

Maundy Thursday

***"They Crucified Him?"***

It was not long after sharing a last supper with his disciples that He came to the garden of Gethsemane and there He prayed to His Father. **"Lord if it be possible that this cup pass from me, let it be so."** He sweat blood as He thought of the hours ahead. **"But not my will, but yours be done."**

They came for him not long afterwards. They came in the night, armed as if He were a criminal. A kiss to identify who He was from one who He had loved.

He stood before the religious leaders, and said nothing. He stood before Herod and said nothing. He stood before Pilate and only responded that Pilate's authority to deal with Him came from God, not Caesar. He stood before the people, those He had blessed, those He had healed, those He had given words of peace to and heard them cry for Him to be crucified. He stood there, alone with the weight of the world's sins on His shoulders. He stood there and was condemned to death.

He was scourged. Scourging was the legal preliminary to *every* Roman execution. The usual *instrument of choice* was a short whip brandishing several single or braided leather thongs of variable lengths. Iron balls and sharp pieces of sheep bone were tied at intervals. For His scourging Jesus, like all others marked for a cross, was stripped of His clothing...His hands were then tied to an upright post...His Body extended back...as far as it would go. His back...buttocks...and legs were flogged by two soldiers (one on either side)...The pounding of the iron balls on His Body caused deep contusions...As the flogging continued, the leather thongs inflicted deeper and deeper lacerations...cutting into the underlying skeletal muscles...*Stripe-like* lacerations appeared...producing quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh...and a substantial loss of blood.

The severity of the scourging was intended to weaken the victim to a state just short of collapse and death...a condition in which he might remain cognizant of the punishments that lie ahead. This presented a bloody...haunting...gruesome figure for the *Death March*.

***"The soldiers went up to Jesus...They put their faces to His... struck Him... spit on Him...They humiliated Him...They put a scarlet robe on Jesus...twisted some thorns into a mock crown...and then pushed it deep into His skull...They forced a wooden staff into His hands...a fake scepter...Our Lord's tormentors knelt before Him... 'Hail, O King of the Jews! Hail King of the Jews!'"***

He stood before the crowd, barely able to remain upright. Pilate asked them to choose-their King, the Son of God or a criminal. They chose the criminal. "What shall I do with this man?" he asked them. **"Crucify Him!"** They shouted. Pilate asked again. "What has he done?"

***"The crowd kept shouting, 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!...'"***

Pilate washed his hands of it all.

Jesus carried His Own Cross-bar from the scourging post to the site of His crucifixion...just outside of the city walls. This was the custom of the day...the condemned man, suffering disgrace heaped upon humiliation...tortured as one considered to be at least one rank below that of Roman humanity. Usually, the outstretched arms of the prisoner were tied to the patibulum.

Since the weight of the entire cross-structure weighed well over 300 lbs, only the cross-bar was carried by the condemned man. The patibulum weighing approximately 150 to 175 lbs. was placed across the nape of the criminal's neck, balanced along both shoulders. We know that our Lord, critically weakened from brutal torture, fell while attempting to balance the weight. The *balancing-act* was an all important part of this macabre walk.

The *Processional* to the site of the Skull was led by a full military compliment, steered through the crowds by a centurion of rank. A sole drummer followed the convicted man, beating out a haunting rhythm known as *The Parade March of Death*. A soldier of standing was next in line. He carried a sign that bore the condemned man's name...and the charge of his capital crime...In Jesus' case,

***"Pilate had prepared a notice to be fastened to the Cross. The titulus read: JESUS OF NAZARETH-THE KING OF THE JEWS. The sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, 'Do not write The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews."***

***"Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written.'"***

At the site of His execution, Jesus was offered a blend of wine and gall...After tasting this bitter elixir, He refused to drink. The soldiers ripped the robe from His Body...reopening the flogging wounds...then threw Him to the ground...His arms outstretched...still tied to the patibulum.

There He lay facing His Father in Heaven...without protest. The soldiers attending Him pulled His arms taut one at a time.

Tapered iron spikes approximately 5 to 7 inches long with a square shaft, 3/8 of an inch across, were carefully driven through His wrists, between the bones of His hands, so that the bones would not be fractured. So the spikes would hold His Body in place, large wooden washers were placed between the head of the spike and his flesh. His bones now produced a brace for the Body's dead weight...but at the same time manifesting, and maximizing pain...as the skin slowly tore.

After both arms were fixed to the crossbar, the patibulum was lifted up and set atop the stipe, the upright part of the cross.

Next Jesus' feet were nailed to the front of the standing post. To accomplish this His knees were rotated laterally, and then bent. A large spike was driven through both of his feet.

When the nailing was completed the titulus, bearing His name...describing the disposition of His crime, was attached just above His head. **"THIS IS JESUS- THE KING OF THE JEWS."** His cross was then lifted up so everyone could see Him.

Jesus was crucified, along with two convicted murderers, one on His right and one on His left. Many people stood watching that day. For some it was just another day's outing or entertainment. They brought something to eat and drink. After all, watching a crucifixion to its logical conclusion could be an all-day affair. Of course, there were those who felt that they *had to be there*...yet they could not bear to watch...and so they turned away. Many of the common folk, and the majority of the ruling class...derided Him...**"If you are the King of the Jews save yourself."**

His Mother and His Beloved Disciple...His Mother's sister...and Mary from Magdala stood near the Cross. We can only imagine their grief and sorrow...their pain, as they heard Jesus cry out. **"Mother behold Thy Son...John Behold thy Mother."** We can only imagine the horror they experienced as they watched Him die.

Roman torture was designed to make a victim's end slow and agonizing...as bloody a spectacle as possible. Blood flowed freely from Jesus' wounds...especially from the *Crown of Thorns* pushed deep into His skull. With each painful raising of His Body to exhale...at each gasp for air, His flesh tore again and again on the rough wooden stipe scraping against His back...Medical science confirms that the weight of Jesus' Body pulling down on His outstretched arms and shoulders...coupled with the continuous loss of blood brought on, and intensified muscle spasms and cramps...making respiration an excruciating and monumental task.

Yet in His pain and suffering, He asked His father to forgive them for what they were doing to Him.

And then finally it was over. **"Into thy hands, I commend my spirit."**

The soldiers raised spears to stab Jesus to make sure He was dead and pierced Him just under the heart. They broke the legs of those who hung with him so they could no longer lift themselves up to breath.

**"Behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world."**

Here was the One those who followed him had loved more than life itself. Here was the one who spoke of God's love for mankind, healed the sick, brought hope to many, and raised the dead. Here in the minds of those who had sent Him to this place, ended the saga of one who had called himself the Son of God.

*No man* made Jesus walk that walk...*No man* could put Jesus on a Cross...*No man* would have been able to bind Him to a Cross if the power to do so had not been given from above.

God demanded a *Perfect Sacrifice*...a *Spotless Lamb*...and thus it was that God's Own Son willingly ascended a *Cross of Death* that was to become the royal *Throne of Life*!

Some people object to having Jesus' crucifixion examined up-close and personal...It offends them. People want to ignore this event...especially if it confronts them with blood shed due to the loveless disobedience that was the real cause of Jesus' death.

If you miss the importance of Christ's sacrifice then you miss the entire Gospel. You miss what God wants you to experience. You miss the reason we call ourselves Christian. People protesting, resisting responsibility, people running away from the Cross is nothing new.

"If He is the Christ Whom God has chosen...if He is Israel's King...He should not be on a Cross...A Crucified Christ hurts people's self esteem...their self-image and pride!"

**Mankind condemned Him....**Pilate went outside and told the crowd, ***"I am bringing Him out to you to let you know that I find no guilt in Him...You may fulfill your Passover tradition. Choose one of to go free."***

*We the People* made a choice. Here is the proof, that left to our own decisions, mankind would not choose Him. They could have released Jesus. Their choice and our choice were clear. Right?

As Jesus hung on the Cross, as Jesus was slaughtered, a priest stood at the pinnacle of *The Temple*. The shofar sounded which announced the daily sacrifice. A knife slit the throat of the Passover Lamb, ***"It is finished!"***

***"Forgive them Father...They do not understand (know) what they are doing."***

"For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ Crucified...to the Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness."

The ruling priests and the scribes insisted on an empty Cross: ***"If He comes down from the Cross, we will believe in Him."***

They blasphemed God's very act of salvation and sealed their fate in the process. ***"Let God rescue Him...He said, 'I am the Son of God.'"***

***"He was despised and rejected by men...He was pierced for our transgressions...He was crushed for our iniquities...The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him...He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him...nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him."***

***"God, Give us the Glory,"*** man demands. ***"We have eaten from the tree of knowledge. We know Your mind."***

I tell you the very Truth, ***"Here is your glory!!*** (Pointing to the Crucifix) ***Here is the victory won...Here is your King...Here is the Son of the Living God!"***

***"For God so Loved the world that He gave His only Son...to be crucified!!!"***

We gather here this day under the Cross of Christ to confess with, St. Paul, and the whole Church on earth that ***"We preach Christ and Him crucified."*** That justification for our sins was achieved when *"True Innocence"* bled to death. That it is here, in His *Passion*, that Jesus forgives His executioners, preaches the Gospel to those bleeding next to Him and secures salvation for us all.

The time has come to confess the power of His Cross...***"Lord we justly deserve what You have received in our place...We acknowledge the price that You paid to redeem us. Remember us when You come into Your kingdom."***

Here, in the greatest tragedy in the history of the world, is the most elevated victory imaginable. In fact it is a victory beyond human comprehension because it is Ultimate Reality. May God's reality bring you peace a peace that will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus alone.

***Amen.***