

People At the Cross
Matthew 27: 33 – 44
Good Friday Sermon
April 2, 2010

The crucifixion of Jesus was an event witnessed by multitudes of people. Even though the Jews wanted to distance themselves from the dirty business of executing a fellow Jew by turning Him over to the Roman authorities, thus ensuring Jesus would be put to death outside the city – and outside the view of tender eyes – the Roman practice of public executions guaranteed a circus would occur.

Also, the place of execution was a common place for such official events. Golgotha meant “Place of a Skull,” and the Romans took perverse pleasure in the irony therein. Even the spectacle of a condemned man being paraded out of the city, across the valley through the municipal garbage dump to the barren, rocky hill where thousands of men had met their gruesome fate was used to maximum effect.

Add to the terrible scene of death and suffering the proximity of a main road passing nearby, and it is certain that countless people came near to the place of execution. Of course, many were there intentionally, either out of duty, or cruel enjoyment, or loyalty. Yes, all kinds of people were present at the Cross.

What distinguished these groups of people? Well, most importantly they were identified by their souls, by their spiritual heart attitudes. Let’s study the widely different heart conditions of those persons who were at the Cross that day: (read Scripture)

1. First, there were passers by who demonstrated hard hearts toward Jesus.
 - A. Some chose to intentionally misunderstand Him (v. 39).
 1. “Wagging their heads” was an insulting gesture – akin to trash talking today.
 2. “You Who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days...” was taken out of context of earlier statement Jesus had made prophetically about His coming death, and resurrection on the third day. He never indicated He would perform a demolition/rebuilding miracle using the temple as a prop.
 3. “Save yourself... come down off the Cross...” Was a clear misunderstanding of Jesus’ oft-stated mission to become the sacrificial lamb of God for the sins of the world (in fact it is an echo of one of the devil’s temptation taunts in the wilderness to throw Himself off the pinnacle of the temple and trust God to catch Him before He reached the ground)
2. Second, others understood Him clearly – more clearly than some skeptics do today (vs. 41 – 43).
 - A. The elders and priests were the theological teachers of the day; they certainly understood Jesus’ message about His mission to save the world. His preaching about redemption was clear, certainly to anyone who understood the prophet Isaiah!
 1. A few days earlier these same men were loath to arrest Jesus because of His popularity among the common folk; they had feigned an interest in learning from

His teachings – in order to trap Him. Now their hatred is no longer hidden.

2. They understood clearly He claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God and thus equal with God.

B. Ultimately, we all have to face that crucial choice: is Jesus a liar, or a lunatic, or is He indeed the Lord?

1. The Jewish leaders thought He was a liar, and they called Him “that deceiver.”

2. It is totally absurd to think of Jesus as a good man, but not God; He clearly claimed to be God.

3. Those who heard Him in person understood His message and logically concluded, “he must either be God – as He claims – or He is a liar and a fraud – and perhaps even insane.”

C. Although many modern unbelievers would not approve of or condone the crucifixion, they readily adopt the opinion of the crowd:

1. “He saved others, let Him save Himself;” many believe each of is our own savior.

2. “He intended to rebuild the temple;” the resurrection accounts are false – Jesus never was physically raised from the dead.

3. Millions agree with the mockers.

D. Why this hard-heartedness? 2 Corinthians 4: 3 – 4 tells us why: *“And even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled in those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, Who is the perfect image of God.”*

E. Is your heart hardened spiritually? Many us were – once – but God softened our hearts and prepared us. Is the Holy Spirit at work in your heart?

2. Second, there was the repentant criminal who had a change of heart (Luke 23: 19 – 21).

A. Here we see two hardened criminals – career types who likely had long ago accepted the ending for their lives that now was playing out: crucifixion for their blood-filled lives of crime.

B. Initially they joined the mocking chorus, but something extraordinary happens...

1. One fellow is struck by a lightning bolt of truth: this Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah!

3. He rebuked his companion; he counsels a radical change: repentance.

4. Then he addresses Jesus directly, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom...” He is confessing that what has been rumored is in fact true; Jesus was the Son of God, and He had power as to who entered the kingdom. He acknowledged Jesus as Savior!

C. Salvation can be instantaneous, in a moment of decision.

1. It is not as a result of works, or of keeping rituals.

3. Thirdly, there were friendly faces near the Cross; there were hearts where Christ is at home (Luke 19: 25 – 27).

A. Faithful women emerged from the shadows around Jesus’ ministry even as the men fled into them (Luke 8: 2):

1. Mary, His mother, who had been greeted by an angel before she even

knew she was pregnant; she had a moment when her faith wavered (Mark 3: 21 & 31);

2. Salome, the mother of James and John, possibly an aunt to Jesus;

3. Mary, the wife of Clopas, likely the mother of J;

James the Lesser;

4. Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus had saved by casting out multiple demons.

B. John, the disciple Jesus considered closer than the others; Jesus bequeathed to him the responsibility for Mary, Jesus' mother;

1. This likely meant Jesus felt His biological brothers were unreliable;

2. Jesus was like a father figure to John;

3. Also, John was related to the High Priest, and had less to fear in the coming months.

C. Does Jesus consider YOU a friendly face?

1. Has He so penetrated your heart and life that He can count on you to stand and claim Him as a friend?

Whatever your status, God wants you to open your life to Him – whether early or late in life, from near or afar – and to steadily draw nearer every day of your life. Today, in our imagination, we have stood with the multitudes as Jesus was cruelly nailed to a Roman cross and crucified as cat calls rained on Him and His meager belongings were divided among His executioners; the sun failed, and darkness descended for three hours; women wept and hard-bitten men cried out.

What is your reaction? Every one of us is responsible for our own reaction. Let the Holy Spirit massage your heart, and soften it, so Christ can penetrate to your core.

Let's pray!