

GOOD OR BAD FRIDAY

Matthew 27:27-46

Leo Douma

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Today, on a Friday, right around the world Christians will mourn the death of Jesus. It is traditionally a day of sadness. It's a day to be sober and sombre. So why in the world should today be called 'Good' Friday? In Europe, in Latin countries it's called 'Holy' Friday. In Norway is called 'Long Friday' and in Germany it's called 'Sorrowful' or 'Suffering' Friday, 'Friday of Mourning'. That seems more appropriate don't you think. We could call it 'Bad' Friday or 'Sad' Friday or even 'Mad' Friday. It seems 'Good' Friday is called 'good' only in English speaking countries.

If you call something 'good' it has a sense of celebration about it. That seems to distort our reflection on what happened that day, certainly the way so much of our nation acts on this day. Our day of remembrance, reflecting on what happened over 2000 years ago seems to have become a rather pleasant experience. As a nation we make a holiday of it. We have an extra-long weekend with four days to go camping before the cold weather sets in. We have a big sale on hot cross buns and chocolate Easter eggs. It's all 'good' and pleasant.

But let us have an honest reflection on history for a moment. We call today 'Good' Friday. But really what was so good about that original day? For the truth is that the day our Lord Jesus was crucified was the darkest and most disgraceful day in all of human history. What makes it so is determined by whom we are dealing with here. It was the day the Son of God, the maker and Lord of the universe was hung up on a cross and left to die, cursed and rejected by both humanity and God.

Let's go back to that day as we find it here in our text in Matthew 27. Imagine Jesus hanging on that wooden cross, hanging between two criminals. Crucifixion was an execution reserved by the Romans for the lowest and worst of offenders. It is a very slow and cruel way of dying. It was intended to be an exhibition to warn the criminal mind or political rebels and to placate the well-to-do.

As you look in your imagination, you will notice the blood is flowing from Jesus' forehead because of the crown of thorns forced on his head. His hands and feet bleed

badly as well because of the nails smashed through them to hold him on the cross together with the rope. Jesus' body is contorted and writhing in pain. He is struggling to breathe with the way his body is hung. Eventually weakened and unable to raise himself he will suffocate to death. Crucifixion was a slow and painful method of execution.

Today the cross is a symbol we all happily wear as Christians. Then it was a symbol of utter contempt. It is an ugly scene and all levels of society are exhibiting their scorn because the cross is symbolic of someone who is cursed. The executed are hung up, half way between heaven and earth. It symbolised no one on earth wanted the crucified person, nor did heaven. That sense of contempt is seen in our text. Look with me at how the various levels of society show their disgust fulfilling the words of Psalm 22:6&7 *"I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads."*

The Romans, the government of the day show their scorn with the written charge that has been placed on the cross above Jesus' head: (Matthew 27:37) *"This is Jesus the king of the Jews"*. What a mockery, what a sick joke! You can imagine them saying: 'The Jews wanted Jesus to be their King and rid themselves of us Romans. Well now they have their own king. But he isn't much use to them. He claimed he was a king, even rode into Jerusalem like a king. He even said he was the Son of God. Well your majesty here is your crown of thorns and this is what we think of you- nothing!'

The ordinary citizen is represented here as well. We see them in Matthew 27 verses 39 & 40. They are the people passing by going about their business on their way to the market and work. We need to understand that the place where Jesus was crucified, namely 'Golgotha', which means 'the place of the skull', was located just north of Herod's gate. It was the main gate in and out of Jerusalem in those days. So, the three crosses were next to the main road. That was deliberately done by the Romans, so the crowds of people continually passing in and out of the city would be forced to see this execution. The bleating of sheep, the braying of donkeys, the bumping of wagons, the sounds of shouting, cursing, laughing and of greetings filled the air along that busy road. Today if you visit Jerusalem to see the historic site of Golgotha basically all you see is a main road full of tourist buses, frustrated drivers trying to get through the crowd, voices of vendors and tour guides calling out for attention.

It was beside this busy road that Jesus hung on a cross. On Fridays the traffic was particularly busy because everyone was getting things ready for the Sabbath, the day to worship God. And the Sabbath after this Friday was extra special being the Passover.

So, picture it with me, sense the irony here. This mass of humanity, with millions in town for the Passover, is busy getting ready to honour God because of how he saved them in the Exodus. They stop and look at this scene on the side of the road, this place of disgrace and scorn, and 'hurled insults'.

A lot of them had put much hope in the political ability of this Jesus. That's why they had sung 'Hosanna' the previous Sunday. But his failure and this scene left them with a foul taste in the mouth. So, they 'shake their heads' and add their bit of abuse. They hurl their insults at him. The Greek says they 'blaspheme' him. They distort the words Jesus had spoken a few days earlier and deride him. (Matthew 27:40) *"You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days save yourself"*. That is big talk Jesus. The temple took thousands of people over forty years to build and you said you could rebuild it on your own in three days. You have big boasts but little to show. The 'Son of God' you reckon. Well 'come down from the cross if you are'. Yes, the ordinary Thomas, Benjamin and Miriam of the day blaspheme the Son of God as if he were the lowest thing around. And then continue on their way to work and the market.

And, the religious leaders, the established church of the day, they are there too in a holy huddle. We see them in Matthew 27:41-44. They are standing there apart in a group by themselves. They sneer at Jesus and gloat amongst themselves. 'Look at him. *"He saved others, but he can't save himself"*. On yes, he got on the donkey and enjoyed the praise of the crowd last Sunday. But look at him now. "He is the king of Israel, is he?" We'll let him do something spectacular now. *"Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him"*.

And then to add the greatest insult they, as religious men, bring God into it as well. What they say next are the prophetic words Psalm 22. They deride Jesus: (Psalm 22:8) *"He trusts in God, let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God'"*. Yes, the so-called church of the day seeks to make a pronouncement on behalf of God that even God doesn't want him. That is the implication here in these words of the Pharisees. What a disgrace, what a shame. How dare these Pharisees mock the Christ! How the Son of God is abused. It really is a sad, bad, sorrowful Friday!

And yet, yet how true this pronouncement is! Here is the most awful thing of all. Jesus is rejected by God. God at this point in time does not want him, even though Jesus is his own son. Jesus is cursed by earth and even heaven. This soon becomes very clear. Jesus has been silent during all this taunting and mocking. But three hours later he cries out (Matthew 27:45-46) *"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"* The mocking

and scorn Jesus can handle with God on his side. But now in the depths of hell he is abandoned by God. Why? Why has this darkest moment in history occurred?

Why? Well this is where the message strikes home and affects us very personally. Let us reflect and remember. Jesus was cursed and rejected, despised by heaven and earth, by all creation and the creator because of our sin. As Isaiah put it (Isaiah 53:6) *"We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all"*. Yes, Jesus hung in our place, for our guilt. In other words what happened to Jesus should have happened to us.

Jesus hung on the cross, not because he was weak or an actual cursed sinner. Jesus could very easily have come down off that cross and shut all those abusing mouths. Remember who we are talking about here. This is Jesus who stilled the raging sea and healed the sick and raised the dead! He would have found it a very easy thing to come off that cross. He did not have to remain on the cross. He is God. He is guiltless. It was not weakness or the nails that kept him there. Then what was it? It was his immense love that kept him hanging on the cross.

The people mock him as the one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it. They have no idea that as Jesus hangs on the cross that is precisely what he is doing! We read in Matthew 27:51 that at the moment of his death the *"veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom"*. The temple was no longer needed and would later be destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Three days after his death Jesus would rise to build a new temple, a temple of living stones- namely the people of God. If Jesus had stepped down of that cross what kind of temple would he have been left with? The shell of a building God had long ago lost interest in because the people had abandoned him. The people hurling abuse would not benefit from such a temple. So, Jesus stayed on the cross. He stayed for them.

They say if Jesus 'comes down they will believe in him'. But if he comes down off the cross, he won't be saving them. Then they will have nothing to believe in. Had Jesus taken up their challenge everything, salvation for us and for the entire creation, would have been lost. So, Jesus stays on the cross. He stays for them. He stays for the sake of his mockers. He stayed for us. He stayed for all who believe in him and what his suffering on the cross stands for.

Let us reflect and remember what we caused our Lord. Make it personal as the poet did:

'Under an eastern sky
Amidst a rabble's cry
A man went forth to die
For me.

Thorn-crowned his blessed head
Blood stained his every tread
cross-laden on he sped
For me.

Pierced were his hands and feet
Three hours o'er him beat
Fierce rays on noontide heat
For me.'

Yes, remember that!

But having seen the depth of our sin let us rejoice and celebrate. Why? Because through Jesus suffering on the cross all of our sin is paid for! When we come to Jesus in faith and confess that it was our sin that caused Jesus to suffer, then our guilt is removed. We are completely right with God. His justice is done, and all is forgiven. How do we know that? The Christ who suffered is also the one who conquered sin and death, who rose from the dead as proof that the guilt was paid for.

So, let us respond as the last verse of that poem:

Thus you were made all mine
Lord, make me wholly thine
Grant grace and strength divine
To me.

Is today a 'Good' Friday? Yes, yes indeed, if we are repentant believers of the Christ who suffered.