man is one of them.' <sup>70</sup> But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, 'Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.'**

**<sup>71</sup> But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know this man you are talking about.'**

**<sup>72</sup> At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' And he *broke down* and wept.**

compare Matthew. 26:69-75  
Luke 22:56-62

<sup>1</sup> As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders *and scribes* and *the whole council*. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.

<sup>2</sup> Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.'

<sup>3</sup> Then the chief priests accused him of many things.

<sup>4</sup> Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.'

<sup>5</sup> But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

<sup>6</sup> Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.

<sup>7</sup> Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.

<sup>8</sup> So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom.

<sup>9</sup> Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?'

<sup>10</sup> For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over.

compare Matthew 27:1-18  
Luke 23:1-5

## Jesus' testimony before the Roman authorities

Mark tells us that Jesus was 'handed over' to Pilate, thus fulfilling the prophecy of 10:33. The reason for taking Jesus to Pilate is not given. It seems that the Sanhedrin's power to inflict death was restricted under Roman rule. However, even if they could have stoned Jesus on their own authority, it may well have suited them to avoid the responsibility, and possible backlash, of such an action (see 14:2).

Pilate was military prefect in Judea from 26 to 36AD. The verb 'handed over' (Greek: *paradidōmi*) is used three times in this passage (15:1,10,15), and has already occurred a number of times in the passion narrative where it is generally translated 'betray' (14:10,11,18, 21,41,42,44). It is likely that Mark is alluding to a passage from Isaiah which uses the same verb three times (see the commentary on 15:16-20).

Since Jesus was not a Roman citizen, the summary form of the Roman investigation as presented by Mark is quite plausible. Jesus does not categorically deny being 'King of the Jews'. The whole of the Gospel has portrayed him as having a special role in effecting what he constantly speaks of as 'the kingdom of God', and in the parallel trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus has stated that he is 'the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One' (14:61). His response to Pilate, 'You say so' places the responsibility back on Pilate to seek a proper understanding of the accusation being brought against Jesus.

The chief priests continue to make accusations against Jesus. Pilate is astonished at Jesus' silence, because, according to Roman law, if the accused fails to defend himself, the accusations stand. It is obvious that Pilate is not convinced of his guilt, so he introduces a ploy which might allow him to pardon Jesus and release him.

Though we have no corroborating evidence of any custom, it is not unlikely that the Roman governor would go along with Jewish practice of pardoning offenders on the occasion of an important feast.

There is a terrible irony in the name of the prisoner: 'Barabbas' is Aramaic for 'son of the father'. He is a symbol for all of us. The guilty son of the father is freed; the innocent one is burdened with our sins. In Paul's words: 'He loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Pilate's ploy does not work, and so it is convenient for him, to avoid unnecessary trouble, to go along with the demand of the crowd and formally condemn Jesus, whom he personally judges to be innocent.

The drama is superb. Centre-stage stands Jesus, eloquent in his silence, free despite his bonds. Around him can be heard the accusations of the chief priests, the interrogation by Pilate and the shouts of the crowd. Jesus alone is a free man.

Scourging was customary prior to crucifixion. The *flagellum* was made up of several strands of leather plaited with pieces of sharp bone and metal. There were no restrictions on the number of lashes, which would have torn great gaps in the flesh and left the prisoner totally exhausted if not unconscious.

<sup>11</sup> **But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.**

<sup>12</sup> **Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call *the King of the Jews*?'**

<sup>13</sup> **They shouted back, 'Crucify him!'**

<sup>14</sup> **Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?'**

**But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!'**

<sup>15</sup> **So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.**

compare Matthew 27:19-26  
Luke 23:18-25

**<sup>16</sup> Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort.**

**<sup>17</sup> And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him.**

**<sup>18</sup> And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'**

**<sup>19</sup> They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him.**

**<sup>20</sup> After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.**

compare Matthew 27:27-31

### **Gentiles mock the King of the Jews**

This is the Gentile equivalent of the mockery inflicted upon Jesus by the Jewish council (14:65); a mockery that continues right through till his death (15:29-32).

The irony continues, for the one they are mocking is, indeed, the one who is bringing to fulfilment the kingdom of God, initiated among the Jews, but reaching beyond them to the many nations represented by the members of the Roman cohort.

To reflect on this scene we could do no better than to read and meditate upon the passage from the Isaiah scroll reproduced on the page opposite. As with the prophet of the exile so with Jesus the promised exaltation is yet to come; but it is he, the suffering and rejected Jesus, who is the one through whom God's glory is about to be fully revealed to the world.

The prophet asks: 'Who has believed what we have heard?' (Isaiah 53:1 - a verse quoted by Paul in Romans 10:16 and by John 12:38). Everyone is keen to acclaim a Messiah; but, this man? Could he be the anointed of God? Is this what God looks like, when he communicates himself to us in human form?

**Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12**

The promise of glory

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.

The servant who will be glorified

Just as there were many who were astonished at him – so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals –

The promise of glory

so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

The servant who will be glorified

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on [paradidomi] him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.

The promise of glory

When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;

The servant who will be glorified

because he poured out [paradidomi] himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore [paradidomi] the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

**21 They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.**

**22 Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull).**

**23 And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it.**

**24 And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.**

**25 It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him.**

**26 The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.'**

**27 And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.**

[Some manuscripts add

<sup>28</sup> 'And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'And he was counted among the lawless.'"]

compare

Matthew 27:32-38

Luke 23:26, 32-34

## The crucifixion

Simon is introduced with a reference to his sons, implying that the sons were known to Mark's readers. Some speculate that this might be the Rufus mentioned in Romans 16:13. Simon takes up Jesus' cross - something every disciple must do (see 8:34).

At the place of the skull (Latin *Calvaria*), the soldiers offer Jesus drugged wine. In the Book of Proverbs we read:

Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more.

– Proverbs 31:6-7

Jesus declines. Is Mark telling us that, though Jesus is about to die, he is not about to perish? Or is he telling us that Jesus is determined to drink the cup of suffering (14:36) in full consciousness?

The soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothes - the first of a number of allusions to Psalm 22:

They divide my clothes among themselves and for my clothing they cast lots.

– Psalm 22:18

Though the account of Jesus' crucifixion is simple and stark, there are indications in it of the reflection upon the Scriptures whereby the early disciples attempted to make some sense of this terrible event. We will return to Psalm 22 shortly.

Mark has Jesus being crucified 'at the third hour' (an expression covering from nine in the morning till midday). The time reference may reflect some liturgical practice in Mark's community.

Jesus does not die alone:

He was numbered with the transgressors.

– Isaiah 53:12

A company of evildoers encircles him.

– Psalm 22:16

The mockery reflects the accusations made at the trial before the Sanhedrin (14:58-62). The chief priests and scribes think that to save himself Jesus must 'come down from the cross'. Salvation, however, for Jesus and for us, can come only by the giving of our life in love 'for the sake of the gospel'; that is to say, as a witness to the love of God. Jesus places his trust in God, if he follows his mission and gives his life for others, whatever the circumstances, God will be faithful and raise him 'after three days' (Mark 8:31, see commentary).

The mockery against Jesus is ironical, for it goes to the heart of Jesus' message. He has already said: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it' (8:34-35). He will save his life only by losing it.

The following passage from the Wisdom of Solomon is useful as a reflection on the scene before us:

Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God and calls himself a child of the Lord. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father.

Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected.

– Wisdom 2:12-20

It was especially from Psalm 22 that Jesus' early disciples found help, as they tried to penetrate the mystery of the heart of Jesus at the end, and to give expression to their reflections. In quoting it, we divide it into various sections, applying the psalm to Jesus on the cross and putting in italics the parts that relate to the passage upon which we are reflecting:

<sup>29</sup> **Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days,**  
<sup>30</sup> **save yourself, and come down from the cross!'**  
<sup>31</sup> **In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself.**  
<sup>32</sup> **Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.'**  
**Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.**

compare  
 Matthew 27:39-44  
 Luke 23:35-38

## Psalm 22

The opening lines invite us to contemplate Jesus' situation as he hung on the cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

The next verses present Jesus remembering his tradition and the faith of his religious community:

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

However, the situation of abandonment persists:

But I am a worm, and not human; *scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; 'Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver – let him rescue the one in whom he delights.*

We are then invited to watch as Jesus remembers his personal religious experience:

Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

Even these tender memories fail to alleviate his condition:

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shrivelled; I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; *they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.*

Jesus continues to cry out to God in his distress:

But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! . . . I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you..

Only at the end is Jesus' persistent cry heard, and his abandonment issues into a song of praise and delight as he sees the face of God:

You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

## The death of the Son of God

The 'darkness' has the dramatic effect of further isolating Jesus. One thinks of the darkness that preceded God's creation of light (Genesis 1:2-3), and the darkness (for *three* days) that came over the land of Egypt prior to God's redeeming action (Exodus 10:21-23). The primary reference, however, is to the eschatological darkness referred to earlier by Mark: 'In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened' (13:24). This is the Day of the Lord, 'a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!' (Joel 2:2; see also Zephaniah 1:15; Amos 8:9).

Jesus' isolation reaches its climax in his final cry. Even in the agony, he could address God as 'Abba, Father' (14:36). Here, for the first and only time in Mark, Jesus addresses God simply as 'God'. There is no suggestion of despair, for he does cry out to God, and 'My God' retains an element of intimacy. As we noted in the commentary on the previous passage, Psalm 22 does end in joy, as God hears the cry, but this should not obscure the utter isolation and desolation of Jesus at the end.

The only other examples of a loud cry are from demons who are expelled by Jesus (1:26; 5:7; 9:26). Here, all this seems to be reversed. The powers of darkness seem to be expelling Jesus' spirit. He appears to be being vanquished by evil. God's intervention comes only after Jesus' death. Some bystanders think that Jesus is calling on Elijah. There may be here a further allusion to Psalm 22. The text translated 'you have been my God' (Psalm 22:10) is rendered in Aramaic '*Eli 'atta* ('My God, it is You!') which could easily be taken as '*Eliya' ta* ('Elijah, come!'). Do we have here a memory of Jesus' actual cry?

The action of trying to revive Jesus with bitter wine reminds us of Psalm 69:

Do not hide your face from your servant, for I am in distress – make haste to answer me. Draw near to me, redeem me, set me free because of my enemies. You know the insults I receive, and my shame and dishonour; my foes are all known to you. Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

– Psalm 69:17-21

<sup>33</sup> **When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.**

<sup>34</sup> **At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'**

<sup>35</sup> **When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.'**

<sup>36</sup> **And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.'**

<sup>37</sup> **Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.**

<sup>38</sup> **And the curtain of the temple ['sanctuary'] was torn in two, from top to bottom.**

<sup>39</sup> **Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'**

compare Matthew 27:45-54  
Luke 23:44-47

## Jesus dies

Only after Jesus' death is God portrayed as intervening. Jesus was condemned to death, partly because of what he had said concerning the sanctuary (14:58). This was also a subject for mockery as he was dying on the cross (15:29). The sanctuary curtain symbolised the fact that we cannot look upon the 'face' of the transcendent God. The divine irony of this moment is that the one rejected by the temple establishment is the one who, by giving his life in love, enters beyond the veil into the presence of God. What is more, anyone looking upon him can now see the glory of God unveiled.

At his baptism, the heavens were 'torn apart'(1:10). Now, at the end, Jesus the Lord, 'suddenly comes to his temple'(Malachi 3:1), entering beyond the veil into the embrace of his Father. The appeal is firstly to Jews. Up till now there has been a curtain between them and their God. Now they are invited to follow Jesus. But the appeal extends beyond them, for Jesus is inviting all to follow him into the 'house of prayer for all the nations'(11:17). Paul expresses it this way:

When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed . . . And all of us, with unveiled faces, see the glory of the Lord.

– 2Corinthians 3:16,18

As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says:

Jesus entered once for all into the Holy Place.

– Hebrews 9:12

We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain.

– Hebrews 10:19-20

Finally, Mark focuses on a pagan soldier. Mark's aim in presenting his gospel is to demonstrate that Jesus is the 'Messiah, the Son of God'(1:1). At the conclusion to the first half of the gospel, Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah (8:29). We have seen Jesus accepting the truth of this claim (14:62), but only after he has spoken of himself as the Son of Man, and insisted on the place of suffering in his mission of his identification with the oppressed.

Here, at the conclusion to the second half of the gospel, and in the light of everything we have seen, a non-Jew, seeing the manner of Jesus' dying, declares: 'Truly, this man was God's Son'. 'This man': naked, powerless, condemned, ostracised, despised, mocked, rejected, dying in utter abandonment; but continuing to believe, continuing to love, continuing to cry out to God for himself and for all the oppressed — this man, whom we have just crucified, was God's Son all the time, and we did not know it.

This is what God was proclaiming at the baptism (1:11), and at the transfiguration (9:7). This is what Jesus claimed as he stood before the high priest (14:62). Only now, however, can the act of faith in Jesus' divine sonship be made safely, for now there is no way this act can lift Jesus into the pagan pantheon or remove him from the stark reality of his human condition.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

– 1Corinthians 1:22-25

Yes, the curtain has been torn away, and God is revealed. But we do not see God in God's transcendence. We see God as God has chosen to be revealed, in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. We see a God who is all-powerful, but only with the power of love, a power to pour oneself out in a love that is unconditional and knows no limits. At last we see God's glory revealed, but only because we see this kind of love revealed in one who shares to the full our human condition. The Son of Man is revealed:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

– Hebrews 5:7-9

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

– Hebrews 4:14-16