

THE CROSS OF CHRIST

John 19

When Moses met God at the burning bush God said, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' I feel like that when we come to this part of Scripture. We are on holy ground.

In ancient literature, both Christian and secular, there are no lurid descriptions of the agonies of crucifixion. Its horrors were bad enough without being made the subject of detailed analysis such as we find in some well-meaning writers.

All four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, record the death of Jesus on the cross. For all four of them it is highlighted as a most significant event. The details are not identical in each Gospel but that should not trouble us. It would be more worrying if they were exactly the same. That would suggest an artificial collusion, whereas what we have gives us the individual perspective of each of the writers. What does John want us particularly to notice?

1. The journey to the cross.

Verse 17 'Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha).' All four Gospels refer to the journey to the place of crucifixion.

The other three Gospels all record the fact that a man called Simon from Cyrene was forced to carry the cross for Jesus, whereas John says that Jesus carried his own cross. This isn't a contradiction. Jesus did set out carrying his own cross. That was the custom, but under the weight of the suffering he had already endured no doubt he stumbled and fell and it would be then that Simon was made to carry Christ's cross.

The three other Gospel writers draw our attention to what Jesus had already suffered and the toll it took on him, but for John the significant thing is that he went out carrying his own cross.

Earlier Jesus had said, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11). He went on to say, 'The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father' (10:17, 18).

The death of Jesus was not a cosmic blunder. It was not a mistake. It was always 'Plan A' from the very start. It was the hour to which Jesus' whole life and ministry had been moving. It was the hour when he would glorify the Father.

From the very start of the Gospel, chapter 1, there are indications that the cross was his goal. Verse 5: 'The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.'

Verses 10 and 11: 'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.'

Verse 29: 'The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"'

2. The two others

John 19:17, 18 'Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.'

At first sight John seems to have much less to say about those who were crucified along with Jesus. He doesn't mention that they were criminals, though that would be evident enough to his readers. He doesn't record the cursing of the one and the words of reproof uttered by the other. He doesn't record the repentance of the dying thief and the promise of Jesus, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise.' He simply says, 'They crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.'

'Two others.' One of the great privileges of my life has been the opportunity to study the New Testament in its original language. Sometimes there are subtle nuances in Greek which you can't easily bring out in English.

You may have heard sermons on John chapter 14 verse 16, where Jesus said, 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever.' You may even have heard me preach on this verse. The Greek language has two words for 'another' or 'others'. You can distinguish whether you're talking about another of the same kind or another of a different kind. When Jesus promised the Holy Spirit he said he would be another of the same kind – the same kind as Jesus himself.

When that word 'another' is used of more than one person it is translated 'others'. So in the same way you can distinguish between others of the same kind or others of a different kind. 'They crucified him, and with him two others.' Which word, do you think, would be used here, others of the same kind, or others of a different kind?

It seems obvious, doesn't it. Jesus, the helper, the healer, the friend, and on either side two others, criminals, rebels, terrorists. Surely they were of a very different kind from Jesus. Now here's the telling thing. The word which John chooses to use is not others of a different kind but others of the same kind. When Jesus hung on the cross, the sinless Son of God, he took upon himself the sins of the world, the gross sins of the worst as well as the sophisticated sins of the best.

On that hill of Golgotha, the place of the skull, three men hung bearing sin, but the central figure was there for your sin and for mine, for the sin of the world. 'Here they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.'

3. The notice prepared by Pilate

Verse 19: 'Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.' Once again all the Gospels record this fact but in John's Gospel there are additional details which show that this title was of particular significance.

'Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews." Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written"' (verses 20–22).

Only John records that many read this sign. Only John records that it was written in the three main languages of the day; only John records the complaint of the chief priests and Pilate's reply.

What kind of king was Jesus? At the very beginning of the Gospel (1:49) 'Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." In chapter 3 Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about the kingdom of God. After the feeding of the five thousand the people intended to come and make him king by force but he withdrew (6:15). When Jesus made his final entry into Jerusalem (12:13) the crowds shouted, 'Blessed is the King of Israel!' and Zechariah's prophecy was fulfilled: 'See, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt' (12:15).

When Pilate summoned Jesus following his interrogation by the chief priests, his first question was, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.' 'You are a king, then!' said Pilate. Jesus answered, 'You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.' 'What is truth?' Pilate said (John 18:33, 36–38).

The soldiers mocked Jesus: 'Hail, king of the Jews!' 'Here is your king,' Pilate said to the Jews. They replied, 'We have no king but Caesar.'

Jesus' kingdom was not of this world. It was nothing less than the kingdom of God. When his own people had him nailed to the cross they were crucifying the king of heaven. The Jews complained but Pilate insisted, 'What I have written I have written.'

4. What the soldiers did

Verses 23–24: 'When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. "Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, "They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." So this is what the soldiers did.'

The cross of Jesus affected all kinds of people: criminals, Pilate, the chief priests, the women, his mother and the disciple he loved. The action of the soldiers in gambling for Christ's clothes can be seen at purely the human level. That was the way soldiers were. But John sees a deeper significance, the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, Psalm 22 verse 18. Behind the human actions and atrocities lies the divine purpose. Scriptures written hundreds of years earlier were fulfilled in the awful events of that day.

5. The presence of the women

Verses 24, 25. It's not clear in the English translation but in the original there's an intended contrast between the end of verse 24 and verse 25. 'So this is what the soldiers did, BUT near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.'

Against the callousness of the soldiers we see sharply defined the tenderness of these womenfolk. What could they do? This is what the soldiers did. What did the women do? What could they do? They stood near the cross. Sometimes that's all you can do, and sometimes that's enough. Sometimes to stand helpless near the suffering of a loved one is the hardest thing to do, and at the same time the greatest thing to do.

6. The instruction to Mary and John

Verses 26 and 27: 'When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.'

This is another detail which only John records. Conservative scholars have agreed for a long time that the beloved disciple referred to rather obliquely in this Gospel was John himself. Amidst the cruelty and the barbarity of this scene there is this moment of tenderness. Even at the height of his suffering Jesus had comfort for those nearest to him.

7. Jesus was thirsty

Verses 28, 29: 'Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they

soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.' Only John records these words of Jesus. As John points out, it is another fulfilment of Old Testament Scripture, Psalm 69 verse 21 this time.

That's one reason why John includes these words here. But perhaps there's another reason. Earlier when Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman by the well the conversation was about thirst and water. Jesus said, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (John 4:13, 14).

In his teaching to the crowds Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty' (John 6:35). When Jesus attended the Feast of Tabernacles on the last and greatest day of the feast he 'stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and whoever believes in me let him drink. As the Scripture has said, Streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive.' (John 7:37-39).

Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. That was the promise of Jesus, and it's against the background of that promise that we must hear these words from the cross: 'I thirst.'

8. Finished!

Verse 30: 'When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.' This is not a cry of defeat but a shout of victory: Finished! Accomplished! It is exactly the same word that is translated 'completed' in verse 28: 'knowing that all was now completed'.

In the original it is a perfect tense, which indicates an act in the past which has consequences for the future. It means, 'It's all over,' but that's only half the meaning. The other half is, 'It's only just begun.' With that, Jesus bowed his head and handed over his spirit.

The death of Jesus was an action which he performed. It was not an execution but a sacrifice, willingly and voluntarily made. For John this is not tragic end but a fulfilment. It's been signposted from the start.

'When [John the Baptist] saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"'

'The Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

John 2:20 The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body.'

'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

'Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me."

"'But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.'