

Ask Fr. James

What is the significance of the tearing of the Temple curtain at the death of Jesus?

At exactly three O' Clock in the afternoon on Good Friday when Jesus was crucified, there was darkness over the whole land for three hours; the sixth to the ninth hour. At the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Some of the bystanders heard him and thought that he was calling Elijah (Mark 15:35). Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, simultaneously mocking him (Mark 15:36). Jesus then uttered a loud cry and breathed his last (Mark 15:37), and the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom (Mark 15:38).

Many scholars have linked the tearing of the temple curtain to an eclipse of the sun that opened access to God for everyone not just through the Jerusalem temple. The tearing of the Temple curtain down the middle was a sign of abrogation of the Temple and temple worship. It signified the end of the temple cult and the access of all people to God's glory. The temple curtain separated the holy of holies, from the outer curtain separating the sanctuary from the courtyard where the people would gather when they came to the Temple for worship. With Jesus' death, the function of the temple came to an end.

The tearing of the temple curtain symbolized the opening of the door for the whole world to receive the good news of salvation, and to render honour where it belonged - Jesus, the new temple, not built by hands (Mark 14:58). The powerful confession of the centurion attests to the end of the temple cult with the tearing of the temple curtain. A centurion was an officer in the Roman army responsible for around eighty to a hundred soldiers. This centurion was apparently in charge of Jesus' execution. In Mark 15:39, when the centurion, who stood facing Jesus, saw the way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.