

## MATT 27.35-36: THE SOLDIERS WHO CRUCIFIED HIM

Death by crucifixion was a well-known custom in the ancient world.

It was practised in Egypt, Phoenicia, Carthage, Persia, Assyria, Scythia, and India, as well as in Greece and in Rome.

Interestingly crucifixion was not a Jewish practice. Before the Romans took away their authority to exercise capital punishment, the Jews had four ways of carrying out the death sentence: by sword, by strangling, by fire and by stoning.

There was never any doubt in the minds of the people of the ancient world that crucifixion was the most dreadful way to die.

Seneca, the Roman philosopher, spoke of the “*accursed tree*”

Josephus, the Jewish historian, described crucifixion as “*the most pitiable of deaths*”

The Roman orator and writer, Cicero, said: “*It was the most cruel and shameful of all punishments. The very name ‘cross’ should not only be far from the body of a Roman citizen, but also from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears*”.

Fortunately for Roman citizens, they were never threatened by this dreadful death.

Crucifixion was reserved for slaves and for foreigners.

### *The cross of Jesus*

There were various types of crosses.

- There was the ‘*crux simplex*’, which was simply a stake on which a man was impaled. The stake might be driven through his chest – or he might be tied to it with his hands upstretched; or it might be driven right through his body emerging through his mouth.
- There was the ‘*crux decussata*’, what we know as the St Andrew’s cross, shaped like a capital X, on which the victim could be stretched either the right way up or upside down. Peter was said to have been crucified upside down

We know that Jesus endured neither of these two forms of crucifixion, because he carried a cross-beam to his place of execution. This means that he was crucified either on a ‘*crux commissa*’ or a ‘*crux inmissa*’

- The ‘*crux commissa*’ involved fixing the crossbeam at the top of the upright, making the shape of a capital T. But the Gospels tell us that above the head of Jesus there was an inscription which read.... This makes it more likely that Jesus died on a ‘*crux inmissa*’;
- On the ‘*crux inmissa*’ the crossbeam was fixed a third of the way down. It was on this kind of cross that Jesus died.

The cross was not high. It would not lift the feet of the victim more than a foot or two above the ground. Normally a cross was no more than 7 feet high.

That Jesus was not lifted far off the ground is shown by the fact that a soldier could reach his lips with a short reed.

Sometimes wild beasts were let loose on the victim as he hung there – what a fate to have your entrails torn out while hanging on a cross.

Half-way up the cross there was often a piece of wood, somewhat like a saddle, (the *pegma*), which fitted between the victim’s legs and on this saddle the victim could rest his weight – for there was no way the body could have been supported by the nails driven through the hands and legs.

Sometimes too there was a foot-rest (*suppedaneum*) attached near the bottom of the upright beam.

However, the fact that Jesus died so quickly makes it unlikely that his body had any support.

### *The process of crucifixion*

The process of crucifixion began with the ritual flogging or whipping, when the victim's back was ripped to piece by the merciless blows of the leather thongs of a whip – at the end of which were pieces of bone or metal. All four Gospels record that Jesus was not spared this dreadful flogging.

Then after the whipping, the prisoner was marched to the place of execution. For Jesus this meant going to “**Golgotha**”, the so-called “**place of the skull**” (27.33). The site may have appeared similar to a skull because it was a rounded knoll, rising from the surrounding surface. Indeed, some have suggested that the entrances to cave-like tombs on that hill may have supplied the knoll with face-like aspects.

As was the custom, Jesus was forced to carry his own cross – or at least the cross-beam. That Jesus was no superman is shown by the fact that Jesus was unable to carry his cross – after the whipping the weight was too heavy for him – so **Simon of Cyrene** was forced to carry it for him (27.32) Incidentally, Africans are very proud of the fact that the first man to carry the cross of Jesus was an African!

On arrival at the place of his execution, the victim was then stripped of his clothing. The Roman practice was for the victim to be stripped of everything – underpants, the lot. There was no place for modesty. Crucifixion was degrading in every way. For Jews this was particularly so – they had a horror of nudity. Jesus almost certainly died totally naked.

At this point came the only time of mercy in the agonising process. Sometimes the victim was knocked unconscious before he was actually affixed to the cross. Amongst the Jews, however, the custom was to offer the victim a cup of drugged wine to dull the pain. So Matthew, for instance, tells us that “**they offered Jesus wine mixed with a bitter substance**” (27.34), but Jesus refused it. He wanted to avoid nothing of the cup of suffering which his father had given him. Perhaps for the sake of the penitent thief, it was as well he did. Whatever, Jesus was in complete possession of all his faculties as he faced the full rigour of the most agonizing death known to humankind (M.Green)

After sedation came the affixing to the cross. There was no one way of doing it.

- Sometimes the victim was just tied to the cross with his hands and arms outstretched.
- Far more usually nails were driven through the hands of the prisoner, fixing them to the cross-beam of the cross.

I say “hands” – wrists is more accurate. Nails through the palms would not carry the weight of the body, but would tear away.

We know that Jesus was nailed to the cross because of the story of Thomas. For Thomas said to his fellow -disciples: “**Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger in those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe**” (John 20.25)

Needless to say, the pain of crucifixion was excruciating – indeed, our word ‘excruciating’ is derived from the Latin word for crucifixion.

The nails were driven through the places where the most delicate nerves and tendons are. When a man was fixed on his cross, he was left hanging in a completely unnatural position, of which the tension increased every moment. The result was that every smallest movement of the body became increasing agony.

The longer a man hung on a cross, the more inflamed his wounds became.

The position in which a man hung affected the natural flow of blood in his body; the blood flow was constricted and the blood vessels, especially in the head, became distended, with accompanying agony.

And yet we read nothing of this agony in the Gospels.

It is an interesting fact that the Gospels say nothing about the pain.

Instead, Matthew, as the other Gospel writers simply states: “**They crucified him**” (27.35).

This causes one of the greatest RC NT scholars to ask: “*In all comparable literature, has so crucial a moment ever been phrased so briefly and so uninformatively*” (RE Brown, 945).

### ***The soldiers – the agents of crucifixion***

Judas betrayed him, Caiaphas condemned him, Pilate washed his hands of him, but it was the Roman soldiers “**crucified**” Jesus – and they appear not to have turned a hair.

Having affixed Jesus to the cross, they “**then divided his clothes among them by throwing dice. After that they sat there and watched him**”(27.35,36).

As far as they were concerned, the job was done – or at least almost done.

They had, however, to ensure that Jesus actually died. For there had been occasions when crucified men had been taken down from a cross and had lived to tell the tale.

The Roman authorities may have thought that there was some possibility that Jesus’ followers would stage an attempt to rescue their leader from the cross.

So the soldiers stayed on to keep watch.

And as they watched, they gambled – they gambled for the clothes of Jesus.

During the time of Jesus a Jew’s clothing would have consisted of a headdress, shoes, a linen undergarment, a robe which hung down below the knees, and a cloak.

It was for these they gambled, and in so doing they fulfilled the prophecy of Ps 22, the psalm of the righteous sufferer: “**They gamble for my clothes and divide them among themselves**” (v19)

At first sight it might appear that these were callous men to sit and gamble while Jesus hung and suffered. But that is far from certain.

It may well be that they didn’t even want to crucify him – perhaps like Pilate they recognised his innocence. But they were men under orders – and to have disobeyed orders would have meant a cross for each of them.

So they crucified Jesus – and as they crucified him, it became just another job – just another crucifixion. And why not? You couldn’t have expected them to identify themselves with Jesus and his sufferings – anymore than you can expect a funeral director to take a personal interest in his clients; feelings – death was their business.

### *Unseeing – and so unblessed at the Cross*

So they gambled while they watched.  
They watched Jesus, the Son of God, dying there for you and me  
Jesus, the Lamb of God, taking away the sin of the world.  
And in watching, they remained unblessed.

True, right at the end of the grisly business the officer in charge suddenly realised that this is no ordinary victim – “**He really was the Son of God**” (27.54) he declared.  
But he failed to see what is really going on – and in failing to see, he remained unblessed.

Sadly, there are many who watch and remain unblessed

- This Easter there will be many who visit London’s National Gallery or indeed other great picture galleries, and see there picture after picture of the crucifixion – and yet who will remain unblessed
- There will be many who go to a concert to hear Handel’s ‘Messiah’ or one of Bach’s great ‘Passions’, yet who will remain unblessed.
- And sadly too there will be people who will listen to a sermon on the death of Jesus – and yet who will remain unblessed.

For we remain unblessed if we fail to see that the Cross is our only hope.  
For the soldiers, the cross of Jesus was but one cross among many.  
True, they may have recognised him as a good man, even as a Son of God, but for them his cross could have been no more an act of heroism or of martyrdom.

Whereas in fact the Cross is the place of atonement.  
It is the place where God deals with our sins.  
It is the place where Jesus, through the offering up of his life, because God’s means by which our sins are forgiven (1 John 3.10).  
It is this that we need to see and believe.

### *Seeing and believing – the Cross our only hope*

Listen to the Apostle Paul: “**Everyone has sinned and is far away from God’s saving presence. But by the free gift of God’s grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. God offered him, so that by his blood – [GNBn: by his sacrificial death] – he should become the means by which people’s sins are forgiven through their faith in him**” (Rom 3.23-26)

Yes, there on the Cross God was at work.  
There on the Cross God was dealing with your sin and mine  
But the eyes of the soldiers were blind to God’s strange work  
They saw – but did not see.

And what is true of them – is true of so many others  
They see – but do not see  
For if they saw, they would believe, and in believing be put right with God  
But as it is, they remain unblessed.

To be blessed is to see the Cross as our only hope

To be blessed is to recognise that without Jesus and his Cross we are lost – for without him we will die in our sins.

Yes, it may no longer fashionable to talk about sin, but talk we must.

As PT Forsyth once told a group of preachers: *“For God’s sake do not tell poor prodigals and black scoundrels that they are better than they think, for the conscience that is in hell is the first to be angered at ingenuities and futilities like these”*.

Our God is a God of Holy love – he is a God who cannot turn a blind eye at sin – rather he must judge it. But the Good News is that judgement took place on the Cross.

For there on the Cross Jesus went through hell for you and for me.

It was not the pain of crucifixion but the agony of bearing your sin and mind, which cause Jesus to cry out: **“My God, my God, why did you abandon me?”** (27.46)

There is much vague sentimental talk about the love of God. But in fact the full depth of the love of God is only seen as the depth of Calvary’s horror is plumbed.

There Jesus went through hell for you and for me.

It is only when we come to grips with the Pauline statement that Christ endured the **“curse”** of the Cross (Gal 3.13), that we come to grips with the love of God.

The cross was no act of heroic love – nor was it an act of exemplary love – it was an act of atoning love – and as such is our only hope.

Not to see – and not to believe – is to sit there with the soldiers and to gamble our life away.

This morning let me urge you to see – to believe – to discover that the Cross is our only hope for this life, and for the next!