**Mark 15:33-41**

**Good Friday**

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it”. These are some words from an early work by Karl Marx. And, of course, to a large extent, he is right. As much as I love philosophy and am well-trained in it, I recognise that philosophy, at its very best, can only give us theories and systems with which to analyse what is real. It is beyond the field of philosophy to initiate change: effective change can only come when we take our philosophies and choose to use them in practice.

And to do that, to work for a better society, a better world, is what is required of us as Christians and, indeed, as responsible members of civic society.

The point is to change the world.

But as Mahatma Gandhi said, the world can only change one person at a time. So we each have an individual responsibility to seek change within ourselves so that the inner change can radiate out with a positive impact on the world around us.

And if each one of us strives for a positive inner change, then the cumulative impact of that in our world will be truly transformative.

The point is to change the world.

The point is to change within ourselves before God.

The point is to change within society before God.

And if we earnestly desire that movement towards God, for ourselves and society, we must begin with the Cross of Christ. There was a Conference of Latin American Bishops in 1968 and they made this statement: “The centre of God’s salvation is Jesus Christ, who by his death and resurrection transforms the universe and makes it possible for each person to reach fulfilment as a human being. This fulfilment embraces every aspect of humanity; body and spirit, individual and society, person and cosmos, time and eternity.”

If our desire is to make a better world, starting with ourselves, we must begin with Jesus Christ. And, most specifically, we must begin with Holy Week.

We know the story of Good Friday, we know the Passion Narratives. We read them almost in a blasé fashion because there are no surprises for us. But if we want to guard against the warning of Karl Marx and make sure that we are doers, not merely philosophers, we need to engage with the story and allow it to determine in us a response that takes seriously our own needs and the needs of the world.

I don’t know what emotions Mark’s account brings out in you. I feel immensely frustrated by Jesus because he’s so submissive to what goes on: I almost want to slap him, to shake him, and tell him to get his act together. The whole account is of a man who remains silent. Mark only attributes one sentence to Jesus from the time of his humiliation at the hands of the soldiers to the time he dies.

Jesus is stripped of his clothes, he is mocked and humiliated, they spit on him. And he remains silent.

Jesus is taken out to be crucified, they cast lots for his clothes, they pin a sarcastic sign above his head. And he remains silent.

The passers-by mock him, they taunt him, he is abused by the robbers on the crosses next to him. And he remains silent.

For three hours in agony he hangs on the cross. And he remains silent.

And he dies.

And he’s put into a grave where he lies for three days. And he remains silent.

We think often about the Words from the Cross. But what comes over most powerfully from Mark’s account is the silence of the cross. A silence that pervades the whole story. A silence that was interpreted by the other players in the story as weakness and defeat. But, in reality, it was the very opposite.

As the Christian writer, Robert Benson, said: “It is in silence that God is known”. The silence of the Passion story is where we find God. A God who endures everything for the love of each one of us. A God who submits himself to the very worst that we have to offer. A God who becomes weak so that we may know salvation.

And somehow, the silence of Jesus shouts loudly against the violence done to him. He doesn’t need to justify himself. He doesn’t need to protect himself. He doesn’t need to speak out in his own defence. Because what Jesus stands for is truth. And the truth will always prevail…

Winston Churchill said that, “Truth is incontrovertible. Panic may resent it, ignorance may deride it, malice may distort it, but there it is.” And that’s what we see in the cross of Jesus Christ. The Roman authorities resented Jesus and in their panic they crucified him. The passers-by were ignorant and they derided him. The chief priests and the scribes were full of malice towards Jesus and they distorted his teachings.

But Jesus remains silent. Because when the panic and the derision and the malice have given all they’ve got, truth still stands. And Christ will be raised on the third day.

And there is a model in that for ourselves if we want to respond to the Passion Narrative in Holy Week; that any change within ourselves, within society must begin with silence. Not a weak sort of silence. Not a silence that gives in to sin. But a silence that allows God to speak.

Too often, we try to justify ourselves: we offer excuses to God for the things we do wrong. “It wasn’t my fault – I was pushed into it”. We offer excuses for Jesus to others as if we were ashamed of him and he needs our defence. We offer excuses for the way the world is, blaming others for the wrongs in society and never accepting our own part. But we need to learn to be silent, to allow God to speak for himself.

If we are silent before God, he will reveal to us our sin and shortcomings. If we share Christ with others and then wait in prayerful, loving silence, the Holy Spirit will convict them of the truth.

The writer of Ecclesiastes says, “There is a time to keep silence and there is a time to speak”. We need to know the difference. Because it is often in the silence that God makes himself known and when God makes himself known, things change…

But, of course, the cross isn’t just about silence. Christ speaks on the cross and Mark records one saying: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

In this one sentence, we have the ultimate cry of desolation; the feeling that, in this moment of supreme suffering, even God has deserted Jesus. And all the physical agony and pain that Jesus had to bear is as nothing compared with the emotional anguish of feeling so very alone.

Perhaps some of us have experienced similar moments of despair when life has reached such a pit of nothingness that we even feel that God has turned away from us. It is a common human experience and, of course, Jesus is only echoing here the words of David in Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? My God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but I find no rest.”

How many of us have experienced that depth of desolation? Many of us, I’m sure…

But it seems to me that, if the cross of Christ means anything, it is testimony to the fact that, no matter how desolate Jesus felt, no matter how desolate we may feel, God had not forsaken him and God does not forsake us.

In fact, the very opposite is true: we can turn to the cross and see Jesus hanging there and look on his suffering, and his feelings of desolation, and remember the sacrifice of love he makes there and all the filth and sin he had to carry and know that, even then, God had not deserted him.

And the proof comes three days later with an empty tomb.

God is not a deserter. He is not some patron saint of oppressors and persecutors.

God remains faithful to us, despite our sin and betrayal, despite our pride and ambition, despite the fact that we so often forsake him. Even though sometimes we cry out in our human frailty, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, we can be assured by the empty tomb that God does not forsake us.

But this is Holy Week – Easter Day is still some days off…and we are left today with the words of Jesus: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And, of course, it is a cry of human agony. And if we allow it to speak to us and shape our Christian love, then we will change, and the world will change.

Jesus is the model of what it means to carry the feelings of forsakenness for other people.

And here is a challenge to us as we stammer our prayers to God for others; that if we want to be truly Christlike, we too need to carry the forsakenness of others, to empathise with the pain and suffering of those we pray for…To come alongside the refugee and the persecuted Christian, those who are bereaved and the terminally ill, the homeless and those who have no hope…To stand with all those who feel forsaken by God and cry out to him with anguish in prayer.

When we pray for the needs of the world, we are not presenting God with a shopping list. We are standing alongside those in need just as Jesus stood alongside us at Golgotha.

“Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it”.

Holy Week and Easter provides the means for change; change within ourselves, within others and within the structures of society that often reflect so little of God.

That change begins with silence, allowing God to speak to us and convict us, knowing that the silence of truth shouts louder than the noise of all that is Anti-Christ.

But that change also involves speaking out; acknowledging our own feelings of forsakenness and speaking out to God and to those in authority on behalf of those in the world who have no voice for themselves.

The cross is silence.

The cross speaks out.

The cross makes real change possible.

Let us recommit ourselves this week to the God of the cross who speaks to us, even in the silence. The God who stretches out his arms to us in sacrificial love asking us to do the same and saying, “Follow me”.