

Reflections on Good Friday (2021) from Mark's Gospel

Mark 14: 53-64 (excerpts) NIV

⁵³ They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together. . . . ⁵⁵ The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. . . . ⁵⁷ Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: ⁵⁸ "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.'" . . . ⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" ⁶¹ But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" ⁶² "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶³ The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. ⁶⁴ "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death.

Tim Reflection #1

Jesus is taken to meet with the Sanhedrin, the religious body that contained the high priest, other senior priests, and the experts of the Mosaic law, and they questioned him.¹ Mark tells us that they were looking for evidence to condemn Jesus to death.² One of the most serious charges was that some had heard Jesus say he will personally destroy the Temple.³ That isn't *exactly* what Jesus said, nevertheless, such a claim struck at the heart of Judaism because that was where the Jews believe God's presence resided. To threaten the Temple would therefore be considered as sacrilege. The high priest asked Jesus, "Are you not even going to respond to these charges against you?" And Jesus remained silent.⁴ As the early church later looked back on these events, they made a connection with Isaiah 53:7 where, speaking of the suffering Messiah, it says, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." Now, since these "witnesses" had failed to provide a conclusive case against Jesus, the high priest then asks Jesus directly: "*Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?*"⁵

This is *the* question. This is where Mark has been leading us on his journey through his gospel. Mark's *readers* have been informed in the very first verse that Jesus *is* the *Messiah, the son of God*. Later on, Peter proclaims it, although the irony is that Peter is now about to deny even *knowing* Jesus!⁶ Even the

¹ Mark 14:53,55.

² See Mark 11:18; 12:12; 14:1-2, 55. Put simply, "Is Jesus a false prophet who is leading the people astray?"

³ Mark 14:57-59. See Mark 13:2.

⁴ Mark 14:61; 15:5. (see Isa 53:7); Matt 26:63; 27:14, Luke 23:9. (See also Ps 27:12; 35:11; 39:9-10; 109:2-27.)

⁵ Mark 14:61. Note the "Blessed One" means "God" and avoids saying God's holy and unspoken name.

⁶ See Mark 14:66-72.

demons address Jesus as the “Son of God,”⁷ which is the equivalent of Messiah.⁸ But otherwise Jesus’ true identity has been essentially a secret until Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on a donkey. And even then, Jesus has not behaved in the way that the people expected the Messiah to behave. So, the high priest asks Jesus outright, “Are you the Messiah?” And Jesus responds, “I am.” This is his hour; Jesus will *not* try to hide or be evasive in the moment. This, therefore, is a moment of *epiphany*, when a secret is made plain. To underline that point, listen to what Jesus says next, “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”⁹ Jesus responds using the language of the Son of Man, a mysterious figure portrayed in Daniel’s popular vision.¹⁰ What Jesus means is this: “You will see me vindicated and I will share the very throne of Israel’s God!” At the *time of writing*, Mark sees Jesus as elevated to God’s right hand and as the one who will eventually judge the world.¹¹ Such a statement is utterly offensive to the religious leaders. Following Jewish tradition, the high priest responds by tearing his clothes¹² and then says, “Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy! What is your verdict?”¹³ They all condemned him as deserving death. Yet where is the blasphemy here? Jesus has, after all, *not* uttered God’s personal, holy and unspoken name [i.e., YHWH].¹⁴ We must recognize that in those days, blasphemy included various types of perceived arrogant speech directed against God or the Law of Moses, or claiming divine prerogatives to oneself. It is the latter that Jesus is accused of - with his “Son of Man at God’s right hand. . .” comment.

There are two added elements of irony here. The first is that this religious charge of blasphemy would be *meaningless* to Pontius Pilate.¹⁵ Consequently, the religious leaders revert back to Jesus proclaiming himself to be the kingly *Messiah*. They knew, and Jesus knew that they knew, that if someone claimed to be a *king* and the Roman governor got to hear about it, there could only be one result: crucifixion. And that, in part, is the reason the chief priest cleverly asked the question, “Are you the Messiah?”¹⁶ Jesus therefore knowingly incriminates himself on a *political* charge in replying, “Yes, *I am* the Messiah.” And the second irony is that throughout his questioning Jesus retains his integrity, ultimately at the cost of his life, whereas Peter loses his integrity to save his skin. Mark contrasts them vividly in his account.

⁷ Mark 3:11; 5:7.

⁸ “Son of God” is the honorific equivalent of “Messiah”; it is *not* the second person of the Trinity.

⁹ Mark 14:62. (See Ps 110:1; Dan 7:13.) The “Mighty One” is a deliberate circumlocution for “God.” (See [8].)

¹⁰ See Dan 7:13-14. Earlier in Mark, the Son of Man has the *authority* of God on earth (Mark 2:10, 28). He will suffer at the hands of human beings and will be later vindicated by God who raises him from the dead; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; 14:21, 41.

¹¹ See Mark 8:38; 13:26-27, the Son of Man comes as eschatological judge. Mark, of course, wants his readers to see that truth for themselves, namely that the suffering Son of Man has been vindicated by God through the resurrection. In other words, this is a confessional Christological statement.

¹² See 2 Kings 18:37; 19:1. (It is also a sign of grief, Gen 37:34; 2 Sam 1:11-12)

¹³ Mark 14:63-64.

¹⁴ Jesus’ response of “I am” *can* be seen *simply* as a direct and appropriate response to the high priest’s question (cf. the bold many “I am” statements in John’s gospel). It may be Christological to Mark; if so, it is ambiguous.

¹⁵ There is nothing particularly blasphemous with thinking yourself to be the Messiah. It might be dangerous, foolish or laughable, but it wasn’t a capital offense under the Jewish law.

¹⁶ This is identical in Greek to what Peter said in Mark 8:29, but without the question mark!

Tim's Reflection #2

Mark records Good Friday as beginning “very early in the morning” with the trial of Jesus before Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate,¹⁷ who then releases the murderer Barabbas.¹⁸ In a tangible sense, Jesus is crucified in place of Barabbas – and this image of “substitution” has influenced much of Christian theology with Jesus becoming the one who dies in *our* place, for *our* sin. We are told Jesus is then flogged by the Roman soldiers. Jesus’ crime, as it were, was for proclaiming to be the *Messiah* or - in words that Pilate could understand - as being “the King of the Jews.” Consequently, the soldiers then mock Jesus by dressing him in purple and putting a crown of thorns on his head.¹⁹ We are told that again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spat on him; they also knelt down in mock homage to him.²⁰ Mark tells us that on the evening before, some Jews also spat on Jesus, beat him, and blindfolded him saying, “You’re a prophet, so prophesy!” The implication being he would be able to say *who* hit him.²¹ The humiliation of Jesus is, then, symbolically universal, at the hands of *both* Jews and non-Jews. Mark then says that Jesus was temporarily dressed in his own clothes and led away to be crucified on a hill just outside of Jerusalem.²² Once on the cross, the soldiers gambled for his clothes.²³ The inscription of the charge above Jesus’ head was: “The King of the Jews.” More mockery and cynicism, as well as a deterrent for anyone else with similar ideas. Mark relates how the Jewish religious leaders also joined in, saying: “He saved others, but he cannot save himself! Let the Messiah, the king of Israel, come down from the cross now, that we may see and believe!”²⁴ The crucifixion of Jesus began at 9 in the morning.

Mark: 15:33-39. The Death of Jesus

Mark tells us that: ³³ At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).²⁵ ³⁵ When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.” ³⁶ Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said. ³⁷ With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. ³⁸ The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Truly, this man was the Son of God!”

¹⁷ Mark 15:1-5.

¹⁸ Mark 15:6-15.

¹⁹ Depending upon one’s theology, the soldiers were, perhaps, unwittingly symbolizing God’s “curse” on humanity (Gen 3:18) being placed on Jesus.

²⁰ Mark 15:19.

²¹ Mark 14:65; Matt 26:67; Luke 22:63-65. (The “Who hit you?” is explicit in Matthew and implied in Mark.) See also Isa 50:6.

²² Mark 15:20-22.

²³ Mark 15:24, alluding to Ps 22:18. See also Mark 15:34, which alludes to Ps 22:1 – “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me . . .”

²⁴ Mark 15:31-32.

²⁵ Psalm 22:1.

Tim's Reflection #2 *Continued*

The darkness at midday is a divine sign, but Mark provides no a word of interpretation.²⁶ In common folklore, darkness signals the death of a great leader, but Jesus hasn't died yet.²⁷ The only words that Mark has Jesus say on the cross is a citation of Psalm 22:1: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"²⁸ This is a psalm of lament, expressing the human experience of suffering and rejection, and even a sense of abandonment by God.²⁹ I suggest Jesus is *not* doubting the existence of God, or of God's power to help; after all, he still calls out, "My God," and yet he is perhaps challenging the God who has kept silent. This psalm ends with mention of divine vindication that is recognised by the whole world; such expressions of confidence in God is typical of Jewish laments. Psalm 22 also mentions the mocking of his opponents³⁰ and the writer's enemies casting lots for his clothes.³¹ Taken altogether, *Mark* wants his *readers* to see Jesus' death in the context of that psalm. Maybe Jesus did too, in which case Jesus is also expressing the depth of his trust in God. Nevertheless, those dying words of Jesus are *still* misunderstood by the crowds.³² We are then told Jesus cried out and breathed his last.³³

Two *very important* epiphanies now occur. The first is that the Temple curtain is dramatically torn in two from top to bottom. The Greek wording implies this was an *act of God* and the same verb is used in Mark 1:10 to indicate that it was God who tore open the heavens at Jesus' baptism. Mark does not offer an interpretation of what this means, nor does he clarify which particular Temple curtain was ripped open. Regardless, this can be understood in two ways – and *both* can apply. This is God's judgment on the Temple and its leadership; it is the first step in God's vindication of Jesus and his ministry – there will be more to witness on Easter Sunday. Moreover, this tearing of the Temple curtain implies that Jesus' *death* itself somehow opens up the way to God's presence for both Jews and non-Jews. That barrier has been removed once for all. This may be not so much to let people *in* but to let God *out*! So that the divine presence is no longer localized in an earthly holy place. Mark does not develop the theological symbolism, but Christians subsequently have; this torn Temple curtain is an important revelation as to one aspect of the meaning, or consequences, of Christ's death.

²⁶ Luke 23:45 says it was an eclipse, this may have been to dampen eschatological enthusiasm amongst the first generation of Christians. In any case, a solar eclipse is an astronomical impossibility at Passover, because it's the time of the *full* moon.

²⁷ As in the story of the death of Julius Caesar.

²⁸ See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/A-Reflection-for-Good-Friday.pdf> .

²⁹ There is nothing in Mark's account to suggest that God had to turn away from Jesus at the cross because he was laden with the sins of humanity. Neither does it say that Jesus is on the cross enduring God's wrath for the sake of others. Mark certainly regards the death of Jesus as salvific, but does not describe any "theory" of atonement.

³⁰ Ps 22:6-8.

³¹ Ps 22:18.

³² Mark 15:35. Note that Aramaic "Eloi" is changed to Hebrew "Eli" in Matt 27:46 (cf. Mark 15:34). It has been suggested that a folk-religion belief that Elijah might come to answer the prayer of pious Jews to deliver them from their troubles – like praying to saints today.

³³ Mark 15:37.

The second epiphany is the response of the Roman centurion as he saw *how* Jesus died. Centurions were well-acquainted with killing and crucifixions. Yet this soldier recognized something different in the *manner* of Jesus' death, namely, as rejected, misunderstood, unheroic, crucified in weakness, and exhibiting *nothing* from which anyone could infer that Jesus is the Son of God. Even though there were no obvious signs of greatness in order to instill belief, this centurion still uttered his conviction that, "This man truly was God' son."³⁴

Let's briefly explore this profound statement. For a *non-Jew* to refer to Jesus as a "son of God" recognizes that this man was *very special* and *belongs to God*. It *doesn't* necessarily mean that the person recognizes Jesus as the *Jewish* Messiah, as such, nor does it mean recognition that Jesus is divine - as in the second person of the Trinity; that doctrine that was developed later. It is nevertheless still a true *confession of faith*. Moreover, in the context of cultic Emperor worship, Mark's non-Jewish readers would also recognize this as implying Jesus is the *real* son of God, and so Caesar is *not*. Mark himself confesses Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God,³⁵ and such a confession cannot be made apart from the resurrection. We, like Mark's readers, are post-resurrection people who see the complete picture before confessing our faith in Jesus. Yet, the centurion had seen enough for his faith journey to begin and to proclaim the crucified Jesus as he really is. This is an epiphany; a divine mystery being graciously revealed and, as such, provides the model of faith for all later believers, including ourselves. This confession is a climactic statement of the identity of Jesus in Mark's Gospel. And, ironically, it is uttered by *non-Jew* - a *centurion* of all people - revealing to the *whole world* who Jesus truly is.³⁶

In conclusion, I have outlined Mark's events of Good Friday in the context of *three* epiphanies. The first was Jesus' reply of "*I am*" to the chief priest's question: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" The second is the temple curtain being torn in two. And the third is the affirmation of the centurion, "Truly, *this* man is God's son." In all three, something that had been hidden was being publicly revealed. No serious scholar of history doubts that Jesus lived and "was crucified under Pontius Pilate," as the Apostle's creed says. The question is, "*Who* is this Jesus? And "*What* does his death *mean*?" More to the point, will we recognize these three epiphanies for ourselves? That Jesus *is* the Messiah, God's son, and that through his death the whole world now has unhindered access to God. To see that, I suggest we need to follow the centurion's example and gaze on the *how* Jesus died, and - particularly in light of the resurrection - see how that it is so very different from any other crucifixion. The execution of Jesus was much *more* than simply a martyr's death. Good Friday is *not* the end of the Jesus story, but it's a crucial part that we can't afford to gloss over. Only by witnessing the darkness and grief of his death can we fully appreciate the light and joy of resurrection. Amen.

³⁴ Mark 15:39.

³⁵ Mark 1:1. See also [8].

³⁶ Note that the voice of heaven in Mark 1:11 is mirrored by the voice of the non-Jewish centurion here who also reveals the identity of Jesus.