

Prayer

Lord God, the mystery of Your presence sometimes eludes us; but You are always with us whatever our perceptions, and whatever the circumstances of life. Give us the courage to accept what we cannot see and release any unworthy attitudes of mistrust towards You. May we always be ready to hear Your voice speaking to us even in the midst of the darkest times, and accept that You can and will lead us through darkness to eternal light. We praise You, Lord God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray for God's will to be done in your life. Do this by asking Him to reveal some of His plans for you. Pray and write down the revelation you receive.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the higher education** *Pray for university admissions tutors responsibility for filling course places. Pray fair and just decisions.*
- *Thank God for peace, and pray for those whose work sustains it*
- *Pray for Moscow residents after the bombing of their metro*

Meditation

When you settle yourself for prayer and meditation.
What is on your mind? What sounds are all around you?
The humming of the computer? ... the kitchen kettle?
... the central heating? ... the wind or the rain outside?

Where will you hear the voice of the Lord?
In a word from scripture? ... the quietness of peace?
... wise word from a prophet? ... the voice of conscience?

Could it be that He will speak to you through
The face of a friend? ... a task to be done?
... a challenge at work? ... the voice of a stranger?

Expect nothing, and fail to hear the voice of God ...
expect something, and hear a word or two, sometimes ...
expect all things, and receive the presence of the Lord!

Bible passage – Matthew 27:27-37

²⁷ Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium, and gathered the whole cohort around him. ²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹ and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a stick in his right hand, knelt in front of him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' ³⁰ They spat on him, and also took the cane and struck him on the head. ³¹ When they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

³² As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene called Simon, and they made him carry his cross. ³³ They came to a place called Golgotha (which means "Place of the Skull"), ³⁴ they offered Jesus wine to drink mixed with gall, which he tasted but would not drink.

³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they shared out his clothes by casting lots; ³⁶ then they sat down nearby and kept watch over him. ³⁷ They placed the charge against him over his head, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'

Bible Study

Review

Today, as we come closer to the awesome climax of the Gospel, we read about the brutal savagery inflicted on Jesus by those who killed Him, and His dreadful journey to the cross and his crucifixion. It is difficult to read of such torture and brutality, but Matthew's stark description is spiritually powerful.

Despite the many stories that have arisen about Jesus' journey to the Cross, Matthew does not relate much about the journey. Neither does he tell us many details about how he was crucified. The other Gospels are similar, though we can add a few other details from Luke's Gospel (22:39-46). This part of the story is told as if it was a report about what the soldiers did to Jesus. Firstly, they tortured Him (27:27-31), then they took Him out to Calvary, using the bystander Simon to help carry His cross (27:32), and then they crucified Him, shared out His belongings, and placed a charge sheet over His head (27:35-37).

Some have wondered whether Matthew could have found out about all this given that he was not there. From a human point of view, we cannot be certain that Jesus would have remembered them. One suggestion is that Matthew learned about what happened in the Praetorium because he later knew one of the soldiers. Another early Christian tradition suggests that one of them later became a Christian, possibly the centurion who was with Jesus at the end, and who declared '*truly this man was the Son of God!*' (27:54). Again, we cannot know for certain, but it is a reasonable presumption given what we do know.

We can also explain the brevity of Matthew's story in this way. He would have been aware of many stories about what happened when Jesus died, but he only included those facts he felt could be verified from Old Testament scripture. If you scour the Old Testament for references to the maltreatment of God's servant, as in the Psalms (22:6,18), or in Isaiah's prophecies of the 'suffering' servant (53:3,5), then many of them are represented in Matthew's story. The only strange thing about this is that elsewhere in his gospel, Matthew has referred directly to the Old Testament Prophets using a formula of words; '*this was to fulfil what the prophet had spoken ...*' (Matt 2:17, 8:177 amongst many others). Yet he does not do this here in the story of Jesus' death and passion, despite the obvious connections we can readily spot. It may be that Matthew expects us to know these Old Testament passages, and he does not quote them because he does not want the focus to be taken away from the figure of Christ Himself.

Matthew writes using the minimum of details, but this creates a powerful sense of tragedy. If we cannot 'feel' what is going on without having it spelt out for us by Matthew in quotes, references and explanations, then there is surely something missing in our humanity, whatever our 'beliefs' about Jesus. The soldiers mocked and brutalised Jesus and they probably did this to everyone they crucified, but their torture was particular to Him. In a grotesque parody of truth, Jesus was mocked as the '*King of the Jews*' (27:29), but something of Jesus' demeanour may have made them have some sympathy for him. They subsequently took hold of Simon of Cyrene and made him carry Jesus' cross (27:32), offered Him some kind of drug to relieve pain (27:34), and strangely gave Him the honour of the title '*King of the Jews*' in His death (27:37). This last detail could have been further mockery, but one of the other Gospels reports that it was far more than that (John 19:22), and Pilate insisted on the wording of this title board even after objections from the high priests.

In whatever way we analyse the story, it always brings us back to the pain and suffering of the One who died for us that we might be redeemed and brought back to God in life, as well as death.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Jesus in the Praetorium (27:27-30)
- Jesus going to Golgotha (27:31-33)
- Jesus' crucifixion (27:34-36)
- The inscription above Jesus' head (27:34)

Going Deeper

Jesus in the Praetorium (27:27-30)

The Gentile soldiers took Jesus for sport and mocked Him. This was the second time that Jesus had been mocked, having first endured the hatred of the chief priests and elders who spat on him, hit him and mocked prophecy (26:67). This time the cohort of the Governor's guard was gathered, numbering 600 men. Some have questioned whether a whole cohort could have been involved, but many soldiers were mercenaries

from surrounding countries, Syria, Phoenicia and Samaria, and they would have enjoyed mocking an Israelite 'King'.

The scarlet robe was a soldier's cloak, placed on Jesus as a mock royal gown, and the other signs of royalty were improvised, being the famous crown of thorns and the staff (or cane). Verse 29 reads like a mock military parade, each greeting beginning with the taunt 'Hail, King of the Jews', which was the paradoxical truth of course, and ending with the same physical insults the chief priests had earlier used, spitting, and hitting. Some commentators describe this as mockery rather than torture, but for one who had already endured a flogging and was raw with the agony of a severe beating, I suggest this was no mere mockery.

All this fulfilled Jesus' own prophecy (20:19) 'they will hand Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified', spoken as Jesus led His disciples to Jerusalem for His triumphal entry. Isaiah also has a prophecy, traditionally read as a description of the suffering of an Old Testament prophet, which sounds more than that in the light of Jesus' suffering; 'I gave my back to those who struck me ... I did not hide my face from insult and spitting' (Isaiah 50:6). It is also difficult to read Psalm 22 and not feel that the poetry connects with our Lord; 'I am scorned by others, despised by the people, all who see me mock me ...' (22:6,7).

Jesus going to Golgotha (27:31-33)

They took the soldiers' robe from off Jesus' back as he would not be allowed to be crucified in that, and they put his own clothes back on him. It was traditional within the Roman Empire for men to be taken to be crucified naked, but in deference to the Jewish people who regarded any nakedness as an insult, this was not done in Jerusalem. Then they led Jesus out to be crucified (27:31). It is tradition only that Jesus went all the way to the cross with the crown of thorns on His head, but it is a reasonable one, for it expressed the terrible truth of His condemnation by the authorities. Although it is not mentioned again, it remains a powerful reminder of both of why Jesus was killed, but also a demonstration of His supreme authority.

As Jesus went on His journey through Jerusalem to the place of execution, the cross-beam, which prisoners had to carry with them became impossible for Jesus to carry, probably because of the flogging that He had received earlier. It was not uncommon for Roman soldiers to commandeer bystanders to perform this task, and the man on this occasion was Simon, from Cyrene in North Africa. He may have come to Jerusalem for the Passover, or even been part of the small North African community in Jerusalem that had a small synagogue in the city. Tradition certainly has it that Simon was converted because of this experience, which explains the mention of his sons in Mark 15:21. It was not an occasion to forget.

Golgotha was a place outside the existing walls of Jerusalem that was used for executions, and I have used this word in my translation because it is commonly used today. It comes from an Aramaic word meaning 'skull', and the Greek of the New Testament literally reads 'Place of the Skull'. For completion, it is helpful to know as well that the word 'Calvary' comes from the Latin for 'Place of the Skull'. The location of Golgotha has long been agreed as likely to be near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, placing it near a major roadway into the city. It was normal for the Romans to use such a site, as they wanted everyone to see the consequences of rebellion against the Roman State.

Jesus' crucifixion (27:34-36)

It was common for women to offer the poor souls brought to Golgotha a drink of wine spiked with herbs and probably some kind of narcotics, to ease the pain. This was an act of charity inspired by Proverbs 31:6,7; and it is probable that this is what was offered to Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, this happened just before He was hauled onto the cross, but no explanation is offered as to why Jesus refused this kindness. Some believe that it shows Jesus' intent to experience fully the suffering of death, but this is just supposition. For Matthew, it is probably reported in fulfilment of the prophecy of Psalm 69:21 'they gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink', and we have no idea why Jesus did not proceed to drink nor does this necessarily have any deep meaning.

Matthew tells us nothing of the cruelty of the crucifixion itself, perhaps appalled, as a Jew would be, at the inhumanity of the whole thing. However, the lack of words adds a power and dignity to the narrative which would hardly be possible if we were to pour over the details of nails and ropes and wooden beams. With a sense of shock, Matthew tells us that 'when they had crucified Him' the soldiers continued their sport by sharing out Jesus' clothes; his only belongings. It was normal for the soldiers to share out the possessions of one who was crucified, but because Jesus left them so little they had to draw lots, otherwise what would be left to be divided would not be usable. Jesus ended His life with nothing, fulfilling Psalm 22:18, which in the Septuagint version of Jesus' day did indeed say that the soldiers would 'cast lots' for his clothes (whereas if you look it up in your Bible, it says 'divided').

The soldiers kept watch nearby, not for sport, but to ensure the completion of their task and to prevent any attempt at rescue; an issue that will arise later in the Gospel (27:62-66, 28:11-15).

The inscription above Jesus' head (27:37)

What the soldiers did next was to place a placard over Jesus' head stating the charge of His crucifixion. It was written probably with the sense of insult generated by the mocking of Jesus in front of the Praetorian cohort, and yet it spoke the truth in a more powerful and eloquent way than any man could otherwise say 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' Matthew does not report any dispute over this placard, as does John (19:21), and the charge stands imperiously throughout Jesus' suffering on the Cross and His death which comes next.

The fact that the placard was fixed above His head does, incidentally, indicate that the cross Jesus died upon was most likely to be the traditional cross shape with an upright above the head, and not the T shape argued for by some on the basis that this was the normal Roman structure of a cross.

Such speculation, however, does little to help, especially as it is impossible to verify such matters. What is verifiable is that of all the things that happened to Jesus in His life, it is His death that gives purpose to everything He did and said. As we proceed toward the final moments of Jesus' life there must have been for Matthew, a sense of awe at what he was writing.

Application

We learn from this passage the bare facts of Jesus' mockery and treatment by Roman soldiers, the painful walk to Golgotha, the reality of the crucifixion, which is too awful for words, and the profound truth of what was written above His head. In addition, there is plenty that can be explored, including cross references to other scriptures.

Although it is possible to get a wider picture of what happened to Jesus by referring to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, I suggest that each story must be allowed to stand in its own right. We need to read Matthew's account as it is if we want to know what God has for us to learn from what he says, for this is what the Holy Spirit has designed and intended. In this light, it seems that as Jesus comes to the Cross, the details of the soldiers actions reminds us that whatever the meaning of Jesus' death for the Jewish people, He died for these soldiers as well. So, when Isaiah says '*He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He did not open His mouth*' (Isaiah 53:7), it seems that this is fulfilled not just by Jesus' silence before Caiaphas and Pilate, but by His silence before His torturers. In this, Jesus stands with all who have experienced the most horrific of deaths over centuries of human life.

We can imagine that the first hearers of Matthew's Gospel listened to this story and found it hard not to weep; they might well have been shocked at what they read. They may have heard about Jesus' death, but perhaps never before from such a 'human' perspective. One can also imagine that those who were unfamiliar with the story were also deeply affected by it, and it gave them a strong desire to know more. Despite its brevity, few people read this and do not respond in the spirit to its details of savage, torture and crucifixion. Yes, this is how the Son of God died at human hands, and we need to know it.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which parts of this story speak to you? Share your thoughts with others in your group.
2. Try to imagine being mocked by a gathering of 600+ armed men. Now think of Jesus; and discuss what you feel.
3. What mental pictures do you have of Jesus' walk from the Praetorium to Golgotha. Where have you obtained these different images?

Topics covered by this text

- *The torture and mockery of Jesus by soldiers*
- *Jesus' crucifixion at Golgotha*
- *Jesus, the King of the Jews*

Personal comments by author

Each of us must respond to the story of Jesus' death as we are led by the Spirit of God. It is a story that is so profound it can hardly be read without raising deep emotions. It seems almost too simple to say that the

only way we can respond to this 'offering of life' is to offer our lives in return. That, of course, is what disciples have done for centuries, and something which we need to remind ourselves about many times over. We cannot and must surely never forget that the disciple of Jesus is one who lives in the shadow of the Cross. We may never be called to share the same agony and death, but Jesus did this for us, and we owe Him the utmost respect and honour for what he has done for us.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Spend some time alone thinking about what Jesus has done for you. Read the story through slowly, and perhaps some of the rest of the text surrounding this passage. Let the Holy Spirit lead your spirit as He will.*
- *Pray for those who turn away from the Cross because they cannot understand what it is all about. Pray that the world may be prepared to accept that the God who made all things has come to earth in Jesus in order to live and die for us, and make peace between us and our God.*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, You came to earth as a baby boy bringing such hope and joy to so many. Yet at the end, You died for us all so that our sins might be forgiven, and Your death was terrible and cruel. Teach us the meaning of these things so that we do not turn away from either the truth of our redemption or of God's love.
AMEN
