

Sermon – 08/10/2006 am

Behold the Man

Study Text: John 19:1-6

He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities...and by his stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:5). Although the prophet spoke these words some 700 years before the time of Christ, it is hard to find a better description of how Jesus was treated as he stood before both Jewish and Roman authorities.

‘I find no fault in him at all’ was the verdict of Pilate’s initial interrogation of Jesus of Nazareth. The Jews had brought Jesus to him declaring him worthy of the death penalty. Not once, not twice, but three times Pilate declared that he found no fault in Jesus. Yet the trial continued in a most extraordinary manner, and eventually Pilate capitulated to the cry of the Jews.

But why this scourging, why this wounding, and why this brutality, you might ask. Why this bruising, why these stripes and why this mocking?

Human Brutality Highlighted

The root of the verb ‘to scourge’ is that for a whip or scourge. The Roman whip had multiple strands, each with a sharp piece of metal or bone tied on the end. The prisoner was stretched out and beaten repeatedly with this whip. While Jewish law restricted the number of lashes to forty, Roman law had no such limitation.

The scourging continued until the torturers were exhausted or their commander told them to stop. The blood would flow freely as the flesh was deeply lacerated. Eyewitness records report that such brutal scourging could leave victims with their bones and entrails exposed. Sometimes they passed out and died.

The depravity of the human heart is perhaps seen most obviously in man’s inhumanity to man. This was so in the family of Adam, and it is so today. Sinful souls delight in devising ways of bringing hurt and harm to those whom they hate. With some, like Hitler and his cohorts, it was ways of exterminating a whole race of human beings. With others it is limited to getting rid of individuals who pose some sort of threat. With still others it may simply be delight in causing hurt or discomfort to someone by way of revenge.

‘Death is too kind for these monsters’ some said of the Bali bombers. ‘Let them suffer rather than die’ they said. Yet in the next breath they would condemn a teenager for torturing a cat or dog. Fellow human beings seem to bring out the worst in us in terms of doing harm. The most righteous man that ever lived brought out the worst of human sin.

The scourging recorded here in John 19:1 may not have been as severe as that just described. This is not to say that Jesus did not suffer a severe scourging – it is just that it may have come later. The Romans had three levels of scourging or flogging their prisoners. One was for relatively light offences, then a brutal flogging for more serious offences (‘flagellation’ in Latin), and a very severe flogging as just described; this was often associated with crucifixion.

According to John, Pilate had not yet handed Jesus over to be crucified. The very severe scourging took place after Pilate sentenced Jesus to death, according to the other gospels. Because of this terrible scourging Jesus was too weak to carry his cross; Simon of Cyrene was compelled to help him.

This initial scourging was actually the second attempt by Pilate to release Jesus. He probably thought that if he punished Jesus his accusers might be satisfied. They might even feel pity for Jesus and be happy to release him. Pilate said *I will chastise him and release him* (Luke 23:16).

Wicked Pilate was prepared to beat an innocent man, just to appease the Jews whom he feared. The even more wicked Jews felt no pity whatsoever when they saw Jesus so horribly beaten. They would have had more pity on an ox that had fallen into a ditch on the Sabbath day! They did not call for a stop to the cruelty being inflicted on Jesus. No! In unison they yelled out *crucify him, crucify him* (19:6).

To this scourging was added mockery. The soldiers and Pilate mocked Jesus as the king of the Jews. They twisted thorn branches together to make a crown, and threw a purple robe around his shoulders. *Hail King of the Jews* they said in mocking tones as they *struck him with their hands* (19:3) and spat on him.

A local plant (*Spina Christi*) which has large thorns and ivy shaped leaves may well have been used to make the crown, but we cannot be certain – apart from the fact that it had sharp thorns. When this crown was thrust upon the head of our Lord, blood would have flowed freely from the wounds inflicted. Rivulets of blood ran down his face, neck and body.

The purple robe may have been the one Herod put on Jesus to mock him. So here was this man, beaten about the body and face, crowned with thorns and clothed in a purple robe being paraded before the Jews by the Roman Governor. Hatred, mocking, and ridicule were openly displayed, but pity and compassion were no where to be found.

The crown of thorns was not only symbolic of kingship. Thorns were symbolic of the Fall! After sin entered the world thorns and thistles appeared in the earth, and Adam had to contend with these all the days of his life. We are still contending with these fruits of the Fall. These fruits of sin were placed on the head of the sinless Son of Man as he bore the sin of many.

Behold the man announced Pilate as he paraded Jesus before his accusers. Pilate was hoping to appease the Jews, but at the same time delighting in mockery. They called Jesus the King of the Jews – or rather accused Jesus of claiming this title for himself. It was all the same to Pilate. He did not miss the chance to mock the man Jesus and his people the Jews.

The man Pilate was referring to was much more than a mere man. He was **the** man – *Behold the man*. Maybe Pilate was pointing to Jesus at the time, but the definite article could be read as indicating the true man or the unique man. John records these words with a sense of the deep irony contained in them. Here indeed was the Man; here was the second Adam whom God sent into the world to deal with sin that came through the first Adam. 'Adam' in Hebrew literally means 'man'.

Vicarious Suffering

Here was the Man, beaten and bruised by wicked Gentiles, being paraded before wicked Jews yelling out crucify him, crucify him. He wore a crown of thorns, and a purple robe covering his lacerated body. Why we asked – why brutality, why this suffering inflicted upon an innocent man. Where was God the Father in all this? Why did he not stop these wicked men? Was he powerless to act?

Remember what Isaiah said. *He was bruised for our iniquities* or our sin. We were somehow responsible for this suffering of Jesus. Peter explains this word of the prophet saying Jesus *himself bore our sins in his own body...and by his stripes we are healed* (I Peter 2:24). Jesus suffered vicariously, meaning he suffered in the place of another. The question is who is the ‘another’?

Was Jesus suffering because of your sin? Was he bearing your sin in his body as he suffered that flogging, was he bearing your sin as he wore that cruel and ignominious crown of thorns? If so, you are healed according to the prophet and the apostle. *By his stripes you are healed*. You are healed of sin, the most deadly affliction of every human soul. When healed of sin you will no longer suffer death. When healed you no longer face the pain and torment hell. Jesus suffered and died in your place. He is your substitute.

If you do not believe that Jesus was suffering in your place, if you think that the way Jesus was flogged and mocked was but a sad reflection of depraved human minds, remember you are inescapably a fellow member of the human race. Remember also that the wrath of God remains on you for you are still in your sin.

God did not intervene to rescue Jesus because it was his wrath being poured out on his own Son. It was divine wrath being poured out on sin. As Jesus took on the ‘likeness of sinful flesh’, God condemned sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3). If Jesus was not bearing your sin as he suffered, and then died, then that wrath of God remains.

The suffering of Jesus seen in his trial is an indication of the suffering, the weeping and gnashing of teeth, the everlasting fire, and the eternal punishment that awaits the unbeliever in Hell (Matthew 25). You can escape this due penalty for your sin because Jesus suffered in your place. Repent of your sin and believe in Jesus Christ. Then, and only then can you say ‘by his stripes I am healed because he bore my sins in his own body on the tree’.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon