

## Sermon – 29/10/2006 am

### They Crucified Him

Study Text: John 19:17-24

In recent days various well-known rich men have been arrested for corporate crime. Some were found guilty of insider trading, false accounting and misleading reporting. In their defence they claimed that the shame and loss of reputation they had suffered should be taken into account in their sentencing. Because they are richer than other ‘common criminals’, shame is somehow more damaging to them.

Today we will look at a man who made himself of no reputation. We will look at Jesus who suffered greater shame than any other man in history – he was innocent. We are looking at man who suffered not only shame but pain, excruciating pain, as he suffered arguably the cruellest form of execution ever devised by man – and he was without sin. Why? Why did Jesus have to die? Why did he die such a painful and shameful death?

A friend called me during the week with a question. He was listening to the radio while driving and must have heard how the priests and elders mocked Jesus saying ‘if you are the Son of God come down from the Cross’. My friend wanted to know how Jesus answered them. He gave no answer according to Scripture.

I went on to tell him that Jesus could have come down; he could have called upon his Father to send more than twelve legions of angels to rescue him. But it was the will of God for his Son to die, and his Son was obedient unto death. *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life* (John 3:16).

### Pain

Pilate delivered Jesus to them to be crucified. The cries of the Jews prevailed and they were satisfied. The soldiers took control of the situation. They were tough men, well practised in techniques of humiliation and torture. Jesus was no exception. He was flogged till blood flowed from his lacerated flesh. The crown of thorns thrust upon his head drew more blood. When they had finished, probably because of exhaustion from wielding the dreaded scourge, they put his clothes back on and made him take his cross to begin the journey out of the city (0.5-1.00km).

Was Jesus carrying the full cross or just the cross bar? Scholars cannot agree. Some think that the upright would have been in place at the site and that it was only the cross-bar Jesus was forced to carry, but I am not convinced. In any case it was very heavy, especially for one who had just been flogged so severely.

*And he, bearing his cross went out to the place called the Skull* (19:17). John does not mention that Simon of Cyrene was compelled to bear the cross for Jesus somewhere along the way. Obviously Jesus was physically unable to go on so the soldiers grabbed Simon to help him. John may well have been reflecting on the truth that Jesus was not only bearing his cross but also bearing our sin as he went out to be crucified.

The place of crucifixion was outside the city wall, a place called ‘the Skull’ by translation of the Greek term *cranium*. John gives the Hebrew name also for this would have been what it was known as locally. ‘Calvary’ is a Latin word which has come into English. Why this name ‘the Skull’? Maybe because the landform resembled a skull, or maybe simply because it was the site of executions – we cannot be certain.

Nor can we be certain of the exact location of this place, apart from being outside the wall of the city at the time. The site of the current Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a possibility, like a number of others. The historicity of this event is not dependent on finding the exact location, nor is our faith. Those who want to worship at this ‘sacred site’, or before some relic from this site, are under a great deception.

At Golgotha Jesus was crucified. Roman citizens could not be crucified without the sanction of the Emperor, so painful was such a death. A person who was crucified was said to have ‘died a thousand deaths’. Large nails were driven through the hands and feet of Jesus before he was lifted up to hang on the cross. The weight of the body put pressure on the diaphragm making it difficult to breathe. A small footrest attached to the cross assisted breathing but was really meant to prolong the suffering. It could take hours, even days, for the victim to die. In the meantime muscle spasms wracked the whole body as the person struggled to breathe and to live.

Pilate found no fault in him. The Jews knew he was not guilty. Yet this innocent man was subjected to the most painful of deaths, the death of a slave or worst of criminals. The Son of God did not escape the wrath of Man. The Son of Man was not spared the wrath of God as he bore our sins in his own body on the tree.

## Shame

*They crucified him and two others with him, one on either side (19:18).* Was Pilate continuing to mock the Jews by crucifying two criminals or terrorists with their King? This may well have been so, but the sovereign God was able to turn such malice into good, and into the fulfilment of his own words. John likes to point out such fulfilment of Scripture but it is Mark who writes *so Scripture was fulfilled which says ‘and he was numbered with the transgressors’ (Mark 15:28).*

Luke tells us that one of the criminals turned to Jesus and was saved even as he hung on the cross. He suffered the wrath of man but escaped the wrath of God and the agony of Hell as Jesus said to him *today you will be with me in Paradise (Luke 23:43).* The other criminal blasphemed Jesus and died in his sin. He would not enter Paradise with Jesus.

He was lifted up like the serpent was lifted up by Moses in the desert (3:14). Jesus was crucified with a criminal on either side. The one who looked to him was saved. The other who cursed him died in his sin. The picture of Golgotha is a picture of this world. As people hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, as they see Jesus on the Cross, they either believe in him or they don’t. They either join him in heaven when they die or they don’t.

Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross and the writing was: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS (19:19). It was common practice to specify the crime for which the person was being crucified. This acted as a strong deterrent to those who passed by. The plank

may well have been put on the neck of Jesus as he was led out and then attached to the cross above his head.

Pilate finally declared Jesus guilty of sedition. This title was probably meant to mock the Jews who had forced his hand in condemning Jesus. But in the sovereign purposes of God this truth about Jesus was displayed for all the world to see. It was in all the major languages so everyone could read it. Hebrew was the language of the Jews, Latin that of the Romans, and Greek the *lingua franca*.

The chief priests objected to this title placed on the cross above Jesus' head. They felt the barbs of Pilates mocking and asked for it to be altered. But Pilate was in no mood to listen to them any longer. *Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written'* (19:2). And indeed what he wrote was true. It was as if he was speaking words given by God. He was of course simply trying to calm his own troubled conscience after committing such a great injustice. 'It is no uncommon thing to see a wicked man, when he has given way to the devil and trampled on his own conscience in one direction, trying to make up for it by being firm in another' (Ryle).

The shame continued as Jesus was stripped of his clothes before being nailed to his cross. The four soldiers who performed this gruesome act proceeded to divide his clothes among themselves. The seamless tunic was probably an undergarment. His outer garments, maybe head gear, a coat, belt and shoes, they put into four piles and took a pile each. But the tunic was a problem. To divide it would have meant tearing it and so ruining the garment. They decided to draw straws.

We like to dispose of the clothes of loved ones who have died with a measure of dignity. No such dignity was accorded Jesus, the Son of God. The soldiers cast lots for his garments even before he had died.

John records these details not only to show the shame that Jesus suffered but to show that once again Scripture was being fulfilled. He quotes from Psalm 22 declaring *therefore the soldiers did these things* (19:24). Events were not moving out of divine control. On the contrary, all that was happening was in accordance with what God the Father, and Jesus himself had foretold. It was all according to the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23, 4:28).

## **Gain**

What was the determined purpose of God in allowing his only begotten Son to suffer such pain and shame as he was crucified? It was a clearly a display of the great wickedness and depravity of human hearts. It was also a display of the outworking of sin. Sin leads to suffering and eventually death. Jesus suffered the wrath of God upon sin as he bore our sin. By his stripes we are healed.

Do you know what you have gained through the pain and shame that Jesus suffered? He endured it all for you. Do you know what that sinner on the cross beside Jesus gained when he asked *Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom?*

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