

## MARK 14.32-42: JESUS IN PAIN

Chelmsford 9 March 2008

"If you want to understand the Christian message", declared Martin Luther, "you must start with the wounds of Christ". This morning I want to focus on the wounds of Christ. The theme of my sermon is '*Jesus in pain*'.

I've chosen this theme because today, according to the church year, is Passion Sunday: it is the Sunday when Christians remember the Passion of Christ.

As I reflected on this term '*Passion*', I found there a *double-entendre* – a double meaning. For in the English language the word denotes two quite different things:

- On the one hand, the word *Passion* refers to suffering. Music lovers at this time of the year go and listen to Bach's St John's Passion – or his St Matthew's Passion – in these Passions Bach sets the suffering of Jesus to some of the most wonderfully haunting and moving music imaginable.
- On the other hand, the word *Passion* refers to a very strong emotion, whether of anger or of love. Here we have a reminder that the Cross was marked not just by great suffering but also by great emotion. In a very real sense the Cross was a display of both anger and love – there in the body of Jesus we see God's deep anger against sin, and we see also God's equally deep love for the sinner.

It was precisely because of God's passion that the passion of Christ came about: i.e. it was because of God's anger against sin and his love of us, that Jesus suffered on the Cross.

Interestingly next week BBC is screening a new production of the last week of Jesus, entitled 'The Passion'. Starting on Palm Sunday and finishing on Easter Day, it will depict the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the Cross & the Resurrection. To what extent it will make clear that behind the sufferings of Jesus lies the passion of God, I don't know. It will, however, provide a useful talking point for Christians with their friends & neighbours

## JESUS SUFFERED PAIN

Time and again the Scriptures speak of Christ having suffered for us: e.g. Peter in his first Letter wrote: "**Christ suffered for sins once and for all, a good man on behalf of sinners, in order to lead you to God**" (1 Pet 3.18).

And yet for the most part the Scriptures do not provide a detailed description of that suffering. The passage where we come the nearest to such a description is Mark's account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

It is this account which will form the basis of our meditation this morning.

**"They came to a place called Gethsemane"** (15.32)

**Gethsemane** - the very word symbolises the suffering of Christ.

Literally, it means "*wine press*" - the place where grapes were crushed.

It was here in this Garden of Gethsemane the spirit of Jesus was crushed – or to use another metaphor, it was here that he went 'through the mangle'.

It was in Gethsemane that his soul began to experience the intensity of that pressure which culminated in his death on the Cross. Gethsemane was a place of suffering.

Jesus, the Son of God, was no robot. Nor was he superman.  
Jesus, the Son of God, shared in our flesh and blood.  
Jesus knew what it was to suffer.  
And we see this above all not at Calvary, but at Gethsemane.  
According to Mark, Jesus wrestling with whether or not to submit to his Father's will caused him greater internal suffering than the physical crucifixion itself.

For it was in Gethsemane that "**Distress and anguish came over**" Jesus. (v34).  
According to one commentator, the word translated **distress** [*ekthambeisthai*] "denotes a being in the grip of a shuddering horror in the face of the dreadful prospect before him", while the word translated **anguish** [*ademonēin*] denotes "an anxiety from which there was no escaping and in which He saw no help and no comfort" (Cranfield – quoting Barth in the second instance).  
Or in the down-to-earth language of Eugene Peterson: "**He plunged into a sinkhole of dreadful agony**" [The Message].  
Although for three long years Jesus had been going the way of the Cross, now the reality of what lay ahead began to truly bite and Jesus was appalled. And rightly so! The prospect before him was truly frightening.  
Jesus went on to say to his three friends, Peter, James and John: "**The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me**" (v34).

In many an account we find Christian martyrs facing death with apparent joyful serenity - but not Jesus. "*No one*", wrote Luther, "*ever feared death so much as this man*".

Jesus was in pain.  
When we were children, pain was something physical - we experienced pain if we caught our thumb in the door or if we stumbled over in the playground and grazed our knee.  
But as we grow older, we experience pain at many different levels - pain of mind and of heart and of spirit.  
Jesus in his final days experienced the full gamut of pain.

My mind goes to the Book of Lamentations: "**Is it nothing to you, all who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger**" (1.12 NRSV).  
The reference in the first instance was to Israel's sorrow and pain as she experienced God's judgement in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. But how much more appropriate these words are of Jesus: "**See if there is any sorrow like my sorrow**" - or as GNB translates: "**Look at me... No one has ever had pain like mine**".

But be more specific, you may say: what kind of pain did Jesus suffer?

## 1. JESUS SUFFERED THE PHYSICAL PAIN OF CRUCIFIXION

In the first instance, Jesus experienced the physical torture of crucifixion – and here in the garden Jesus anticipates the horror of it all.

Listen to one vivid description of crucifixion: "*The Assyrians invented it, but their method was too quick. They merely impaled you on a sharpened stake, up the anus,*

*through the body, and out through the mouth. You didn't last long. So the Romans perfected it, dragged it out longer, refined it, in order to let you have a little time to meditate upon your crimes. By the second or third day, four fifths crazed as the crows peck your eyes out, maybe (or so the Romans calculated) you'll act as a fairly effective deterrent to other would-be opponents of the regime". (Michael Seward, Don't Miss The Party 41ff).*

It was a ghastly way of dying. Crucifixion was an agonizing form of death by suffocation. But it was more than that. Listen to another description: "*Of all deaths it is the most lingering and agonising. The unnatural position of the body made every movement a pain. The suspension of the whole body on jagged iron nails driven through the most sensitive nerve centres of the wrists and ankles, ensured constant exquisite torture. The wounds of the nails and the weals from the lash soon became inflamed and even gangrenous. The body's position hindered circulation and caused indescribable pain in the chest. A raging thirst set in, brought on by the burning sun. The flies were thick around the victim. The agony of crucifixion was terrible beyond words"* (M.Green, The Empty Cross of Jesus 23).

It was, said the Roman writer Cicero, the "*most cruel and most terrible punishment*" – the kind of death no civilized person would want to think about, let alone see and hear it happen.

Jesus wasn't being squeamish in experiencing "**distress and anguish**" - he would not have been human, if he hadn't shuddered at the thought.

There in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus wrestled with his impending fate. Mark tells Jesus "**threw himself on the ground**" (v35) – Jesus was absolutely desperate.

He cried out to God: "**Father, my Father** [lit. Abba Father]! **All things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want**" (v36).

He could so easily have turned his back on the Cross - even at that late stage.

But instead, he was "**obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross**" (Phil 2.8 NRSV). Here is cause for wonder - here is cause for surrender.

Who can see his wounds and not be affected?

**"Christ suffered for sins once and for all, a good man on behalf of sinners, in order to lead you to God"** (1 Pet 3.18).

But there was far more to the Cross of Jesus than mere physical pain.

## 2. JESUS SUFFERED THE SPIRITUAL PAIN OF SIN-BEARING

The Cross was made all the more intolerable, because when Jesus died he took upon himself the sin of the world - as Peter later put it: "**Christ himself carried our sins in his body to the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness. It is by his wounds that you have been healed**" (1 Pet 2.24).

Jesus - in a way that is beyond our understanding - took upon himself the punishment due to us - he died for our sins.

This thought is present here in Gethsemane. Listen to Jesus' prayer: "**Father, my Father! All things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me**"

(v36).

What was this **cup of suffering**? In the OT cup was often used as a metaphor for the judgment of God. E.g. Is 51.17: "**Jerusalem... you have drunk the cup of punishment that the Lord in his anger gave you to drink**

The Cross was the moment when Jesus drank from the cup of God's wrath, the cup of God's punishment. Jesus experienced to the full the holy wrath of God against all that is wrong in this world.

[Cranfield: "*Of course, when we speak of God's wrath, we must remember that his wrath is not like ours: it contains no element of spitefulness, pettiness or hypocrisy, but is the reaction of the altogether holy and loving God to sin*"]

No wonder "**distress and anguish**" came over Jesus.

*"It is one thing, fearful as it will be, to answer for our own sins before a holy and almighty God; who can imagine what it would be like to stand before God to answer for every sin and crime and act of malice and injury and cowardice and evil in the world?"*

(James Edwards). We see something of the cosmic proportions of this sin-bearing in that cry from the Cross: "**My God, my God, why did you abandon me?**" (15.34)

Jesus was not just experiencing physical pain, but spiritual pain.

Jesus in dying on the Cross experienced the full horror of separation from God, separation brought about by bearing in his body the sins of the world

The technical term for this is '*expiation*': Jesus through dying on the Cross became the means whereby the sin of the world was dealt with.

**"This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven"** (NRSV **to be the expiation for our sins**)" (1 John 4.10).

What a way to love! Words cannot do it justice.

John Milton once wrote an exquisite poem on the birth of Jesus, entitled, 'An Ode On The Morning of Christ's Nativity'. He planned a companion poem on the death of Jesus. But only a few lines were written and have come down to us. With them is the significant comment: "*This subject the author finding to be above the years he had when he wrote it, and nothing satisfied with what was begun, left it unfinished*".

### 3. JESUS SUFFERED THE EMOTIONAL PAIN OF ISOLATION

Along with the physical pain of crucifixion & the spiritual pain of sin-bearing, there was also what we may term the emotional pain of isolation. When Jesus died, he died alone.

True, there were two thieves either side of him - his mother and some of the women were at the foot of the Cross, as also John, the beloved disciple.

And yet Jesus was alone - in the sense that none truly understood why he had chosen to tread this particular path.

Within Mark's account there is an anticipation of the isolation Jesus felt by the failure of Peter, James & John to stand by Jesus as he prayed to his Father in his hour of need.

Have you ever asked yourself why, when Jesus went to pray, he took with him Peter, James & John? Almost certainly because in his anguish & his loneliness he yearned for

their company, for their presence as friends who cared - Luther spoke of Jesus "*seeking comfort from his disciples, whom previously he had comforted*".

But in fact the very opposite was achieved. The effect of his taking them with him was to make clearer than ever that he was alone.

Jesus said to his three closest friends: "**The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me. Stay here and keep watch**" (v34) - but they promptly fall asleep. Jesus was in great pain of heart - and yet they failed to stand by him; they did not seem to care that he was in such anguish.

Instead they succumbed to the effects of good food and wine.

This happened not only once, but twice, three times. On the second occasion Mark tells us: "**He came back to the disciples and found them asleep; they could not keep their eyes open. AND they did not know what to say to him**" (v40).

While Jesus struggled in prayer, they could not understand.

Jesus was on his own.

There was nobody to hold his hand.

There was nobody who could identify with him.

There was nobody who could understand what was going on.

This was all the more hurtful, when you consider that Jesus had sought to explain to his disciples what was going to happen.

For when Jesus was on the road to Jerusalem, Mark tells us that "**he was teaching his disciples: 'The Son of Man will be handed over to those who will kill him. Three days later, however, he will rise to life'. BUT - adds Mark - they did not understand**" (Mark 9.31.32) .

Nor did they understand at Gethsemane - nor did they understand at Calvary.

Nothing is more hurtful when your motives and your actions are misunderstood.

When you quite literally go to the stake for some one., but they fail to see what you have done.

This must have been hard beyond measure.

How tempted Jesus must have been to give up.

In the wilderness immediately after his baptism Jesus had been tempted by the Devil to go his way, rather than God's way. Now as he wrestled in prayer he was surely tempted even more tempted to turn his back on Jesus' way - especially when nobody else seemed to care or understand.

Jesus must have been in emotional turmoil - compounded by his sense of utter isolation.

**"Christ suffered for sins once and for all, a good man on behalf of sinners, in order to lead you to God"** - on reflection an understatement.

A challenge - to surrender - he died that we might be forgiven

A challenge - to devotion - he loved us to the uttermost

A challenge - to discipleship - he calls us to take up our cross & follow him

A challenge - to mission - he suffered not only for us, but for others too