

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

The Trial Before Pilate, Continued (John 19:1-16)

Scene Four: Christ is Scourged, Crowned, Mocked (Inside). Pilate was reluctant to order the execution of Jesus. In his perverse way, he judged that submitting Jesus to a severe beating would gain the pity of the people. Once they beheld his battered body, they would relent and call the whole thing off. The Passover Amnesty had not worked. Pilate's own testimony about Christ's innocence was rejected. Now he would appeal to their tender mercies.

A scourging customarily preceded crucifixion. It was meant to weaken the victim so that he would die sooner on the cross. The scourge was a leather whip. At its tip was a piece of lead whose weight increased the impact of the lash. Sometimes the anklebone of a sheep was added to the tip of the lash. Its jagged edge tore into the flesh of the victim and increased the bleeding and bruising.

The soldiers stripped Jesus naked and tied him to a post, his arms stretched upward and secured by ropes at the wrist. Two soldiers scourged him, one tall and one short, to make sure the whole back of Christ's body would be reached with maximum force. The legal limit of lashes was thirty-nine. We do not know if they exceeded this limit. Sometimes this happened, as is evident from the Shroud of Turin, where the imprint of a crucified man shows that the victim received at least sixty lashes.

For many centuries countless Christians have contemplated this scene. Their meditation transcends any morbid fascination with physical punishment. A stream of Christian poetry and hymns reflect the faith insights that are drawn from this experience. The sick, the lonely, the crushed and the poor identify with this agony of Jesus, because he has chosen to share in their own pain. The scene convinces them that God now knows what they suffer because, in his Son, he experiences human suffering and humiliation. This God is no bystander in the face of human pain. This God is truly compassionate in that basic meaning of that word---one who visibly "suffers with" (*cumpassio* in the Latin).

A second truth drawn from this meditation is that salvation is experienced in the wounds of Christ. Isaiah already gained this insight centuries ago. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole. With his stripes (lashes) we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5, RSV). Our suffering is overcome by Christ's suffering. Our wounds are healed by Christ's wounds, not necessarily through miraculous cures but by the gift of faith Jesus offers, a faith that involves pain in the goal of liberation from sin. When Isaiah says that by the wounds of the Suffering Servant we are healed, he is ultimately talking about theological healing, the cleansing away of our sins.

That is one side of the healing work of Jesus in his being scourged. He liberates us *from* our sins, but also liberates for inner freedom and personal dignity. To gaze on him at the whipping post, we ponder the externals of indignity, degradation, the appalling result of his persecutors' perversity, inhumanity, and total insensitivity. There's nothing pleasant about the event. Flesh ripped, blue welts erupting, sweat from the heat of pain and the sun, dehydration and thirst, unimaginable stabs of pain, helplessness, the shame of one's nude body exposed to the eyes of men and women. We cannot ignore the smell of blood, the grunts of the scourgers, the sound of the whip.

The point of forcing ourselves to face the grisly reality of the scourging is to see through the human indignity Jesus shows us on the surface. With our faith we penetrate the interior world of Jesus. There we experience with awe the inner drama of Christ, his extraordinary dignity despite outward appearances, his ability to look dehumanized and yet radiate the magnificence of the glory-presence of the Word as well as his splendor of being human.

We experience the flow of salvation from his center of power and grace, liberation from sin, liberation for the practice of every virtue a virtue that will be the true source of human dignity. He is saving us from pride, greed, lust and all the other self-destructive forces in our souls. He is saving us for humility, generosity, chaste living and all the other spiritual powers that make us noble and worthwhile. Not for one moment is he a pawn of fate, a helpless human set adrift on the ash heap of history. At his core is his freedom, at once human and divine which no diabolical force or other human resource can dislodge. From that center under the noise of the action at the whipping post he reaches out to the center in every one of us. He thirsts to unite us in the best of all solidarities, the communion of Love that no other power can overcome.

We should hold firmly to our focus on the inner center of Jesus even as we watch the outward indignities multiply and produce a dreadful cumulative physical and emotional effect. After scourging Jesus, the soldiers made a crown of thorns (actually a cap) and draped him in a purple cloak and mocked him. "Hail, King of the Jews!" (verse 3). Soldiers often played this game of the king, but usually seldom so cruelly, for normally the crown was made of paper, a fool's crown for a dunce. They sought comic relief from their deadly duty. Here, the reality of blood lust overcame their more civil impulses.

A pile of thorn branches would be nearby for making fires on the cool nights. Quite possibly the gritty thorn fronds of the date palms were at hand. If so, the contrast of Sunday's palms of glory with Friday's palms of pain provides its own message. The skull bleeds easily and profusely. The cap of thorns would be secured by some heavy beating of the head. The old hymn is correct when it says, "O sacred head surrounded with crown of piercing thorn."

And so the soldiers knelt before the King of Glory. They bowed in mockery little knowing they bent with a gesture of reverence before the Master of the universe. The heartless prostrated before the King of hearts. They saw nothing more than a helpless man whom they could beat up and make fun of.

Jesus stood there, his body smarting with waves of pain, his head a blinding headache, all his natural sensitivities open to resentment at being treated both as a fool and a human rag doll. Yet incredibly his glory radiated there even more powerfully than in the excitement of the miracles of the Bread, Wine, and Raising of Lazarus. No enthusiastic crowds sing his praises. But angels worship him and praise God for the shimmering radiance they behold at his center. He looks like a broken man to some. To our eyes of faith, he manifests his expansive inner power, becoming more majestic even as outward details tell us otherwise.

His center glows with resolve, shines with love, pulses with forgiveness, expands with the confidence that evil's kingdom is about to meet defeat. He will have one shattering moment ahead when he shouts his cry of abandonment from the cross (see Matthew 27:46). Yet even in that seemingly shaky moment, he will testify that he has completed the descent from the heavenly realms, the kenosis-self-emptying. Only complete ascent and glory will assuredly follow.

Scene Five: Behold the Man (Outside). Pilate brought Jesus outside, hoping his pathetic beaten appearance would be enough to persuade them to let him go free. For a second time, Pilate publicly said he found no guilt in Jesus. No capital crime. Therefore, there should be no capital punishment. Pilate pointed at Jesus and said, "Behold, the man" (verse 5).

Pilate's words possessed a meaning far deeper than he meant and one more profound than was appreciated by the crowd. Pilate had first called Jesus a king. Now he calls him a man. What he did not realize was that all the royalty of the truly human, all that really is human, was embodied in Jesus. Just when he looked his worst as a human being, Jesus was presented to the world as "the man", a real human being in full dignity. This insight was captured wonderfully by the Second Vatican Council, which we paraphrase here.

It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of the human becomes clear. Christ fully reveals what it means to be human and brings to light our most high calling. Jesus, the image of the invisible God, was a fully realized human being.

He restored each of us to the likeness of God that was distorted by sin. Humanity, by the very fact that it was assumed----not absorbed----by him, has been raised in us to a dignity beyond compare. (Read and meditate on all of paragraph 22 in “Church in the Modern World.”*).

*”The Church in the Modern World,” *Gaudium et spes, Vatican Council II: Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1981).

In Matthew’s gospel (25:35-45), Jesus said believers would recognize him among the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the imprisoned. His most powerful presence would be noticed among the poorest of the poor, the oppressed, the homeless, the despised, the weak, the lonely, the forgotten, the so-called “uglies” of this world. Look at Jesus in this scene. Thirsty from loss of fluids, imprisoned, a stranger’s purple cloak covering his nakedness, hungry, in pain, a stranger in the Antonia, despised. He lived in that moment the very traits he described in Matthew. We are called upon to recognize the real Jesus in such a state. Let us see in him the precious gift of humanity that no disfigurement, deprivation, or social downfall can hide. Behold the Jesus who reveals what is genuinely human to every human being.

A force of evil overtook that little gathering of respectable citizens, religious leaders, and guards. The assembly became of mob. Sin possessed their hearts and perverted their capacity to recognize a just, honest, loving and innocent Jesus. Just as tragic, they fail to recognize or respect the human dignity of the man they see before them. They allow their voices to ring with shouts, “Crucify him, crucify him!” (verse 6). The voice of compassion for his wounded humanity is missing. One listens in vain for the sound of faith in the warm and healing Word of God become flesh. No reason. No faith. Just emotion, blind prejudice and the protective justification that Jesus broke their law by claiming to be the Son of God. They took their most sacred possession, the Holy Scripture, and used it as an instrument to bring about judicial murder. They used the word of God to kill the Word of God.

Scene Six: The Uses of Power (Inside). Pilate and Jesus go back into the residence. The governor became “more afraid” (verse 8). He had two kinds of fear, one caused by the dissidents who were not backing down and beginning to threaten him, the other a superstitious fear of Jesus who might be some kind of divinity. After all the mob spoke of him as a Son of God. Fear would both drive out any positive step Pilate might have taken, and trigger his survival instincts. Whatever tiny grain of humanitarian instincts he may have felt would soon yield to his customary political ones.

Peering deeply at Jesus, Pilate asked him where he came from. Jesus remained silent. His silence was meant to provoke Pilate to reflect upon himself. He must now come to his own decisions. Jesus had offered him the possibility of change, but Christ would not force the governor to change.

Impatiently, Pilate raised the question of power. This was a subject dear to his heart, one with which he was totally familiar. He indicated that he could simply use his political power to save him. Jesus evaded his political statement. Jesus had never made politics a major element in his teachings, miracles or witnessing of the kingdom. He simply told Pilate that whatever powers the governor possessed, it came from above.

Scene Seven: A Fatal Judgment (Outside). Still, uncharacteristically, Pilate made one more effort to release Jesus, but caved in before taunts of the crowd that he was not a loyal public servant of Caesar's. He could hardly be so if he was willing to let a rival king go free. The mood had turned as ugly as it could get. Pilate sat on his judgement chair, placed Jesus on the stone pavement and said, "Behold, your king" (verse 14). Refer here to what was said above about Christ's royal humanity. Above the crescendo of the yelling mob, Pilate heard the priests say they had no king but Caesar. Their faith told them that only God is their king. Their politics taught them that kingship belonged to the House of David. Their emotions persuaded them to shout allegiance to the half-mad emperor Tiberias wandering about his palace in Capri.

Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

It was noon.

The priests at the temple had begun the sacrifice of the lambs.

The people had begun to sing the holy texts of the Haggadah.

At the beginning of this gospel, John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and called him God's lamb. The sacrifice of the Passover lambs at the temple will be matched by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who marches to the cross to save us from our sins.

The Crucifixion (John 19:17-22)

The Persians invented crucifixion. The Romans adopted it for executions in their provinces. The victim carried the crossbar to the place of execution where a vertical post was prepared to receive the crossbar. The prisoner was mounted on the cross either with ropes or with nails. We know Jesus was nailed to the cross. Thomas the apostle said he would not believe in Christ's resurrection unless he could see the nail marks and put his fingers into the spaces left by them. Jesus obliged Thomas during an Easter appearance and invited him to do what he wished (see John 20:24-27).

Crucified victims died from asphyxiation, a process that could take as long as a week. The downward pull of gravity weakened their arms to the point where they could no longer lift themselves up to exhale their breath. The execution mound was a few feet above ground level, hence relatives and friends could easily converse with the victim during the dying process. All observers agree that crucifixion was a horrible and painful way to die.

In John's account Jesus carries the crossbar by himself to Calvary. Matthew says that Simon of Cyrene helped him with it (Matthew 27:32). Calvary means place of the skull. Some have concluded that this meant the area was used for beheadings. A legend says that Adam was buried there, thus connecting the death of Jesus with that of Adam. Hence, in a vivid manner the saving blood of the new Adam (Jesus) would flow upon the old Adam.

Two others were crucified with Jesus, one of each side of him. Pilate ordered an inscription to be placed over the head of Jesus. It read, "Jesus the Nazorean, King of the Jews." It was written in three languages, Roman, Greek and Hebrew. The leading priests asked Pilate to change the wording to "He said he was King of the Jews." Pilate tired of their pressure and stubbornly left the words as they were.

Woman, Behold, Your Son (John 19:23-27)

Four men stood guard at the cross. They divided Christ's clothing among themselves. This would have included a tunic, belt, sandals and a head covering. They gambled for his fifth piece of apparel, his seamless robe. Customarily, a high priest wore a seamless robe, hence that fact of Jesus owning one assumed a special symbolism for he became the high priest of the new covenant.

Since the beginning of his kenosis (this Greek word means emptying) he progressively emptied himself of any trace of the status of heavenly glory. During his journey on earth he gradually let go also of all earthly possessions. He left behind his modest, comfortable home in Nazareth. He let go of his trade as a carpenter. As a wandering preacher, he depended on the hospitality of others. Little by little his life exhibited the utmost simplicity. Now at the end of his life, the few pieces of clothing he owned were taken away from him. Possibly his robe had been woven by his mother. Son and mother watched the robe go to a guard who won a bet. The long process of emptying was reaching its conclusion. What is emptied of all possessiveness will be filled with the eternally satisfying life of God.

As Mary's only son, Jesus had some unfinished business. He asked John to look after his mother and take care of her. "Behold, your mother" (verse 27). John welcomed this responsibility and took her into his household. Tradition says that John and Mary moved to Ephesus, a city of 250,000 people, nestled in a valley with mountain walls on three sides and a canal-port that connected the city to the Mediterranean. Today one may visit the House of Mary a mile above the city.

Jesus turned to Mary and said, “Woman, behold, your son” (verse 26). This is the second time in John’s gospel he addresses her as “woman”. At Cana he addressed her as woman to indicate her elevation to a spiritual role in the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation. He had told her then that his “hour” had not yet come. Clearly, the hour had finally arrived and she would be intimately united to the event at the cross. He spoke of her as mother when entrusting her to John. That was his filial responsibility to her as his mother.

At Calvary he addressed her as woman who is called to be the mother of Christians, the mother of the church. By saying, “Behold, your son,” Jesus extends her motherhood beyond John to all women and men in the church. It is said that dying people need the permission of loved ones to enter death. They need to be released by those who mean the most to them. Jesus was asking her to release him with all the love and generosity she had shown from the joyful Annunciation to this tragic moment. Just as he has accepted in peace this forthcoming death, so must she.

She must let go of the physical body of Jesus. She will gain the Mystical Body of her Son. As Jesus requested her permission to go into death, he also asked her to deepen her faith and love more than she would have imagined up to that point. He also wanted her to say a “yes” (a fiat in Latin) to sharing in the growth of the Mystical Body just as she had agreed to his physical birth at the Annunciation. At Bethlehem she bore Jesus with all the beauty of a Christmas carol. At Calvary she faced the challenge of being the mother of Christians with all the sorrow of a deathwatch. Yet the outcome is so different. All she could find was a stable at Bethlehem. Now she had the whole world to work in. She surrendered to God’s will when Gabriel asked her to be the mother of Jesus. She surrendered to the will of the Son of God----her Son, too, for she is the God bearer (*Theotokos*)----when he asked her to be the mother of Christians.

At the Annunciation Gabriel sang the first Ave Maria.
Today, in perfect harmony with Gabriel we add, Salve Regina!

I Thirst...It Is finished (John 19:28-30)

By now the body of Jesus was heavily dehydrated. Loss of bodily fluids, blood from the beatings and water from the sun, heat and exertion, led him to cry out, “I thirst” (verse 28). That was the physical cause of his words. However, at this moment in his passion, he had a far deeper concern, one related to his saving mission that was entering its final minutes at Calvary. He was asking those who heard him, and we who hear him now, to be open to his love and forgiveness. “Let me love you. Let me forgive you.”

His thirst was fundamentally spiritual, an enormous desire to share the love he had come to earth to share with everyone. Many people on their deathbeds say they wish they had loved more during their lives. On his deathbed, Jesus said he wished more had accepted the love he generously offered every day of his life.

The risen Jesus continues to speak his “I thirst” in the world today. For all those who feel unloved, he offers a fulfilling love. Acceptance of his love is the key.

Nearby was a jug of soldier’s wine. They used it to numb their own feelings as well as to quell the pain of the crucified. A guard put some wine on a sponge and offered it to Jesus. When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, “It is finished” (verse 30). Jesus had considered his passion as an act of worship. He stretched to the limit his calling as high priest of the new covenant. He reached back into the sacred history of his people and wove all their forms of worship into a seamless robe of holy adoration, obedience, and praise.

He took the “olah.” The holocaust of a lamb by Abel and made a total offering of himself. He seized the cup of wine that Melchisedech used as a libation---pouring off the wine onto a rock as a toast of thanksgiving to God---and poured out fully the wine of his blood as thanks for the reality of salvation for all. He picked up the twelve loaves at the temple altar and turned himself into the bread to be broken for the redemption of the world.

Jesus gathered into his heart all those who had assembled for the friendship meal of Passover and created the new Passover, the Eucharist which would continue the effects of his passion and resurrection into history. He brought the scapegoat of the feast of Atonement out of the wilderness and made himself the one upon whom all the sins of the world would be heaped. Just when he seemed most separated from every creature on earth, he was witnessing solidarity with everyone, atonement, at-one-ment.

It was three in the afternoon.

At the temple the priest offered the last lamb.

He said “Kalah,” which means “It is finished.”

At Calvary Jesus offered himself as the true Lamb of God.

He said, “Kalah.” Which means, “It is finished.”

The Piercing of Christ’s Side (John 19:31-37)

The Jews had a rule that all dead bodies should be buried before Passover. The two thieves were still alive. Soldiers took mallets and broke their legs. The shock hastened their deaths. Jesus was already dead, but a soldier took a knife and pierced his heart as a kind of assurance. The bones of Passover lambs were not to be broken, so neither would Christ’s bones be touched. Water and blood flowed from Christ’s side. This event was a sign of the birth of the church. On the cross the church was born in the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist.

The Burial of Jesus (John 19:38-42)

Christian art has supplied the scene of the descent from the cross and Mary’s claim of the body of her son. Michelangelo’s Pieta best expressed the tone and mood of John’s gospel.

He sculptured fulfillment, achievement, glory muted by tranquility. The nail holes in Christ's hands and feet are tiny holes. Violence has vanished and Jesus sleeps peacefully in Mary's arms. Jesus radiates sympathy for those who stand before this scene in which he lay in his mother's lap. We behold the sublimity of Jesus and Mary. Their harmony reflects the reconciliation of nature, people, and God just accomplished. Christ's divinity quietly emerges through his exquisite humanity. We look at Mary's face, like that of a maiden, filled with silent composure. The beauty of the two figures keeps revealing the grandeur of their inner lives.

It is time for the burial. Jesus had once said it would be harder for a rich man to get into heaven than for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle. Two rich men came forward from the anonymity of the crowd at Calvary. They had been secret admirers of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea claimed Christ's body from Pilate and then donated his new tomb in the garden next to Calvary. Nicodemus, who had visited Jesus at night long ago to discuss his teachings, brought one hundred pounds of spices to anoint the body.

Joseph's tomb was carved out of a rock. A flagstone was placed there for anointing the body. The gift of Nicodemus was enough for a royal anointing. After Christ's body was wrapped in a shroud, it was placed on a ledge. Mary and the mourners took one last look. It was evening. They withdrew from the chamber and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Their final traditional prayer was, "Dust you are and unto dust you will return" (See Genesis 3:19).

In three days Jesus would conquer this death and transform that humble dust into the glory of a risen body.

St. Francis loved to meditate on the passion. He would sing about it, simulating the movement of a bow across a violin. Then his exuberance would dissolve in tears for Jesus. On his own deathbed, he received the stigmata, the wounds of Jesus. He died with a psalm on his lips.