

Good Friday: Matthew 27:27-50  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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April 7, 2023

### **A Slave's Death**

Some three or four decades before the birth of Christ, the residents of Rome witnessed the construction of the first heated swimming pool. The pool was built on the Esquiline Hill, a location just outside the city's ancient walls, which had only recently been deemed prime real estate. In time, the Esquiline Hill would become a showcase for some of the wealthiest people in the world: an immense expanse of luxury villas and parks, the ancient world's equivalent of Beverly Hills or the Hamptons.

But there was a reason why the land beyond Esquiline Gate had been left undeveloped for so long. For many centuries, from the very earliest days of Rome, this land had been a place of the dead, an open grave yard. When laborers first began work on the swimming pool, the corpse stench still hung in the air. A ditch, once part of the city's venerable defensive system, had been littered with the bodies of slaves and others too poor to be laid to rest in tombs. Vultures flocked there in such numbers that they were known as "the birds of the Esquiline." Nowhere else in Rome was a process of gentrification quite so dramatic as at the Esquiline. The marble fittings, the tinkling fountains, the perfumed flower beds—provided a veil to disguise from wealthy Romans the fact that they were walking over a mass graveyard.

The process of reclaiming the area beyond the Esquiline gate took a long time, however. Even decades after the initial development, vultures would still be seen there, wheeling over a site known as the Sessorium, which still remained what it had always been: the place set aside for the execution of slaves. There, troublesome nobodies would be nailed to crosses, exposed to public view like slabs of meat's hung from a market stall. Even as seedlings imported from exotic lands began to be planted across the emerging park land of the Esquiline, these "bare trees," the crosses, remained as signs of its sinister past.

No death was more excruciating, more contemptible, than crucifixion. To be hung naked, long in agony, swelling with fluid in their lungs, helpless to beat away the clamorous birds - such a fate, Roman writers agreed, was the worst imaginable. Which made it, in their minds, so suitable as punishment for slaves. You see, Rome was built on the backs of slaves, their economy was based on it, their luxury dependent on it. Everywhere you looked, in every household or estate, there were slaves busily working for their masters. So many in fact that their masters feared that, without strict rules and severe sanctions like crucifixion to keep them in line, the entire order of the city might fall apart.

Still, most Romans had mixed feelings about crucifixion. Naturally, in order to serve as a deterrent to misbehavior, it needed to be public-- nothing spoke more eloquently of a failed revolt than the sight of hundreds upon hundreds of bodies of rebels hung on crosses, whether lining a highway or else massed before a rebellious city, the hills all around it stripped bare of their trees. Yet because the crucified were exposed to the public gaze, the citizens could not

ignore the barbarity of the practice. So foul was the stench of their disgrace that many felt tainted just by viewing a crucifixion.

So awful was it, in fact, that Romans couldn't countenance the possibility that they were the ones to come up with it—they were too civilized. Only a people known for their barbarity and cruelty could have ever devised such a torture - the Persians, perhaps, or the Assyrians, or the Gauls. Everything about the practice of nailing a man to a cross was repellent. "Why, the very word is harsh on our ears," one writer said.

It was this disgust that crucifixion uniquely inspired that explained why, when slaves were condemned to death, these executions were undertaken in the meanest stretches of land beyond the city walls, away from the good citizens, not in my backyard, over *there*, out of sight, if not entirely out of mind. This explains too why, when Rome burst its ancient boundaries, only the planting of the world's most exotic and aromatic plants could serve to mass the taint. This was also why, despite how widespread crucifixion was across the Roman world, few cared to think much about it. Order had to be maintained, that was what was important, not the lives of such vermin who presumed to challenge it. Why should such filth be of concern to men of breeding and civility?

The surprise, then, is less that we should have so few detailed descriptions of crucifixion in ancient literature, than they should have any at all. It wasn't the sort of thing that made the news or was thought worthy of being documented by ancient writers. Yet, amid the general silence, there is one major exception which proves a rule. Four detailed accounts have survived from antiquity, and then suffer its of the process by which a man might be sentenced to the cross and then suffer its punishment. I'm speaking of course of the Passion stories from the Gospels, each of which tells of the horrendous death by crucifixion that Jesus suffered. Some, in trying to make connections to today, have likened the crucifixion to modern day executions by electrocution or lethal injection, but those deaths, as tragic as they are, do not come anywhere close to the horror that was death on a cross.

Some years ago I read a doctor's explanation of what happened when someone was crucified. It was a truly awful way to die—suspended by stakes driven into the nerves behind your wrists, pinned in a cramped position for hours, days, having to push yourself up through the pain so as not to drown in the fluids in your lungs, until finally, mercifully exhaustion gets the better of you. and you give up, give in. And for Jesus this torture came after first being flogged, whipped, thirty times. The blood loss from that alone would be enough to kill someone. Critics of Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion* from twenty years ago complained that the movie was too bloody, too brutal. But in truth he probably undersold its horribleness. Crucifixion was a nasty, terrible, painful, humiliating way to die. Something Romans countenanced only for slaves, the scum of the empire, and so fitting for a backwater peasant like Jesus who was stirring up trouble among his people. Best to just get rid of him, by crucifixion, to remind his people who was boss.

You may be asking yourself why I am dwelling on all these horrific details of Jesus' crucifixion. Why be so gruesome, so graphic? Isn't it enough to know that Jesus suffered and died? Perhaps, to some extent. But it is easy for us, sitting in a climate-controlled building, in a major American city, in the wealthiest country in the world, with all the advantages of advanced medicine,

industry, and legal protections, to gloss over the horrifying reality of Jesus' death. The accounts of the Passion that we have, while fuller than just about any other description we have of crucifixion, are in reality not all that detailed. They're sparse in their descriptions of what Jesus underwent, likely trusting that their original audience knew well enough what crucifixion entailed and so they didn't need to be explicit. But we on the other hand, we modern-day believers living some two thousand years later—we need to be reminded of what actually happened, how brutal it was. Not to revel in so much pain and gore, nor to work up a sense of pious indignation at what was done to our Savior, but rather to appreciate more fully what the cross meant for Jesus and for us.

For, we Christians see in the cruel, wretched death of Jesus not simply a miscarriage of justice, or a violation of human rights, or even an act of state-sponsored terrorism—though it was all these things. Rather, what we see in the crucifixion is the depths God is willing to descend to save us. God so loved the world, the world that hated and feared him and that was bent on destroying the goodness of God's creation, God loved *this world* so much, that he sent his Son to us, taking on the form of a man, even that of a slave, and then dying a slave's death, strung up naked and bleeding outside the walls of Jerusalem, like so many others had died in the Esquiline outside Rome. But more than just another example of "man's inhumanity to man," what Jesus' crucifixion shows us is God's commitment to us, his willingness even to sacrifice himself in the most painful and shameful way, so that we can be with him. On the cross, we see what love, true love, God's love looks like—a life broken and poured out for sinful humanity, giving his life that we may have life and joy and forgiveness in him. This is why, instead of calling this day dark or tragic or disastrous, we dare to call it "good." Amen.