

As you have already figured out, today is Palm Sunday when the church celebrates Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Jesus is at the gates of Jerusalem near the end of His earthly journey and His destination with the cross. On this day, Jesus received the kind of welcome that we all hope that He would receive, especially in today's world. The disciples placed their garments on the donkey for a saddle, and the people spread their coats along the road as others waved palm branches to prepare the way for Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem. Not only that but the crowd shouted "Hosanna," which means "save us." This is exactly what we all want and need Jesus to do – to save us. The crowd also cheered: "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

However, as we have seen in our discussion of the book *24 Hours That Changed the World*, the people quickly changed their tune from shouts of "Hosanna" on Palm Sunday to cries of "Crucify Him; Crucify Him" on Friday morning. In a way these people represented the fickle human race Jesus came to save; always running after the latest fads and not taking the time to truly understand who Jesus Christ is. In an attempt to know Jesus better and to truly understand what Jesus has done and is doing for each of us, over the last five Sundays, we have been studying the events in the final 24 hours of Jesus' life prior to the crucifixion.

As I stated at the beginning of this study, we have a tendency to jump from Palm Sunday to Easter morning and overlook the events that took place during Holy Week. Sometimes we don't want to think about the betrayal, denial and desertion that Jesus experienced from His disciples; His torture and humiliation at the hands of the religious leaders and Romans soldiers; and the crucifixion. But if we are to truly understand and appreciate the sacrifice that Jesus made for each of us, then we need to walk this lonely road with Him. So I encourage you to take advantage of the outing to the Stations of the Cross in Santa Fe, the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday Services this week.

This morning we come to the crucifixion which is recorded in all four gospels. Jesus had predicted His death throughout His ministry; He was born with the cross in His destiny. We know the story; many of us have heard it since childhood. Sometimes preachers try to look for new and different angles to the crucifixion, but in reality that is a waste of time and does not do this time honored story any justice. For the crucifixion and the Resurrection define our belief and faith as Christians. So now let's look at the description of the crucifixion in the Gospel of Mark in the fifteenth chapter, verses 24 through 39.

Read Mark 15:24-39

For centuries, the Romans practiced crucifixion as a means of striking fear and obedience into the hearts of the people that they ruled. It was a terrifying death, and made a definite

impression on those who witnessed it; no one wanted to die this way, so they tolerated the Romans and their laws. I know that when I was growing up in the South, we had chain gangs; seeing those guys with leg irons and working on the side of the road in the heat of the day had a definite influence on me to stay out of trouble. The goal of crucifixion was to inflict the maximum agony for the longest possible time. Victims could hang on the cross for days. Depending on what was convenient for the Romans, the victim's arms could be nailed to the cross at the wrists, which were considered a separate part of the hands; or the arms could be tied to the cross with ropes. The feet seem to have always been nailed to the cross.

Now many pictures and movies of the crucifixion show Jesus hanging high above the ground. However, more recent studies have determined that the crosses were no more than nine feet tall. Thus, allowing for the sign at the top of the cross identifying Jesus as the "King of the Jews," it is likely that His feet were no more than three feet above the ground. From this height, Jesus could look into the eyes of His mother; and she could reach out and touch her Son. In addition, He could look down on those who had mocked Him, and hurled insults – those who had insisted that He be crucified and those who were crucifying Him. This makes His prayer all the more remarkable when He prayed: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

As I said last Sunday, as the Son of God, Jesus could have called down legions of angels to bring vengeance on the people, but this was not God's plan. Instead, Jesus pulled himself up and with all His strength offered a prayer on behalf of those who mocked and killed Him. This is something that we all need to remember the next time we feel like lashing out at someone who may have hurt us.

Among those who were hurling insults and mocking Jesus were the very same people who earlier in the week on Palm Sunday had welcomed Him into Jerusalem with shouts of "Hosanna, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." There were also the religious leaders who were getting what they wanted; to get rid of Jesus and His teachings, so they thought. However, they would definitely be in for a surprise in the coming days! And then there were the soldiers whose job it was to carry out the execution. Of course, they got some enjoyment out of this; they didn't like the Jews and being stationed in Jerusalem was not a choice assignment. The crucifixion gave them the opportunity to make fun of a Jewish man and His religion. In addition they got to divide the victim's clothes among themselves.

A centurion was normally in charge of the crucifixion; he was equivalent to a sergeant-major today and was the backbone of the Roman Army. About the sixth hour the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus cried out with a shout of victory: "It is finished." Verse 39 in our reading from Mark states: "When the centurion, who stood facing Jesus, saw how He died, he said: 'This was certainly God's Son.'" Now the centurion had seen many a man die, but no one with the dignity

and assurance of Jesus. He looked Jesus in the eye and saw something that changed his life. When we stop and look into Jesus' eyes we too are changed. We see love that we have never known; hope beyond all the problems of life; and grace that promises that we will live with Jesus forever. This is the very reason that Jesus came to live among us and to die on an old rugged cross on our behalf.

Now I'm just an old dirt engineer and not a doctor; so I don't understand the medical terms of how a victim suffered on the cross. Some believe that asphyxiation was a common cause of death among those crucified; hanging on a cross made it very difficult to exhale without raising oneself up. The longer one hung on the cross and the more exhausted one became, the more difficult it was to exhale. Breathing became more and more shallow, so that crucifixion became a slow death by suffocation. Others believed that a buildup of fluids around the heart caused congestive heart failure. When I attended a spiritual retreat known as the *Walk to Emmaus* in 1987, we were given a nail to hold and then someone read a graphic, I mean graphic medical explanation of how Jesus died. I still remember that night when grown men wept as they realized what Jesus had suffered for them.

Now that we have established that I am just a retired engineer, bear with me as I try to explain again the complex theological doctrine known as atonement. Atonement is defined as "the reconciliation of God and humanity through the life and death of Jesus Christ." Now over the years scholars have come up with several different theories of atonement. In one Jesus is seen as taking our place, receiving the punishment humanity deserves for its sin. In another, Jesus' suffering and death demonstrate the depth of human sin and the breadth of God's love in such a way that is meant to move us to repentance and a deep desire to follow God.

There is also the theory of the sacrificial offerings from the Old Testament. Jesus became God in the flesh, revealing God to us; but He was also fully human. In this capacity, He became our high priest and intercessor with God. As our high priest, He offered a sacrifice to God to atone for the sins of humanity, to reconcile us with the Father. He did not offer a goat or a bull as was done in the Old Testament, but He offered Himself as the Son of Man and as our high priest. In essence, He said: "Father, for these creatures, so small, so broken, so easily lured into hurting one another, for these men and women who do evil to one another and turn their backs on You – for them I offer myself to You to atone for their sins."

The fact that the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death is open to different interpretations, and that even the New Testament authors appear to have different ways of making sense of it seems to indicate that God may well have intended it this way. It is apparent from the gospels that the suffering and death of Jesus were critical to God's plan of salvation, but none of the gospel writers clearly spell out how Jesus' suffering brings about the salvation of the world.

This may be what God wanted; because each of us is a unique individual, maybe God wants each of us to see Jesus' atoning sacrifice differently. Because in reality, we each see God and His Son Jesus Christ differently depending on our backgrounds and circumstances in our lives. While Hebrews 13:8 states that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever, we change with time and with what's going on in our lives. Thus our perspective of God and Jesus changes. At times when we have felt ashamed of something we have done, we see Jesus as our substitute knowing that He has taken the punishment on our behalf. At other times, we have seen our brokenness and sinfulness in His suffering and death, and have been amazed by the love of God that refuses to give up on us. The cross of Jesus has beckoned us at times to give ourselves fully and unselfishly to others and to God's work. At still other times we picture Jesus offering Himself to God on our behalf, and we are moved to gratitude and love.

I hope that this discussion of the crucifixion and what Jesus did for each of us on Calvary has helped you gain a greater appreciation of God's love for you. This love is summed up in those wonderful words of John 3:16-17 – "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." In addition to these verses, I take assurance and hope in 2 Peter 3:9 which states: "God is patient; He does not want anyone to perish, but wants all to repent and be saved." It is my hope that all of us will recognize what Jesus has done for us and will accept Him as our Lord and Savior.

When Jesus died, the veil in the Temple was torn from top to bottom. This veil separated the Holy of Holies, the throne room of God, from the rest of the Temple. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter and only once a year to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people. Thus by His death Jesus as our high priest atoned for our sins with a one time offering. But just important, He removed any barrier between us and God, allowing each and every one of us to have a personal relationship with God. Now this is an awesome opportunity; one which I hope and pray that each of you will or have taken advantage of. As one of my sons told me: "it's not a religion, it's a relationship." In the end it doesn't matter what denomination you belonged to or where you went to church; all that really matters is your personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

As we prepare to celebrate the Risen Lord next Sunday, what is your relationship with Him? Is He a friend or a stranger; is He closer than a brother or distant? During the past five weeks, have you grown closer to Him or has all this talk about what Jesus experienced during Holy Week on our behalf gone in one ear and out the other? I hope that you will take these questions seriously, because your place in eternity depends on how you answer. Jesus came to save each of us and to have a personal relationship with us. Don't pass up this opportunity; if

there is any doubt in your mind or if you have never accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then during the closing hymn open your heart to Him and receive His grace and love made available to you on the cross at Calvary. Amen