



## Sermon preached by Revd Dr Michael Wilson on 10th March 2024

Readings: *Deuteronomy 21: 18-23; 1 Corinthians 2: 1-2; Galatians 3: 13-14; Mark 7: 24-30*

### *Lent IV*

This is the fourth Sunday in Lent. Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem and death. A word, then, about crucifixion:

In England, until 1834, roadside gibbets, like Caxton gibbet, just the other side of Cambourne, were reckoned an effective criminal deterrent. The Romans thought much the same about crosses. Nothing like having corpses hanging everywhere to concentrate minds. They crucified thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands. We just don't know. The first people to crucify that we know of were the Ancient Syrians. The Romans learnt it from them. Less well known, so too did the Jews. Notoriously, a mere 80 years before Jesus, during the Maccabean period of independence, the Jewish King Alexander Jannaeus crucified 600 rebellious Pharisees in Jerusalem. It's amazing what you learn, preparing to preach.

I was stunned also to discover that, according to the BBC, extremist factions in Syria *still* crucify. They cite the Koran. *'The penalty for waging war against Allah ... is that they be crucified. ... a disgrace in this world; and in the hereafter a great punishment.'*<sup>1</sup>

Which brings us to our Old Testament reading.

Deuteronomy 21: 18-23

<sup>18</sup>If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, <sup>19</sup>then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. <sup>20</sup>They shall say to the elders of his town, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' <sup>21</sup>Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid. <sup>22</sup>When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, <sup>23</sup>his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the LORD your God is giving you for possession.

I think we have all, in recent months, had sad cause to ponder the complex relationship between the Jewish sacred texts and the Christian faith. Let's be clear: that is *not* Christian doctrine.

Disturbingly, the Old Testament and the Koran agree: to be hung on a tree – to be crucified - is to be eternally cast out from the family of God's people. So when a Jew was crucified, especially, by Jews, he was, effectively, no longer a Jew! The Jewish King Jannaeus knew that. That's why he did it.

Nearly a century later, those in the Jewish Council calling for Jesus' crucifixion knew it too. That's why they wanted it. They needed Jesus excommunicated – cast out from the bosom of Abraham *for ever*. After that, no-one could possibly claim him as the Messiah of God.

Yet, according to the Book of Acts, a few years later, Saul, whom we know by his Latin name, Paul, went into the synagogue at Corinth to address the congregation.

1 Corinthians 2: 1-2

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. <sup>2</sup>For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

Why *'and him crucified?'*

Of course, the assembled Jews laughed, just as they'd laughed in Antioch, Pergamon, Philippi, and Thessaloniki. Obviously, this Jesus, of whom they had never heard, wasn't just a total loser - he was a deeply defiled, *heretical* loser. *Crucified!* An outcast of God! The *Christ?* The Messiah? God's Anointed one? Absolutely no way! Which was why they'd crucified him in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Verse 33 of the fifth book of the Koran says: "Indeed, the penalty for those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive upon earth [to cause] corruption is none but that they be killed or crucified or that their hands and feet be cut off from opposite sides or that they be exiled from the land. That is for them a disgrace in this world; and for them in the Hereafter is a great punishment."

But also present were those whom the Book of Acts calls ‘Greeks’ - pagan hangers on, deeply attracted to the disciplines of Judaism. They received ambiguous treatment from the Jews - their presence was indulgently tolerated, even welcomed if they were rich and influential, but simultaneously, they were kept strictly at arm’s length. You can come, but you can’t belong.

These Greeks *didn’t* laugh.

Let’s remind ourselves of what Paul had written to the Galatian Christians, both Jews and gentiles:

Galatians 3: 13-14

<sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—<sup>14</sup> in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Jesus was crucified ‘In order that the blessing of Abraham - strictly for Jews only - might come to the Gentiles.’ How does Paul think that works?

Well, It’s about that insurmountable divide between Jews and gentiles. You can come, but you can’t belong. Obviously, in his flesh, Jesus of Nazareth had been a Jew – a rabbi, at that. But now, in his Spirit, because he’d been crucified, he’d been jettisoned out on the gentile side of the wall – in effect, Jew no longer.

Those who plotted Jesus’ death had supposed that all claim to his being ‘The Blessed of God’ would die with him. It didn’t. *It went with him.*

What those Greek hangers-on in the synagogue in Corinth heard Paul saying was ‘This crucified Jesus is, literally and metaphorically, on your side. You came here seeking from Moses the blessings of Abraham. You have discovered that Moses cannot deliver. But this crucified Jesus, who was a Jew but is no longer – he *can.*’

So the Greeks left the synagogue, and set up next door with Paul and his friends. Remarkably, some of the Jews, Crispus, the leader of the synagogue among them, went too. How did Crispus suppose it worked for him? Come to that, how did it work for Paul himself? How could he - a Jew - be blessed by a crucified Messiah – a Messiah the wrong side of the wall?

Well, *was* Paul a Jew? Genetically, of course he was. And certainly, spiritually, he *had been* a Jew, and a very fine one too, as he reminds the Philippians. Saul of Tarsus! - the Pharisee who had ruthlessly harried the followers of Jesus. But what is he now? He tells the Philippians that he counts all that Pharisee-stuff as .... as what? ... as effluent – as the stinking slops of human sewage oozing around the open street sewers of every Graeco-Roman town. His abandoning his Jewish name, Saul, for his Latin name, Paul, is his very public sign that he has, in effect, stopped being a Jew and has become a gentile - just like Jesus had. Except of course that Jesus was forcibly cast out of Jewry, whereas Paul had cast *himself* out in order to be where Jesus was.

As he told the Philippians, he wished to be with Christ in his dying – in his ejection - so that he might be with him in his resurrection and his living. To be Christians, Jews had – in effect - to become gentiles.

You might be thinking, ‘Surely, this cannot be right?’ Well, remember how in the gospel stories Jesus repeatedly rattled the boundaries of Judaism?

Listen, for example, to Mark Chapter 7.

<sup>24</sup> From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, <sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ <sup>28</sup> But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ <sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ <sup>30</sup> So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Here, if you like, is a small-scale prototype of what happened full-on after the Crucifixion. The blessings of Abraham, intended for the children, are also for the dogs - for you and me.

Reading the Book of Acts and St Paul, it is surely clear that leaving Judaism behind was *the major issue* the first Christians had to overcome when seeking Jewish converts. St Peter himself, bidden by the spirit to eat unclean meat in the home of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, cried in horror, ‘No Lord! Never!’ But he did! He, a Jew, stayed for days, eating and sleeping with that pagan household. Unthinkable!

Jewish converts had to consent to be every bit as vile as they had always supposed the gentiles to be, because, as Peter discovered, it was there, amidst the vileness, that the crucified, cast-out Jesus was to be found. As Peter

ministered Christ to Cornelius' gentile household, as they were being lifted up, so too was he lifted up. That, dear friends, is how it works.

So, at last we get to what we might call a preaching point appropriate to the fourth Sunday in Lent. It comes in four parts:

We all – do we not? - have our Pharisaic pride – our family, our career, our qualifications, our money, our house, our neighbourhood, our social circle, our church – whatever it is that makes us proud of who we are in the eyes of the people whom we think matter. Paul, and all the Jewish converts, had to waive goodbye to all that.

They had instead to discover how to rejoice in being with people whom previously (quite literally) they wouldn't have been seen dead with.

It was there – and *only* there - surrounded by those completely unacceptable people, they found the risen Christ (himself an outcast) lifting up those awful people.

And finally, crucially, it was right there, and *only* there, as they participated with the crucified outcast Christ in the lifting up of others, that they too were lifted up.

Dear friends, if for them, then so too for us.

Is this not a *sublime* revelation? It comes to us not through the death of Jesus, still less through the pain he suffered (spare me all those ghastly worship songs), but precisely and explicitly through his being *crucified*. For as Paul didn't quite put it to the Galatians, Christ was crucified

in order that in Jesus the Christ – in Jesus the Messiah - the blessing of Abraham might come to us, so that we too might receive the promise of the Spirit, through faith.

Amen.

Michael Wilson  
10<sup>th</sup> March 2024