

Lk. 23:13-43

Don't weep for me; weep for yourselves

Tim Anderson 10/4/20

Today is a solemn day in the church's calendar.

The most solemn day.

Because it's a solemn day,

many pious Christians across the centuries

have made it a day of mourning –

mourning for the suffering the Jesus endured on the cross.

At first blush this seems entirely reasonable –

why not mourn for the unspeakable horrors

inflicted on God's only Son?

But today I want us to hear the words of Jesus.

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me;

weep for yourselves and for your children.”

As Jesus is being lead off to be crucified,

he tells those in mourning not to weep.

It's a strange thing to say,

and it's worth some further thought.

We've just read the account of Jesus crucifixion in Luke's gospel.

Because it's the central story of Christianity,

it's a story we hear each year.

So to give it some freshness,

I'm going to concentrate our thoughts

on the aspects of the story that are recorded only by Luke.

That way at least it won't be the same things we hear every year.

And if we don't talk about these things now,

it might be a long time before we do so again.

So there are three aspects of Jesus crucifixion that we find only in Luke:

firstly, his interaction with the women of Jerusalem,

that I just mentioned,

secondly, his words from the cross,

“Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”
thirdly, the interaction between Jesus
and the two criminals crucified with him.

So first,

Jesus' interaction with the women of Jerusalem.

From this we discover that God's judgement is more fierce
than we would like to believe.

I wonder what you would have said to the women of Jerusalem,
if you were in Jesus' position?

“Daughters of Jerusalem,
thank you for your sincere and heart felt sympathy
on this the day of my death.

Your love for me goes up to my heavenly Father as a fragrant offering.”

It's a possibility.

It acknowledges the kindness of their hearts.

Here's another possibility.

“Daughters of Jerusalem,
don't weep for me.

Things look bad now,

but in three days you will see the triumph of God –
you will see sin and death defeated.”

It's a possibility.

It encourages the women to raise their eyes above the present trouble
to see the action of God in it all.

But what does Jesus actually say?

“Daughters of Jerusalem,
do not weep for me;
weep for yourselves and your children.

For the time will come when you will say,

‘Blessed are the barren women,
the wombs that never bore
and the breasts that never nursed!’

Then they will say to the mountains,
‘Fall on us!’

and to the hills,

‘Cover us!’

For if men do these things when the tree is green,
what will happen when it is dry?”

It’s a puzzling thing for Jesus to have said,
isn’t it?

How are we to understand Jesus’ words?

Jesus is talking about a day of great calamity
falling upon the residents of Jerusalem.

In those days,

having children was considered

to be the greatest happiness in a woman’s life.

There are many today who still consider children a great blessing.

But in those days the feeling was universal.

To be a mother was the pinnacle of a woman's life.

Remember the tears of Hannah when she couldn’t conceive,
and her joy when baby Samuel arrived.

So for Jesus to say,

For the time will come when you will say,

‘Blessed are the barren women,

the wombs that never bore

and the breasts that never nursed!’

is prophesy of days of great distress.

Days when the living conditions in Jerusalem would be so bad,

that people would think they are better off without children –

because that way they don’t have to watch them starve

or be brutalised by the invading armies.

Things that at a human level dwarf even the suffering of Jesus.

Jesus is pointing them to the coming destruction of Jerusalem.

In 37 years from that day,

Jerusalem would be invaded and razed to the ground by the Romans.

The suffering in the city would be horrific –

not unlike what has been happening in Wuhan or New York.

So at a surface level,

Jesus is saying,

“Bad things are happening to me.

But don't mourn for me.

At a human level, even worse things are going to happen to you.

And it's only half a life time away.”

But there's more to it than that.

It still doesn't quite gel, does it?

Why point people away from an unspeakable tragedy

happening before their very eyes,

to one that will take place 37 years hence?

A tragedy that Jesus perceives

but the women listening to him

had no chance of knowing what he was talking about.

It's because the events are linked.

If Jesus hadn't been crucified,

Jerusalem would not have been destroyed.

You can say what you like about Roman armies –

God is in control of the world.

Jerusalem was destroyed because it was under the judgement of God.

Jerusalem was under the judgement of God,

because it had rejected the messiah God had sent.

The things Jesus says

about mountains falling on us and hills covering us.

Those are quotes from the prophet Hosea.

Let me read you a bit more of the quote,

“The high places of wickedness will be destroyed –

it is the sin of Israel.

Thorns and thistles will grow up and cover their altars,

Then they will say to the mountains,

“Cover us!”

and to the hills, “Fall on us!”

Since the days of Gibeah, you have sinned O Israel,

and there you have remained.

Did not war overtake the evildoers in Gibeah?

When I please, I will punish them;

nations will be gathered against them

to put them in bonds for their double sin.”
When you read the whole quote it is crystal clear.
It’s the judgement of God,
poured out on the nation of Israel
that results in the destruction of their religion
by the warfare of the nations round about.
Notice the thorns and thistles covering their altars.
God is destroying their religion,
because they have rejected him.
They have rejected God because they are rejecting Jesus.
Jesus says,
“For if men do these things when the tree is green,
what will happen when it is dry?”
When the tree is green it is alive.
When it is dry it is dead.
Jesus is saying,
"If people can do such things
when then nation of Israel is spiritually alive
because of my presence among them,
what will happen when the nation is spiritually dead
because the worship that was centred on the temple in Jerusalem
has moved away
and is now centred on Jesus?"

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me;
weep for yourselves and for your children.”
We tend to focus on Jesus’ death as the great act of God’s mercy.
And rightly so for that it is.
We find forgiveness for all our sins,
when we throw ourselves on God’s mercy expressed to us through
Jesus’ death.
But Jesus’ death is not only an act of mercy.
It’s also an act of judgement.
It seals the fate of those who reject Jesus.
With God, mercy and judgement go together.

God's judgement is poured out on Jesus himself –
 that's what the darkness coming over the land signifies,
 and God's judgement is on those who reject his Son –
 That is what Jesus is warning the women of Jerusalem about.

The warning is no less stark for the people of our day.
 The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70
 was only a foretaste of what will happen to those who reject the Son.
 There will be another day of judgement.
 And the description is strikingly similar
 to Jesus' words to the women of Jerusalem.
 Listen to part of the vision of the end that was given to the apostle John.

“Then the kings of the earth,
 the princes and the generals,
 the rich, the mighty, and everyone else both slave and free
 hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.
 They called to the mountains and the rocks,
 'Fall on us and hide us from the face
 of him who sits on the throne
 and from the wrath of the Lamb!'
 For the great day of their wrath has come,
 and who can withstand it?”
 We don't take any pleasure in this.
 I'm sure Jesus took no pleasure in telling it to the women of Jerusalem.
 He told them because he had compassion on them.
 But our hearts lack compassion
 if we hide from people the truth they need to hear.

The women of Jerusalem teach us
 that God's judgement is more fierce than we would like to believe.
 Jesus' words from the cross teach us
 that his mercy is wider than we dare to believe.
 As he was hanging on the cross,
 Jesus said,

“Father forgive them,
for they don’t know what they are doing.”

Who did Jesus die for?

Was it only the nice people?

We know it was not.

But it’s hard to imagine

that he was dying for the salvation
of the very people who nailed him to the cross.

Could they be saved,

the very ones who crucified him?

The answer is yes.

Jesus prayed, ‘Father forgive them’.

How could they be saved?

The answer is in the same manner as anyone else.

If they repented of their sin

and put their trust in Jesus

then they would be saved.

The centurion at the end of the story saw what happened and said,

“Surely this was a righteous man.”

He was part of the crucifixion of Jesus.

And he was at least one step along the road to putting his faith in Jesus.

The hymn writer has us sing,

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

We were there.

Not watching.

We were participating.

It was for my sin and yours that Jesus went to the cross.

We nailed him there.

Jesus said,

“Father forgive them,

for they don’t know what they are doing.”

A year or two earlier Jesus had said,

“You have heard that it was said,

‘Love you neighbour and hate your enemy.’

But I tell you:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Jesus was no hypocrite.

He practiced what he preached.

Here, he is loving his enemies.

Here, he is praying for those who persecute him.

I’ve met people who don’t think they are good enough for God.

They are ashamed of what they’ve done in their lives.

So ashamed that they feel they could not come to God.

The message here is that Jesus would welcome with warm embrace the very people who nailed him to the cross.

There is no one so bad that they are outside the scope of God's love, if they turn and ask for forgiveness.

Jesus said,

“Father forgive them,

for they don’t know what they are doing.”

God's mercy is wider than we dare to believe.

Jesus' interaction with the criminals teaches us that his love is more free than we can believe.

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him:

‘Aren’t you the Christ?

Save yourself and us!’

But the other criminal rebuked him.

‘Don’t you fear God’,

he said,

‘since you are under the same sentence?’

We are punished justly,

for we are getting what our deeds deserve.

But this man has done nothing wrong.”

I wonder what made that criminal want to insult Jesus.

He could have insulted the soldiers who had nailed him to the cross.

They at least had done something to him.
He insulted Jesus because that's what sinners do
when they don't want to acknowledge their guilt.
They try to smear a bit of mud on anyone who makes them look bad by
comparison.

The other criminal rebuked him.

“Don't you fear God?”

This is not a confession that Jesus is God.

He's saying that God knows the truth.

God knows that Jesus is innocent of any crime.

God knows that the criminal is guilty.

This guy is only hours away from meeting his maker.

The time for bluff and bluster is over.

It's time to be honest about where he stands before God,
and beg for mercy.

One criminal was going to his death with an honest spirit
the other was still full of bluff and bluster.

And the unrepentant criminal will face God's judgement.

But the other criminal.

This is a special story.

He said to Jesus,

“Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And Jesus answered him,

“I tell you the truth,
today you will be with me in paradise.”

From the start of his ministry Jesus has been preaching one message –
repent and believe.

This criminal had repented.

He said to the other criminal,

“We are getting what our deeds deserve.”

That's repentance.

It's an acknowledgement that the punishment for their crimes was just.

He repents and he has faith.

“Jesus, remember me.”

He knows he's going to die.

But he has faith that Jesus is coming into his kingdom on the other side of death.

He has faith that if he turns to Jesus now,
that Jesus may look favourably on him then.

This is a wonderful, wonderful message.

How many good works

did that criminal have time to do before he met his maker?

None.

Not one.

He can't help any old ladies with their shopping.

His feet are nailed to a cross.

He can't put any money in the temple treasury.

The soldiers have most likely already pocketed his last denarius
and he won't be earning any more.

There is nothing he can do to earn God's favour.

And yet,

Jesus answered him,

"I tell you the truth,
today you will be with me in paradise."

Free forgiveness!

Utterly free.

In the hymn 'Rock of Ages' we sing the words,

"Nothing in my hand I bring,
simply to your cross I cling,
naked, come to thee for dress,
helpless, look to thee for grace."

That's it.

We are no different to that criminal.

It was just a bit easier for him

to realise that he came to Jesus empty handed.

In your heart of hearts,

do you really believe that God's love is that free.

Or are you secretly trying to earn it?

If you are trying to earn God's love,
you are mocking Jesus on the cross.

You are saying, “Jesus, you didn’t need to go to the cross.
I can find my own way to paradise.”
Be like the criminal who said,
“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

If God’s judgement is more fierce than we would like to believe,
his mercy is wider than we dare to believe,
and his love is more free than we can believe.