

## Sermon: Passion Sunday 2009

Today, the fifth Sunday in Lent, is traditionally named Passion Sunday because it begins the holiest part of the Church's year – the days leading up to the Crucifixion of Our Lord. We get the word *passion* from the Latin for *suffering*. As it says in the Creed: *Crucifixus etiam pro nobis: sub Pontio Pilato passus, et sepultus est. He was crucified also for us: under Pontius Pilate, he suffered and was buried.* Let us look then at the sufferings of Christ; at his Passion. Imagine, we are walking the way of the Cross with him.

Crucifixion was a punishment dished out by the Romans, particularly to political rebels. There were plenty of these in Galilee in New Testament times – freedom fighters or terrorists, according to your point of view. Even among the disciples there was one, Simon the Zealot. Death by crucifixion took a long time, sometimes days. They didn't always nail you up. Binding with cords was enough. For you died of asphyxiation or heart failure through the constant effort to raise your chest for a breath. The soldiers would often administer mercy by coming round to break the victim's legs to cut short his suffering. We read in the Gospel how they came to break Jesus' legs but found him to be dead already. The so called *vinegar* which they brought the crucified to drink contained a drug to dull the pain.

*And it was the third hour, and they crucified him...*

Part of the punishment was a ritual flogging, called *scourging*. **The only people exempted from scourging were women and Roman senators. The scourge was a short whip called a *flagrum* or *flagellum* to which were attached several braided leather thongs of variable lengths. Knots were tied in the ends of each thong, and sheep bone or iron balls were inserted into the knots at the end of each thong, designed to open wounds already made. Many convicts did not survive the scourging.**

Before all this, he was subjected to a show trial. He was arrested in the middle of the night, taken illegally and arraigned before Herod and Pontius Pilate.

*And they stripped him and put upon him a scarlet robe. And when they had plaited a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head and a reed in his right hand and they bowed before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"*

Jesus was also brought before the High Priest and accused of blasphemy. Think about this for a moment. It is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, accused of blasphemy. Of course, it is the accusation which is the blasphemy. Likewise, anyone crucified was accounted cursed. And here in Jesus we have the Blessed One cursed. These are the scandalous ironies of his deeper suffering. Everyone turned on him. Here is Christ the Word. And in these ironies the very language is turned against him.

Remember how Jesus' last week had begun. *And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way...and cried saying, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!"*

And five days later the same crowd screamed, *Crucify! Crucify! Let him be crucified!*

His suffering was intensified by the treachery and cowardice of his disciples, these men who had been close to him, day and night, for three years: *And they all forsook him and fled.*

He was betrayed in the garden by his friend Judas Iscariot: *...he goeth straightway to him and saith, "Master! Master!" and kissed him. And Jesus said unto him, "Judas, betrayest thou the Son of Man with a kiss?"*

There was no end to Our Lord's desolation. Recall that blissful high day among the cedars and the olive groves in Caesarea Philippi when Simon Peter had confessed to him: *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.* And Jesus conferred on him there the greatest honour and trust: *Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.* And now what? Here is Peter the rock, warming himself by the fire and identified as a follower of Jesus by a serving maid. *But he began to curse and swear saying, "I know not this man of whom ye speak!"* Some rock!

In these next two weeks, we enter the dark centre of Our Lord's Passion. But when we look back at his life as portrayed in the gospels, we wonder, did he ever have any respite? We must put aside the sentimental image of Jesus in his long white robe strolling serenely around Galilee and performing gentle acts of kindness; issuing a cosy teaching of sweetness and light. I think he never had any peace. As he said, *The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*

From the start he was persecuted, escaping from Herod into Egypt. He was beyond his Mother's understanding when he was only twelve. She reproves him: *Why hast thou thus dealt with us?* He endures forty days and nights without food in the desert, besieged by evil in that nightmare vision of the pinnacle of the temple, and tempted to suicide: *If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down...*

But all this rejection, all this betrayal, was only the outward sign of an inward desolation, infinite in its cruelty – because it was inflicted on the heart of the Son of God. *He came unto his own, and his own received him not...They laughed him to scorn...he was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*

Here is the everlasting God in human form, God who made the heavens and the earth and all that therein is, rejected, cursed, tortured and crucified, put to death by the creatures to whom he had given life. God murdered by his own creation. There is much glib ecclesiastical talk about human suffering. But what can compare with the sufferings of God? We do not even approach

the depths of this suffering, of the sheer grandeur of God's self-sacrifice until we realize that God knew he would come to the Cross on Calvary - even before he laid the foundations of the earth.

And yet nowhere in the gospels do we find even a moment of self-pity in Jesus. He does not sulk. There is none of the exquisitely refined and narcissistic despair we find in our modern prophets such as Samuel Beckett. Jesus' passion was limitless, but he always turned it outwards.

*Suffer the little children to come unto me...* To the adulterous woman he saved from stoning: *neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more.* When his friend Lazarus died, we are told his response in the shortest verse in the whole Bible: *Jesus wept.* And over the city of his forefather David: *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings – but ye would not.*

And, as he is being led away to be crucified, he accidentally comes across Peter who has just disowned him. And, instead of self-pity, his heart goes out to Peter: *And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered...* Peter would never forget that look.

Let us keep this Holy season. Let us follow Christ's Passion and the way of the Cross

The poet C.H. Sisson comes close to the heart of Our Lord's Passion – which is the Passion of God. Sisson says:

*What he did on the Cross was no more than others have done for less reason: And the resurrection you could take for granted.*

*What is astonishing is that he came here at all: Where no one ever came voluntarily before.*