

The Human Journey Ended (1) – Jesus Trusts God

Luke 23:44-49 - Jesus Dies

44 It was about the sixth hour by this time,
and darkness came over the whole earth until the ninth hour
45 and the sun was blocked out.

The veil of the Sanctuary was torn down the middle.

Earlier in the narrative when speaking of the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus had said: There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars ... When these things begin to happen, straighten up and lift your heads, because your redemption has come close (21:25,28). Taking his lead from Mark's Gospel, Luke gave the same detail. He was not necessarily referring to any historical event. He was illustrating the reality unfolding at a totally different level. This was the beginning of the process of redemption.

The veil of the temple shielded the Holy of Holies from common gaze. The Holy of Holies was understood to be the place par excellence of the presence of God among his people.

Again what was in question was not a factual event. The tearing of the temple curtain was symbolic. With the death of Jesus, God was accessible to everyone, no longer hidden from view. Indeed, the very death of Jesus in its own way revealed the heart of God: Jesus had remained faithful, empowered by God. God's way of love had triumphed.

46 Shouting out with a loud cry, Jesus said,
"Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!"

When he said this, he expired.

As so often in his narrative, Luke again departed radically from Mark. In Mark the dying Jesus had shouted out his sense of dereliction by God, the absence of God: My God, my God, why have you abandoned me.

Luke was concerned consistently to emphasise the deliberate response of Jesus to his experience of suffering. The words that Luke put on his lips were taken from one of the Hebrew psalms that Jesus would have known from his youth and recited frequently.

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.
Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.
You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,
take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.

Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God. (Psalm 31:1-5)

Jesus had wrestled with the temptations to despair, lack of trust and vindictiveness. He had overcome: forgiving, and surrendering to God in total trust. Jesus believed that his faithful God would truly redeem him. It was also Luke's faith. His confidence in Jesus' certainty was the reason he had chosen to present Jesus' passion the way he did.

47 The centurion observed what had happened
and glorified God, saying,
"This man was a truly just man."

In Mark's narrative, the centurion's comment could have been ambiguous. There was no doubt in Luke's. The Roman Empire, firstly through Pilate, then through the criminal who had violently rebelled against it, and finally by the centurion who had executed the deed of execution, publicly declared once more that Jesus was innocent. Ironically, in proclaiming Jesus as innocent, the Empire was declaring its own brutality, oppression and moral bankruptcy.

Though Rome had killed the innocent Christ, it was in fact no worse than other Empires. It simply embodied the sin of the world. The innocence of Jesus exposed the dishonesty, corruption and violence that disfigure the human race. It revealed the virtually inevitable vicious tendencies of human systems to blind individuals to what they are doing and lead them to surrender their sense of moral principle and innate decency to the systems' needs. It unmasked the sin of the world.

48 The crowds that had gathered around for the spectacle,
when they saw the things that happened,
turned back home beating their breasts.

Again Luke muted the starkness of Jesus' humiliation. Not only did the crowds not mock the dying Jesus, they may have been moved even to a response of repentance. Though the practice of beating their breasts was a common way of expressing grief, in the context even grief may have suggested shame and contrition.

49 All his acquaintances stood some distance from him;
and the women who followed him from Galilee
carefully observed all these things.

Luke also assumed that Jesus was not completely abandoned as he died. Acquaintances, presumably both male and female, were there at a (safe) distance. Luke specifically mentioned the women who had followed him from Galilee, without giving any idea of numbers. With a few exceptions women had generally been the invisible members of the group of disciples. By the time Luke was writing his Gospel, the tradition seemed to have forgotten their names (or discounted their importance).