

Sermon – 19/11/2006 am

Pierced for Our Transgressions

Study Text: John 19:31-37

‘Blind guides who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel’; with such words Jesus described the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, especially the Pharisees. Such words are an apt description of the behaviour of the Jews during the crucifixion of Jesus. The same men who had shouted crucify him, crucify him, the same men who mocked Jesus as he hung on the Cross dying, were now concerned not to violate the holy Sabbath. Envious and violent men, even men who sanction murder, can be very religious men.

I have been watching the documentary called “The Secret Files of the Inquisition’. Bishop Caraffa, who became Pope Paul IV, was very concerned to maintain orthodoxy in the church in the face of Reformation teaching. He banned all books containing such teaching, including Bibles in languages other than Latin. The church did not permit the people to read the Bible in their mother tongue. Those who refused to comply with the teaching of the Church, and uphold the authority of the Pope were brought before the inquisition and condemned. Many were burned at the stake; one young believer was boiled in hot oil.

The Pope reasoned that the Law of God, supposedly enshrined in the traditions of the church, must be upheld at all costs. Their reasoning was much the same as the Pharisees some 1500 years previously. Such reasoning still gives credence to certain practices in the church today.

Law-Keeping Murderers

The Law of Moses stipulated that a body must not be left hanging on a tree overnight; it had to be buried the same day (Deuteronomy 21:23). In the case with Jesus the next day was the Sabbath, a high or special Sabbath because of the Passover. The Jews did not want this holy day defiled by having bodies on crosses outside the city, even though they were responsible for an innocent man being on one of those crosses. The Jews asked Pilate to hasten Jesus’ death in a yet another horribly cruel act, that *they might be taken away* (19:31).

Despite their outward show of law keeping, these Jews were wicked murderers. The Spirit-filled apostles did not hesitate to declare to these Jews *the God of our father’s raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree* (Acts 5:30). Yet their action in having Jesus taken down from the Cross before sunset on Friday was yet another action under divine control.

The Jews inadvertently contributed to the fulfilment of prophecy, the sign of Jonah. *As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth* (Matthew 12:40). ‘How true it is’ writes Ryle ‘that the wickedest enemies of God are only axes and saws and hammers in his hands, and are ignorantly his instruments for doing his work in the world’.

No Bone Broken

At the request of the Jews, Pilate ordered that the legs of the men on the crosses be broken to hasten their death. It is interesting that Pilate acquiesced to this request after refusing to

change the title he placed over Jesus. He was probably aware of how upset the Jews would be if their Sabbath law was broken. He might well have had another riot on his hands.

Breaking the legs of the victims hastened death because they could no longer push up to relieve the pressure on their diaphragm. Breathing became more difficult and they soon died of asphyxiation. That was if they did not die of shock first. The legs were not just broken they were shattered by a large mallet ‘The shock attending to such cruel injury to bones can be the coup de grace causing death’ wrote one physician.

Pilates soldiers broke the legs of the two criminals, *but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead they did not break his legs* (19:33). The Jews wanted them broken and Pilate gave permission, but the soldiers did not break his legs. How amazing! What held them back? These men probably revelled in such brutality – it was their business. But they were restrained. Why – and by whom?

The soldiers observed that Jesus *was already dead* (19:33) – unlike the two criminals. They had their legs smashed as their intense suffering continued – even the one who had believed in Jesus. Believing in Jesus does not mean we escape all bodily pain and suffering. Jesus escaped this additional suffering, not because he could not bear it, but in fulfilment of Scripture.

It is written in the Bible *not one of his bones shall be broken* (19:36 cf. Psalm 34:20) – and every word of Scripture must be fulfilled. It was also a requirement of the Passover that no bone of the Passover lamb be broken (Exodus 12:46). It was Passover when Jesus was crucified. He is the true Passover lamb, *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (1:29).

His Side Pierced

Have you ever heard the argument that Jesus never really died but merely fainted and went into a coma? In the coolness of the tomb, some say, he revived. Many believe this lie for it obviates the need to believe in the resurrection. The Docetic heresy, which may well have been about when John wrote this gospel, claims that Jesus only ‘seemed’ to be a man and that he only ‘seemed’ or appeared to die. In fact the teaching of the Quran is also to this effect – Sura 4.157 reads ‘they did not kill him, they never crucified him – they were made to think they did’. Mohammed’s knowledge of Christianity was mediated through Docetic sources.

How do we answer such arguments? This is what is called apologetics. Our answer will include reference to this passage. These soldiers may not have been medical experts, but they knew when a man was dead. And John describes what he saw in detail, and at length, so that we will believe Jesus actually died.

The soldiers were responsible to see that Jesus died. If they took a man down when he was in a coma and he later revived and escaped, they would be jeopardising their own life. If a Roman soldier allowed a prisoner to escape he was bound to fall on his sword. How much more if a man condemned to death escaped! These soldiers had come to smash the legs of Jesus. But they did not break his legs because they were convinced he was already dead.

But one soldier pierced his side with a spear. Why the soldier did this we are not told – apart from the fact that he was fulfilling Scripture. Was he just ‘trigger happy’ as they say? It was

just a simple thrust of his spear and no one cared. Jesus was dead anyway. John, however, cared and took special notice.

When the side of Jesus was pierced *immediately blood and water flowed out* (19:34). John emphasises that he saw this remarkable phenomena first hand, and that what he is writing is true. He records this *so that you may believe* (19:35). He wrote this whole book that you *may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name* (21:31). This piece of truth is essential to the whole truth of the gospel. You cannot believe that Jesus saves you from sin and death if you do not believe that he actually died and rose again.

Much has been written by medical experts and theologians about this phenomenon of blood and water flowing from the pierced side of Jesus. The essential detail is that Jesus was dead, and may have been so for some time. His heart may have broken or burst as indicated by Psalm 69:20 – *reproach has broken my heart*. This is the very Psalm which speaks of Jesus thirsting, as we saw last time. Somehow blood entered his chest cavity and there separated into its two fractions, red blood and serum or water.

What is the symbolism, if any, associated within this flow of blood and water? Early Church fathers like Chrysostom and Augustine saw in this a reference to the two sacraments – baptism involves water and the Lord's Supper involves blood. There is a tendency by some to see the sacraments in lots of places.

John does refer to blood and water again in his letters (I John 5:6). Washing with water was prescribed under the Old Covenant for ritual purification. Furthermore, *according to the law almost all things are purified by blood* (Hebrews 9:22). Blood meant a sacrifice, for it meant the death of a substitute. John would have seen the washing away of sin by the sacrifice of Jesus symbolised in what he saw – the water and the blood that flowed from the pierced side of Jesus.

In the famous hymn, 'Rock of Ages', Augustus Toplady expresses the atonement in these very terms:

*Rock of Ages cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.*

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon