

# THE CROSS OF JESUS.

## John 19v16-37

I can think of no more gruesome spectator sport than deliberately turning up to watch a public execution. From time to time we hear of such things. In some States in America the family of the victim is invited to sit and watch the guilty person put to death. If I were to witness something like this it would live with me for the rest of my life. But this morning I have the words of a song ringing around my head.

*“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?  
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?”*

Were you there when Jesus was executed? It seems a strange question doesn't it? Of course we were not there!

*Back then* there were many onlookers at the execution of Jesus. Let's take a quick look at some of them before coming back to the question of you and me. Who was there and what difference did it make to them?

### 1. Roman soldiers

**v16.** This was a probably a detachment of four soldiers with a centurion in overall charge. Their job was to escort the prisoner to the site of execution, (usually by the long route as a warning to the people) then nail him to the cross & stand guard until he was dead. They were responsible for getting the job done. These soldiers were hard men doing their duty. They had already subjected Jesus to a terrible beating (**v1**) and created entertainment out of the whole sordid business. (**v2,3**)

Overseeing a crucifixion was a long, hot, dangerous duty, so the soldiers made the best of it. They shared out the condemned man's belongings. (**v23f**) There were four shares of roughly equal value from each victim - headgear, outer shawl, belt & sandals. This left one item more valuable than the rest, the woven inner garment (cf. a man's suit). So they gambled for it.

Perhaps all this was just another day's work to these soldiers. They had done it before & would do it again. But Matthew's Gospel records an extra detail. The crucifixion of Jesus was accompanied by strange natural phenomena. The skies went dark for three hours. The ground shook. *“When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God.”* (Matthew 27v54)

### 2. Two Criminals

**v18.** Isaiah had prophesied that the Suffering Servant would be “numbered with the transgressors” (Is. 53v12) John's Gospel barely mentions these two men. They certainly did not want to be there.

Luke's Gospel (23v39-43) gives us more detail about these men & reports a brief conversation between one of these convicts and Jesus. The other one joins in the mockery of the soldiers, but his companion corrects him, & turns to Jesus. The sign above Jesus head may be mockery to some & provocative to others, but it points this man in the right direction. He demonstrates remarkable faith as he asks a favour of Jesus. (v42). He is acknowledging Jesus as King in Christ's moment of utmost humiliation. Surely he never looked less like a King than at this moment.

Revelation can come to you when you least expect it! That is the experience of many of us. This man died alongside Jesus with these words ringing in his ears. "*Today you will be with me in Paradise*".

### **3. The Chief Priests.**

Once again we need the other Gospels for a complete picture. e.g. Mark 15v31, 32. The chief priests taunted Jesus. This was very un-Jewish. They probably wouldn't have been there but for the sign above Jesus' head. **(v19-22.)** When Pilate refused to change it they felt it necessary to stand there undermining the sign, so that the travellers on that thoroughfare would not be misled.

When asked, "Were you there?" these men would be able to say, "Yes, we were there. We mocked him as he hung on the cross."

### **4. The Crowd.**

Passers by "*hurled insults*" at Jesus. (Mark 15v29,30) Some lingered out of morbid curiosity. Yet a large number were suddenly and unexpectedly stricken with remorse at the moment of Jesus' death. Luke tells us that many who witnessed his last breath "*beat their breasts and went away*". (Luke 23v48)

I wonder if there were others in that crowd, not mentioned in the Gospels. Did Simon of Cyrene linger after having been forced to carry the cross beam for Jesus? He may even have become a follower of Jesus because his sons, Alexander and Rufus are known the early church. I wonder if Barabbas was there. If so, then he saw Jesus dying in his place. That was his perspective on the cross.

In Zeffirelli's 'Jesus of Nazareth' he has Nicodemus looking on solemnly and reciting Isaiah 53.v3-6 "*He 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. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*"

God doesn't see anonymous faceless crowds. He looks and sees each person. Each one is responsible for their attitude and response to Jesus.

## 5. Women.

**v25-27.** Women were there. Mary, the mother of Jesus & Mary Magdalene were there, among others. They would have been full of anguish, of questions; bewildered and horrified. But they were there. Women have often been the most loyal disciples - devoted to Jesus. Most of the men had run away, afraid for their lives.

But John was there.

## 6. John

John was closer than anyone else to Jesus. He was also Jesus' cousin, because his mother was Salome, Mary's sister. This may explain why he is entrusted with Jesus' mother at the cross. The fact that John was there, at the cross, makes him a key eye witness to the event. As a result he records a specific detail which has come to be highly significant. **v31-37.** When the soldier's spear was plunged up into Jesus' side there was a flow of blood and water. John simply recorded what he saw. Would he have known that water was a sign that the heart muscle had been ruptured by the spear? Some have suggested that Jesus did not really die on the cross. He seemed to be dead and later revived and escaped from the tomb. No. He was dead. His heart was pierced by the soldier's spear. John was there when they put Jesus to death.

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All who were present would have heard Jesus last words word, "It is finished!" **(v30)** This is one word in the original Greek. '*Tetelesti*' does not mean that something is over, but that something is "rounded off to perfection"; "completed". This is not a cry of despair but of consummation. Christ's saving work on the cross is complete. All that had been prophesied, all that the Father had sent Him to do, had been accomplished. (John 17.4) The other Gospels speak of Jesus shouting in a loud voice. This is a cry of triumph.

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The soldiers, the two criminals, the chief priests, the crowd, the women, John: all these people were, literally, there. But in what sense can anyone seriously ask you the question "Were you there?"

Let me answer this in a roundabout way. Most people have heard of the famous artist Rembrandt. One of his engravings is called '*Three Crosses*'. The centre cross dominates & is encircled by onlookers. But in the background, on the edge & almost hidden in the shadows is a face familiar to 17th century art lovers. It is Rembrandt himself. I say "*familiar*" because Rembrandt painted a long series of self portraits; about 100 have survived. They follow every stage of his life & career. Most art critics agree that the reason for this was not so much vanity as honest self appraisal. A searching self-examination. One writer put it like this:

*“In some of the portraits he appears with a confident air in fancy dress, acting the part of a swaggering young man; a romantic, or a man of substance and responsibility. But later in his life he reveals increasingly his disillusionment, suffering, doubts and need for reassurance. Taken together, the self-portraits are the finest, broadest, and most moving visual autobiography ever created.”*

For Rembrandt this whole question of being “*there*” at the cross was clearly of some significance. So why did he put himself in the scene at the cross? Did he regard this as a vital part of any serious analysis of his life? Facing Jesus on the cross. Taking in the sight of the Saviour. What is his response to Jesus going to be? What does it all mean?

Few people have the courage to carry out a searching examination of their life as Rembrandt did. Fewer still face up to the cross and its meaning as part of that self appraisal. To review their life in the shadow of the cross. What about you?

Mel Gibson is a world famous movie star, but in his film “the Passion of the Christ” he only makes the briefest of appearances. When Jesus is nailed to the cross a hand is shown bringing the hammer down. That hand is Gibson’s. When asked why he chose to do this he said that it was his sin that put Jesus on that cross. Mel Gibson has taken time to look at himself in the light of the cross, and this is his conclusion. It was my sin that put him there. He died because of me. He died for me. He died in my place.

Many of us here this morning have taken the time to look at ourselves in the light of the cross. But if you have not, why not take the opportunity now? Ask yourself what this all means. How do you feel about Jesus? Who do you identify with in the shadow of the cross. What do you make of Jesus?

In another of Rembrandt’s paintings, ‘*The Descent from the Cross*’ the lifeless body of Jesus is gently taken down from the cross. One of those helping, standing on a ladder and holding the lifeless arm of Jesus is a figure who, (once more) bears Rembrandt’s features. Here the artist is not at a distance, in the shadows. He is active and involved and committed.

Is that your response today? Here and now, at the cross of Jesus. Not standing with the mockers. No running away. No impartial observation. This is my Saviour. This is my Lord. This is my King. This is my Friend. This is the One who deserves my worship and adoration - my life.

*“When I survey the wondrous cross,  
On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*“Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were an offering far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”*

In the Choco jungle of Columbia. Primitive animist tribe, the *Embera*. Little contact with the outside world. Live in huts on stilts. An anthropologist called Richard Dugdale, who had researched in that area later returned to share Jesus with the tribe. He toiled for a long time without results. Then at Easter he arranged a Passion Play. A teenager called Machuko played Jesus. At one point he was strapped on a cross. He stayed up there for some considerable time giving the village plenty of time to look & ask questions. But while he was on the cross Machuko understood. He realised that Jesus had died on the cross for him. That God loved him & that Jesus had taken his punishment, had died in his place. He gave his life to Christ.

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In the excavations of the Roman Fortress of Antonia in Jerusalem a pavement dating back to this time has been preserved, bearing the marks of the so called “Game of the Kings”. On one of our visits to Israel Liz and I gleaned some background on this game from a Jewish guide in Jerusalem. (I have not been able to verify this from any other source) Apparently the game was very popular with the army but was causing serious concern. It was a first century equivalent of Russian roulette, but the board looked like snakes & ladders. The soldier who won got to be king for a day, with the others satisfying his every whim – and then they killed him! So concerned were the authorities they tried to ban it. It was depleting their army. But it persisted. So they hit on a bright idea - an example of killing two birds with one stone. Soldiers could play the game on two conditions (i) that a condemned prisoner replaced the soldier, and (ii) that the soldiers playing the game made up the crucifixion party. Their edict solved the problem of losing good soldiers, as well as their difficulty over the unpopular role of crucifixion duty. If this background to the Game of Kings is true then Jesus died in the place of one of the soldiers on duty at the cross.

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*Back then* there were many onlookers at the execution of Jesus. Let's take a quick look at some of them before coming back to the question of you and me.

### 1. The Soldiers.

**v16.** This was a probably a detachment of four soldiers for each execution, with a centurion in overall charge. They were responsible for getting the job done.

They had already subjected Jesus to a terrible beating. **(See v1)** The Romans had three levels of flogging: the *fustigatio*, a moderate beating for lesser offences, the *flogellatio*, a brutal flogging for more serious crimes, & the *verberatio*, the most terrible of all, which preceded crucifixion. Prisoners sometimes did not survive this. These soldiers were hard men doing their duty.

**v2,3.** They even managed to create entertainment out of the whole sordid business. In the excavations of the Fortress of Antonia in Jerusalem a pavement dating back to this time has been preserved, bearing the marks of the so called “Game of the Kings”. On one of our visits to Israel Liz and I gleaned some background on this Game of the King gleaned from a Jewish guide in Jerusalem. (I have not been able to verify this from any other source) Apparently the game was very popular with the army but was causing serious concern. It was a first century equivalent of Russian roulette. The winning soldier got to be king for a day – and then was put to death! So concerned were the authorities they tried to ban it. But it persisted. So they hit on a bright idea - an example of killing two birds with one stone. Soldiers could play the game on two conditions (i) that a condemned prisoner replaced the soldier, and (ii) that the soldiers playing the game made up the crucifixion party. Their edict solved the problem of losing good soldiers, as well as their difficulty over the unpopular role of crucifixion duty. If this background to the Game of Kings is true then Jesus died in the place of one of the soldiers on duty at the cross.

**v16,17.** They escorted the prisoner to the site of execution, usually by a circuitous route as a warning to the people. Then they nailed him to the cross, hauled him up & then stood guard until he was dead. Mel Gibson is a world famous movie star, but in his film “the Passion of the Christ” he only makes the briefest of appearances. When Jesus is nailed to the cross a hand is shown bringing the hammer down. That hand is Gibson's. When asked why he chose to do this he said that he played his part in putting Jesus on that cross.

**v23,24.** Overseeing a crucifixion was a long, hot & dangerous duty. So the soldiers made the best of it. They shared out the condemned man's belongings. There were four shares of roughly equal value from each victim - headgear, outer shawl, belt & sandals. This left one item more valuable than the rest, the woven inner garment (cf. a man's suit). So they gambled for it.

**28,29:** It is Luke who tells us that it was soldier who offered Jesus a vinegar soaked sponge when Jesus said "I am thirsty" It is not surprising that he was thirsty; the agony of crucifixion and the heat of the day would make him so. The soldier would not have picked up something far more significant in Jesus' words. At the last Supper Jesus had said "*the cup which my Father has given me, am I not to drink it*" (Jn.18.11) This was the cup of God's wrath on sin. In Gethsemane he agonized, asking if it were possible that he might by-pass drinking from this terrible cup. But now, on the cross, He is eager to drink it to the dregs. Appropriately the drink the soldier offered was a bitter drink. This was a bitter cup Jesus was drinking.

**v31-37.** If the prisoner lingered too long the soldiers finished him off. This results in an important piece of visual evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. When the spear was plunged up into Jesus' side there was a flow of blood and water. John was an eyewitness to this and simply recorded what he saw. Would he have known that water was a sign that the heart muscle had been ruptured by the spear? Some have suggested that Jesus did not really die on the cross. He seemed to be dead and later revived and escaped from the tomb. No. He was dead. His heart was pierced by the soldier's spear.

## 2. Two Criminals

**v18.** John's Gospel barely mentions these two men. For more detail we have to turn to Luke Gospel. (23v39-43) These men certainly did not want to be there. They were dying alongside Jesus & suffering the terrible agony of crucifixion. Luke uses the word for "*criminals*" or "*evil-doers*" but Matthew and Mark call them *lestai*, probably "*guerrilla fighters*", a word John applies to the terrorist leader Barabbas. Perhaps they were fighters in his band, condemned to die with Barabbas himself. Isaiah had prophesied that the Suffering Servant would be "numbered with the transgressors" (Is. 53v12)

## 3. The Crowd.

We need the other Gospels for a complete picture. e.g. Mark 15v29-39. **The chief priests** taunted Jesus. This was very un Jewish. Alfred Edersheim ('The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah') suggests that the priest would not have been there but for the sign above Jesus' head. '*This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.*' When Pilate refused to change it they felt it necessary to stand their undermining the sign, so that the many passers-by on that thoroughfare would not be misled. They were effective in this.

**Passers-by** "*hurled insults*" and tormenting comments at Jesus. Some lingered out of morbid curiosity. Yet a large number of these onlookers were suddenly and unexpectedly stricken with remorse at the moment of Jesus' death. Luke tells us: "*they beat their breasts and went away*". God doesn't see anonymous faceless crowds. He looks and sees each person. Each one is responsible for their attitude and response to Jesus.

I wonder if there were others in that crowd, not mentioned in the Gospels. Did **Simon of Cyrene** linger, after having been forced to carry the cross beam for Jesus? He may even have become a follower of Jesus because his sons, Alexander

and Rufus are known the early church. I wonder if **Barabbas** was there. If so, then he saw Jesus dying in his place. That was his perspective on the cross.

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#### 4. Friends.

**v25-27. Women** were there. In fact it was almost a family gathering. Mary, the mother of Jesus. And another Mary, married to someone called Clopas, who may have been the brother of Joseph (Mary's husband). The sister of Jesus mother (called Salome according to Mark). Then there was Mary Magdalene. They would have been full of anguish, of questions; bewildered and horrified. But they were there. Women have often been the most loyal disciples - devoted to Jesus.

Most of the men had run away, afraid for their lives. But **John** was there. The Gospel portrayal of John is curious. He is a mixture of the volatile and the reflective, capable of sudden anger ("A son of thunder") and yet of leaning intimately on Jesus at the Last Supper. He was close to Jesus, perhaps closer than anyone else, *"the disciple whom Jesus loved"*. He was also Jesus' cousin, because his mother was Salome, Mary's sister. This may explain why he is entrusted with Jesus' mother at the cross.

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