

The Crucifixion (Mark 15:1-47)

The religious trial, held during the night in front of the Sanhedrin, is now over, but Jesus' ordeal is not. It is now early the following morning and the civil trial, before the Roman authorities, is about to begin.

I. JESUS FACES PILATE

[1] And as soon as it was morning the chief priests, with the elders and scribes, and the whole council held a consultation; and they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him to Pilate.

[2] And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so."

[3] And the chief priests accused him of many things.

[4] And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you."

[5] But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate wondered.

First thing in the morning, the chief priests together with the elders and scribes, in short the whole Sanhedrin, had their plan ready. They had Jesus bound and took him away and handed him over to Pilate, who, in turn, will hand him over to crucifixion and death.

A new trial began immediately before Pilate, this time according to Roman law and under Roman judicial authority.

A. Pontius Pilate - Historical Background

Pontius Pilate was the Roman procurator (governor) of Judea. He normally resided in Caesarea on the coast but was stationed in

Jerusalem for the Passover feast to maintain order among the large crowds.

According to historians, Pilate was much worse than he appears in the Gospels. He was cruel, arbitrary and disdainful towards the Jews.

- The fifth Roman governor of Judea, he held office from 26 to 36 A.D.
- Jesus was crucified in 30 A.D.

B. The Charge against Jesus

The Sanhedrin had to decide what charge to bring against Jesus before Pilate.

Obviously a religious charge such as blasphemy would be meaningless to the Roman procurator, so some other charge – a political one - had to be found.

Jesus had accepted the title “Messiah,” and its secular equivalent was “King of the Jews.” From Mark’s brief account we can assume that the accusation brought against Jesus was that he claimed to be “King of the Jews.”

This title would make a political agitator out of Jesus and a “seducer of the people.” It would present a political threat to the procurator and the emperor and would be immediately crushed.

This was an effective charge since almost every messianic movement during the Roman occupation of Palestine was inevitably suspected of preparing a national uprising against the Romans.

C. Pilate's Interrogation of Jesus

Since the Jews did not have the authority to pronounce or carry out a formal death sentence, they brought him to Pilate with the charge that he claimed to be King of the Jews.

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks Jesus. **And he answered him, "You have said so."**

Jesus' answer is enigmatic: **"You have said so"** (Mk 15:2). It is neither an outright affirmation nor a denial.

The meaning is this: they are your words not mine; it is true that I am a King, but not in the sense you intend: I accept the title, but not in your sense; you do not understand, but my accusers do.

Jesus has his own understanding of that kingship but withholds the out-and-out admission which would allow Pilate to condemn him as a political threat.

The chief priests bring further accusations, and Pilate urges Jesus to answer them. Pilate, like any judge, would have preferred at least some defense, but Jesus is silent in fulfillment of Isaiah 53:7

"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth."

Pilate's wonder at Jesus' refusal to defend himself in a life-or-death situation takes on the nature of a religious awe or reverence. He probably suspects the deeply religious nature of the man before him, and the hidden agenda on the part of the chief priests, which goes far beyond their original accusation.

Pilate initially tries to defend Jesus, but he finally gives up in the face of the implacable hostility of the Jews, who remain unyielding in their desire for the death of Jesus.

- They will stir up the crowd and Pilate against Jesus, the Righteous One.

The core of the conflict is Jesus' kingship. He is king but they do not understand the meaning of his kingship, which is one of love, not power.

Every human being is involved in the trial, myself included.

D. Prayer

O Jesus, help me to understand the power of your word and of your silence. Both eloquently proclaim that you are king.

II. PILATE DELIVERS JESUS TO BE CRUCIFIED (MK 15:6-15)

[6] Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked.

[7] And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas.

[8] And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he was wont to do for them.

[9] And he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?"

[10] For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.

[11] But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead.

[12] And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?"

[13] And they cried out again, "Crucify him."

[14] And Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him."

[15] So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

A. Barabbas

Mark tells us that on Passover Pilate customarily pardoned **one prisoner** upon request of the people. This seems to have been a common practice in the Greek and Roman world at the time.

A man called Barabbas was then in prison charged with a serious enough offense to be held until Pilate could judge him. Barabbas was in custody along with some rebels who had committed murder during a rebellion.

Barabbas is an Aramaic name that literally means “son of Abba” or “son of the Father.” Aramaic speaking Christians surely detected the tragic irony: the guilty Barabbas is exchanged for Jesus, the truly innocent Son of the Father.

B. Jesus or Barabbas

When it comes to who should be released, Jesus or Barabbas, Pilate's knows that Jesus is innocent and tries to have him released: ***"Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?"***

Addressing the crowd, Pilate expected the crowd to choose Jesus. But the chief priests quickly turn the crowd against Jesus and call for the release of Barabbas.

- Evildoers always choose one of their own!

C. Crucify him!

Pilate soon finds himself facing a mass of screaming people, among which organized groups are loudly clamoring: ***"Crucify him."*** The situation had suddenly changed.

As a Roman magistrate, Pilate alone had the authority to execute Jesus, since the Jewish leaders were powerless to enforce the death penalty without him.

Pilate was not convinced of Jesus' guilt throughout the trial, and he was determined to free him. Nevertheless, he lacked the integrity to release Jesus.

Instead, fearing the uncontrollable violence of the mob, he wilts before them and, in helplessness and cowardice, hands Jesus over to be scourged and crucified.

D. The Scourging

“Having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.”

According to Roman practice, every crucifixion was preceded by a scourging that was so devastating and degrading it was applied only to slaves or non-Romans.

Already before the actual execution, therefore, Jesus had to submit to a punishment so gruesome that it could cause his instant death.

Once sentence was passed the victim was stripped naked, bound to a post or pillar, and lashed until the flesh hung in shreds. The instrument was a whip of rawhide, braided with pieces of bone or metal.

The Jewish historian Josephus relates that as a commander in Galilee he himself had once ordered the scourging of some of his fellow Jews, a scourging so lacerating that their entrails were laid bare.

Jesus was scourged by Roman soldiers. There was no limit to the number of strokes.

In the words of St. Josemaria Escriva:

Bound to the pillar. / Covered with wounds. / The blows of the lash sound upon his torn flesh, / upon his undefiled flesh, / which suffers for your sinful

flesh. / More blows. / More fury. Still more . . . It is the last extreme of human cruelty.

Finally exhausted, they untied Jesus. / The body of Christ yields to pain and falls limp, broken and half dead (St. Josemaria Escriva, Holy Rosary, Second Sorrowful Mystery).

III. THE MOCKING OF THE KING (15:16-21)

[16] And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the praetorium); and they called together the whole battalion.

[17] And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on him.

[18] And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

[19] And they struck his head with a reed, and spat upon him, and they knelt down in homage to him.

[20] And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him

A. Overview

The scourging is followed by a parody of a royal coronation and homage to a king. The soldiers who have accompanied Pilate to the Passover festival to maintain order now gather for an entertainment break.

The mockery of a convict was quite common. The soldiers often amused themselves by insulting the prisoners in their custody and playing cruel jokes on them.

In Jesus' case the entire cohort of 600 soldiers is said to have taken part.

The spectacle consists of two phases, each with three actions.

B. Parody of a Royal Coronation

- 1) The soldiers strip Jesus of his garments and put a purple cloak on him. Purple alludes to kingship.
- 2) On his head they put a crown of thorns taken from the fire wood or from the thickets growing in the area.
- 3) They put a reed in his hand.

A cloak, a crown and a scepter are the insignia of kingship.

C. Parody of Homage to a King

- 1) They kneel before him and sarcastically laugh: "Hail, King of the Jews.
- 2) They spit upon him.
- 3) They take the reed from his hand and beat the crown of thorns into his head.

It is an outrageous and vile caricature of the homage due to a king. The paradox is that their parody proclaims and demonstrates the reality. They affirm what they deny.

Once again the irony of the situation is striking. According to his opponents the paradox lies in the fact that Jesus claims to be a king while he is not. In reality, however, Jesus is king and they unknowingly confirm it.

- His kingdom is not of this world.

IV. THE CRUCIFIXION (MK 15:21-32)

[21] And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyre'ne, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.

[22] And they brought him to the place called Gol'gotha (which means the place of a skull).

[23] And they offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it.

[24] And they crucified him, and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take.

[25] And it was the third hour, when they crucified him.

[26] And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews."

[27] And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.

[29] And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days,

[30] save yourself, and come down from the cross!"

[31] So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself.

[32] Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

A. Simon of Cyrene

This scene now turns to the way of the cross. In Roman crucifixions, the condemned usually was forced to carry the cross-beam to the place where the upright beam was already standing.

"Jesus is exhausted. His footsteps become more and more unsteady, and the soldiers are in a hurry to be finished." Jesus' weakened condition leads the soldiers to seek help for him.

They choose **Simon of Cyrene** the father of **Alexander and Rufus**, who are well-known to Mark's community, and force him to carry the cross (cross-beam).

Years later, Simon's sons, Christians by then, will be known and held in high regard among their brothers in the faith. And it all started with this unexpected meeting with the Cross.

"I went to those who were not looking for me; I was found by those who sought me not" (Is 65:1)

It seems reasonable to imagine that Simon first felt victimized at being forced to carry the cross. But contact with the Holy Cross and the sight of the suffering and death of Jesus, must have touched his heart; and the Cyrenean, who was at first indifferent, left Calvary a faithful disciple of Christ. Jesus had amply rewarded him.

B. Golgotha

Just outside the city gates of Jerusalem there was a skull shaped rock formation called **Golgotha**, an Aramaic word which means **skull**. The popular term "Calvary" comes from the Latin word for skull in the Vulgate translation. Golgotha was the site of the crucifixion.

C. Jesus Bears the Full Weight of Sin

And they offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it.

Wine mixed with myrrh was a narcotic pain killer. The Jews used to offer dying criminals wine mixed with myrrh or incense to drug them and thus alleviate their suffering.

Jesus refuses it, choosing instead to bear the full weight of suffering for man's sin. He will drain the cup of God's wrath to the very dregs.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24).

D. The Crucifixion

“And they crucified him . . .”

On a Friday morning around nine o'clock, nearly 2000 years ago (about April 7, 30 A.D.), Jesus of Nazareth was executed as a political criminal on a hill near the city of Jerusalem.

The method of execution was crucifixion.

Crucifixion, a form of Roman execution, was torturous, degrading, and reserved for the most heinous criminals. It was also the most painful method of execution.

The victims' feet were nailed to the upright beam and their wrists to wooden cross-beam. Death came slowly from a combination of blood loss and asphyxiation, a process that could be hastened by breaking the legs of the criminals.

Christian tradition sees in Jesus' physical death on the tree (the cross) a reflection of Adam's spiritual death at the tree of good and evil.

Whereas Adam sin brought death to the entire human family, Jesus' death rescues man from sin and gives him new life in the family of God.

E. They Divided His Garments

After Jesus was nailed to the cross, the soldiers shared his clothing among themselves. The members of an execution squad had the unwritten right to take whatever a victim of an execution wore on

his body. In Jesus' case is involved the outer and undergarments, the girdle and sandals.

The collection of spoils by the execution squad recalls the messianic prophecy of Psalm 22: 18.

They divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots.

F. The Third Hour

And it was the third hour, when they crucified him.

Mark notes that Jesus was crucified at 9:00 o'clock in the morning (literally the third hour).

The day was divided into four night time "watches" and several day time "hours" (6:00 AM to 6:00 PM). (The "third" hour is 9:00 AM, the "sixth" hour is noon, and the "ninth" hour is 3:00 PM).

"The events of the passion occur in precise three hour intervals reminding the reader that nothing is happening by mere chance; all is taking place by the 'set plan and foreknowledge of God' (see Acts 2:23)."

G. More Mockery and Insults

While Jesus hung on the cross he was mocked and taunted by the passersby and by the bystanders who turned up at the execution site.

"And those who passed by derided him:" Literally "they were blaspheming him." By slandering and shaking their heads at Jesus the angry crowd unwittingly fulfills the messianic prophecy from Psalm 22:7.

The virulence and malice of the insults hurled at Jesus as he hangs helpless and in agony on the cross are astounding. They are more piercing than the nails in his hands and feet.

They come from three sources:

- The passers-by;
- The chief priests and the scribes, and
- The two revolutionaries crucified on either side of Jesus.

V. THE DEATH OF JESUS (MK 15:33-41)

[33] And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

[34] And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "E'lo-i, E'lo-i, la'ma sabach-tha'ni?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

[35] And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Eli'jah."

[36] And one ran and, filling a sponge full of vinegar, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Eli'jah will come to take him down."

[37] And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last.

[38] And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

[39] And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

[40] There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Mag'dalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salo'me,

[41] who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

A. A Dreadful Darkness

Mark tells us that darkness covered “the whole land” for three hours from noon until 3:00 PM. The Old Testament associates such dreadful darkness with divine judgment on sin (Ex 10:21-23; Is. 13:10-11; Amos 8:9).

- It is also a cosmic sign of the end of an era or a world. Amos prophesied:

On that day . . . I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight . . . I will make it like the mourning for an only son (Amos 8:9-10).

- Such darkness was also a sign of the death of a king (Ez 32:7) or the destruction of a city (Is 13:10; 34:4).

In the original Passover, darkness falling over “the whole land” was the plague indicating God’s wrath upon Egypt for not heeding the message of Moses (Ex 10: 21-23). Judea has become Egypt!

B. It is Finished

At 3:00 o’clock Jesus prayerfully utters in a loud voice the first words of Psalm 22: ***“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”*** Although Mark does not tell us, Jesus probably prayed the whole psalm quietly or, at least, interiorly.

Psalm 22 is a lament of the just man that ends in an expression of confidence in God for the outcome.

This prayerful cry is misunderstood by some of the bystanders as a call to Elijah: “Listen, he’s calling on Elijah.” An attempt is then made to give Jesus vinegar to drink.

The vinegar was offered as a gesture of refreshment for thirst, to keep Jesus alive a little longer, just to see if Elijah would come. It

was also fulfillment of Psalm 69:21, “For my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” Jesus, however, utters a loud cry and dies.

The fact that Jesus died with fragments of the 22nd Psalm on his lips would suggest that his life did not end in despair but, despite the endless agony, in an unfathomable trust in God: “You are my God – in spite of everything.”

Jesus last cry is a cry of victory over all the powers of evil, a cry of consummation (which John 19:30 interprets with the words “It is finished”).

At once two important signs take place.

C. The Sanctuary Curtain is Torn

The veil in the Jerusalem temple symbolized God’s inaccessibility to sinners (Heb 9:8).

At Jesus’ death, the temple veil is ripped from top to bottom, signaling the end of the temple as God’s place of revelation and worship. It is a prophetic action of the destruction of the temple brought about by the death of Jesus.

In the last analysis, however, it is not Jesus who vindictively destroys the temple but the temple establishment itself who does so by executing Jesus.

D. The Centurion’s Confession of Faith

Secondly, the Centurion, representative of Gentile Rome, is the first in the Gospel to make the Christian confession of faith that Jesus is the **Son of God**. Not even Peter did that.

What brings the Centurion to confess the true identity of Jesus is not the cosmic signs he sees, *but how Jesus died*. It is Jesus’

heroic endurance of death, not his miraculous escape from it that proves the very issue for which he was condemned.

E. The Women

The primary witnesses of the saving events of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection are not the Twelve, not even the three chosen men, but a handful of faithful women.

REFLECTION / MEDITATION

The Reproaches of the Good Friday Liturgy

***My people, what have I done to you
How have I offended you? Answer me!***

*I led you out of Egypt,
from slavery to freedom,
but you led your Savior to the cross.*

***My people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me!***

*For forty years I led you
safely through the desert.*

*I fed you with manna from heaven,
and brought you to a land of plenty;
but you led your Savior to the cross.*

What more could I have done for you?

*I planted you as my fairest vine,
but you yielded only bitterness:
when I was thirsty you gave me vinegar to drink,
and you pierced your Savior with a lance.*

*For your sake I scourged your captors
and their firstborn sons,
but you brought your scourges down on me.*

***My people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me!***

*I led you from slavery to freedom
and drowned your captors in the sea,
but you handed me over to your high priests.*

*I opened the sea before you,
but you opened my side with a spear.*

*I led you on your way in a pillar of cloud,
but you led me to Pilate's court.*

***My people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me!***

*I bore you up with manna in the desert,
but you struck me down and scourged me.*

*I gave you saving water from the rock,
but you gave me gall and vinegar to drink.*

*For you I struck down the kings of Canaan.
but you struck my head with a reed.*

***My people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me!***

*I gave you a royal scepter,
but you gave me a crown of thorns.*

*I raised you to the height of majesty,
but you have raised me high on a cross.*

*My people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me!*

VI. THE BURIAL OF JESUS (MK 15:42-47)

[42] And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath,

[43] Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.

[44] And Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead.

[45] And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph.

[46] And he bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.

[47] Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid.

F. Joseph of Arimathea

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. His courage as a disciple of Jesus helped him to arrange the burial of Jesus and so risk his reputation as a respected leader in Israel.

Roman practice was to leave the crucified on the cross even after death, at the mercy of wild animals and birds of prey, unless their family requested the privilege of burying them.

This was usually denied in the case of those condemned for high treason. For this reason, Joseph's action is doubly remarkable. He is not a relative, and he intercedes for one condemned for treason.

It was not unknown for crucified persons to survive on the cross for two or three days. Thus Pilate is amazed that Jesus is already dead after only six hours, and verifies Jesus' death from the centurion before releasing the body.

Joseph, probably with help from others, perhaps servants, takes the body down, washes it and wraps it in a linen cloth.

“Mark's account of the burial establishes two important points: that Jesus was truly dead and that, contrary to the usual practice for crucified criminals, he was given a reverent burial” (The Gospel of Mark – Mary Healy, p. 325)

G. The Tomb of Jesus

According to the Gospel of John (19:41-42), the tomb in which Jesus was laid was located in a garden near Jerusalem. The site had to be close by, since the Sabbath rest began at sunset and all labor would have to cease by then.

What is implied in the description of the tomb corresponds exactly to what is known of first century tombs in the vicinity of Golgotha. A stone quarry had provided spaces for burial sites.

The stone rolled against the entrance to the tomb is for the sake of protecting the body from scavenging animals; it also emphasizes the finality of death.

H. The Two Women

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

These women, along with Salome, kept watch from a distance as Jesus died. They continue to watch as Joseph removes the body of Jesus from the cross and carries it to the tomb.

Although Mark does not indicate the location of Jesus' tomb, it was less than two hundred feet from Golgotha, making it easy for Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses to observe where the body of Jesus was laid to rest.

In closing this section, Mark mentions the two Mary's who witness the burial of Jesus because it is important that they identify the tomb which will be the scene of the Easter morning discovery.

Preparation for Week 14 (Mark 16)
