

## JESUS' CRUCIFIXION

### Mark 15: 12-26

As we now move on to the heart of the Christian year – the horrors of the crucifixion on Good Friday and the joy of the resurrection on Easter Sunday – we start to contemplate the enormity of Jesus' sacrifice, the weight and magnitude of what he really did for us. Tonight we're going to look at that mainly from the perspective of Mark's account, so please open your Bibles at page [\*\*\*] so that you can follow this along with me.

In our opening verses Pilate is half heartedly lobbying for Jesus for the second and third times in verses 12 and 14:

“What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them. “Crucify him!” they shouted. “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” (Mark 15:12-14 NIV)

I don't think that Mark is putting a spin on Pilate's words here in an attempt to make the Jews responsible for the death of Jesus. I think Pilate genuinely believed Jesus was innocent and would have let him go if that had fitted with the political realities of his situation. Here Mark simply tells us that Pilate released Barabbas – a notorious terrorist and murderer – to the crowds, but earlier Mark tells us that Pilate tried to offer up Jesus for release instead of Barabbas, only to have the crowds call out that Pilate would be no friend of Caesar if he released Jesus and demanding the release of Barabbas. If as I believe, this was taking place in AD33, then Pilate would have been desperately afraid of being brought to the attention of Rome because he would have been under suspicion as an appointee of Aelius Sejanus who had been executed for leading a coup against Tiberius Caesar a couple of years previously. Almost all those appointed by Sejanus were subsequently removed from office and executed.

So Pilate bowed to expediency and condemned Jesus to death – look at verse 15:

“Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.” (Mark 15:15 NIV)

There is irony here. Pilate the governor is strangely governed. He loses control to forces he thought he controlled. Only Jesus, the apparently powerless prisoner, is free to do his Father's will and go to the execution he has voluntarily accepted.

I won't go into the technicalities of the various different kinds of flogging the Romans administered and in any event we don't know precisely which Jesus received. But whichever kind it was, a Roman flogging or scourging was a terrible punishment, especially the scourging usually administered as a prelude to crucifixion – the *verberatio*. The prisoner was stripped and bound to a post and beaten with a leather whip woven with bits of bone or metal. No maximum number of strokes was prescribed. The scourging lacerated and stripped the flesh, often exposing bones and entrails. One of its purposes was to shorten the duration of crucifixion, but scourging was so brutal that some prisoners died before reaching the cross. Women were exempted from either suffering or witnessing the *flagellum*, which, according to the historian Suetonius, even horrified the emperor Domitian.

But you know, neither Mark's gospel, nor indeed any of the other gospels, make great emphasis of the physical sufferings of Jesus. Jesus' greatest suffering was spiritual.

Either before or after Jesus had been flogged, quite possibly before, the Roman soldiers beat and mocked him – look at verses 16-20:

“The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spat on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.” (Mark 15:16-20 NIV)

Josephus’ writings on the Jewish wars tell us that this mocking and beating were a perfectly normal part of the preparation of a prisoner for crucifixion.

One of the most remarkable things about the whole process is that it perfectly fits Jesus’ prediction of his passion recorded in Mark’s gospel chapter 10 verses 32-34. Some of you may remember that I preached on that passage a couple of weeks ago on passion Sunday. Anyway, now bespattered with blood and ridicule, the figure of Jesus recalls Isaiah’s suffering servant in Isaiah chapter 50:

I offered my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;  
I hid not my face  
from mocking and spitting. (Isaiah 50:6)

Apparently Jesus was so weakened by the scourging and beating that he couldn’t carry his cross all the way to his place of execution – look at verse 21:

“A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.” (Mark 15:21 NIV)

It was quite usual for the condemned person to carry the crossbeam or *patibulum* of his cross to place of execution, the vertical upright section of the cross was generally left implanted in the ground as a warning to other criminals. In this case Jesus was already to physically weak to perform that task, indeed he may have required physical assistance even to walk to his place of execution – look at verse 22:

“They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull).” (Mark 15:22 NIV)

and note the use of the word “brought”.

In one sense Simon was the first true disciple, because he was the first person to take up the cross and follow Christ.

The Jews normally offered men who were to be crucified alcoholic drink and myrrh – which had pain killing properties – as a sign of mercy. Look at verse 23:

“Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.” (Mark 15:23 NIV)

Jesus did not take advantage of this offer, no doubt because he wished to maintain a clear head for the great task which was to come, or perhaps in fulfilment of the vow he made at the Last Supper not to drink wine again during his incarnation.

It was both Jewish and Roman custom to execute victims outside the city limits (Leviticus 24:14; Numbers 15:35–36; Hebrews 13:12). Jesus is brought to a place called Golgotha (Aramaic *gulgoltah*), meaning “skull.” Our modern term “Calvary” comes from the Latin *calvus*, meaning “scalp,” or “bald head.” Deriving from the original Aramaic. Look at verses 24-26:

“And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was the third hour when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.” (Mark 15:24-26 NIV)

We know from Roman legal texts that it was normal for the soldiers supervising an execution to claim the victim’s garments. We know from the other Gospels that the soldiers cast lots

for Jesus' seamless undergarment in fulfilment of the prophecy of Psalm 22:18 and Mark here tells us that the crucifixion commenced around 09.00 am. It was also normal for a sign stating a victim's crimes to be affixed to their cross and again it's ironic that the sign affixed to Jesus' cross tells us who he really was – "the King of the Jews" and indeed our Lord and King also.

Note the simplicity of the description of the crucifixion and the preceding flogging. Crucifixion was such a horrible form of death that only Christians have ever spoken of it in a positive manner. Josephus described it as "the most wretched of all ways of dying". It was particularly despised by the Jews as the reference in Deuteronomy 21:23 to anyone hung on a tree being under God's curse was deemed to cover crucifixion. Yet neither Mark nor any of the other Gospel writers make any attempt to appeal to our emotions in their descriptions. As I've said earlier, Jesus' greatest suffering was spiritual. On the cross, he who had no sin was made sin for us. He who was sinless took all of our sins, all the sins of the whole world, past present and future, onto his own shoulders – and suffered the full wrath of God that those sins deserved. For the first time in all eternity he was cut off from his Father and cried out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me". The cross of Christ is the focus of the Gospel and the crossroads of human history.

As Isaiah chapter 53 and verse 5 tells us on the cross Jesus was:

"... pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5 NIV)

But, you know, people say to me why did Jesus have to die on the cross – it's brutal and primitive – why couldn't God just forgive our sins if he loves us and wants to forgive us.

Of course, God is perfectly loving, and his loving nature wants to forgive us. But, he's also perfectly just and perfectly righteous and those aspects of his nature don't allow him just to forget about sin. Someone had to suffer the penalty that sin deserves and in his love God sent his son. God is true to all aspects of his nature all of the time. So, believing God could just forgive our sins is to fundamentally misunderstand the seriousness of sin and its consequences. Nothing reveals the gravity of our sin like the cross. For what ultimately sent Christ there was neither the greed of Judas, nor the envy of the Jewish priests, nor the vacillating cowardice of Pilate, but our own greed, envy, cowardice and all our other sins. Christ died in physical and spiritual agony on the cross for my sins and yours to bring us forgiveness and healing.

This Easter-time let's think and meditate on that and renew our commitment to Christ and resolve to take up our crosses and follow Christ each day of our lives from this evening on.