

The man who is utterly powerless is powerful Maundy Thursday 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 & Matthew 27:32-40

As we meet on Maundy Thursday, the Cross looms large on the horizon. In a matter of hours Jesus will be arrested by force, abandoned by his friends tried unjustly, cruelly tortured by the soldiers of an occupying military force and then brutally executed on the orders of a self-centred official afraid of the local religious leaders who jealously guarded their power and influence.

Jesus is nailed to the cross, unable to save himself, unable to be rescued. His life and his future is taken out of his hands. From this point on Jesus is utterly powerless.

Well, that might be how it looks at first glance, it is certainly how the casual bystanders at the cross see it. Matthew tells us, “Those who passed by hurled insults at [Jesus], shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!’” (Matthew 27:39-40)

To them the evidence seems clear; Jesus is utterly powerless. How can he save himself? About as easily as he could have torn down the Jerusalem Temple and rebuilt it in three days. “But,” they mocked, “he’d claimed that he was able to do that, so surely he could save himself too!”

Even today with all our technology and equipment; hydraulic lifting gear, cranes, prefabricated materials and computer aided design it would be impossible to build something like the Jerusalem temple in three days and only a few hundred years ago architects and master craftsmen who started work on buildings like our cathedrals never expected them to be completed in the their own life times. That sort of construction took decades, not days.

So how was this broken man hanging on a cross ever going to tear down and rebuild the Jerusalem temple in 72 hours?

Well, he wasn't.

Everyone had missed the point. Jesus had never said, "Tear down the Jerusalem temple and I will rebuild it in three days", what he actually said was, "this temple" – Jesus was talking about himself; "Destroy this temple," – this dwelling place of God – "and I will raise it again in three days." (John 2:19)

In all fairness, at the time he said it, no one around him including his disciples understood what he meant. So we shouldn't be surprised that no one at the cross understood the significance of that exchange either. Only after the resurrection did Jesus' followers make the connection and realise what Jesus had been talking about. John explains in his Gospel; "... the temple [Jesus] had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken."

So the jibe of the passers-by misses the mark. They think that they are being very clever in a rather cruel way, pointing out Jesus' powerlessness, but actually they're probably helping reminding him – and us – of what Jesus is actually doing, that on the cross Jesus is acting according to God's plan, that the temple of his body is indeed being destroyed ready for its resurrection.

You see, it is import we understand; was Jesus utterly powerless on the cross? "Powerless" indicates that he had no control over what he was going through, but the events of Maundy Thursday (as we call it) reveal otherwise, that Jesus was in total control.

On this evening we remember that Jesus shared the Passover meal with his disciples and, as we were hearing on Monday evening, when he came to the third cup – the cup of redemption which represents the blood of the Passover lamb sacrificed to bring life to God’s people Jesus applied it to himself; this cup now represented his blood poured out for us and his body broken for our redemption.

Why does Jesus do that? Well, he is fulfilling what the Passover lamb was pointing towards; Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and in doing so he is also announcing a new covenant between God and humanity. You see, in the old covenant, the old promise, the temple was the only meeting place between God and man. But as Jesus dies that temple becomes redundant and pointless, the separating curtain is torn because the temple has been superseded. Not by Jesus’ body but by Jesus’ death – “destroy this temple” declares Jesus, not “come to this temple”.

It is in Jesus’ death; his body broken on the cross, his blood poured out through puncture wounds and flayed flesh that God and sinners can at last meet in grace. As Paul put it we do not merely preach Christ, “but we preach Christ crucified.” (1 Cor 1:23)

“Save yourself!” mocked the crowd, “Come down from the cross!” But it is only by staying exactly where he is, only by submitting to death that Jesus can save not only himself, but all who want to be with God. It is only by staying on the cross, seemingly powerless and defeated that Jesus can, in fact, powerfully defeat sin and death once and for all.

It was always God’s gracious and loving plan and so, this evening we remember that the man who is utterly powerless is, in fact, powerful.