

10TH SCRIPTURAL STATION - JESUS IS CRUCIFIED

by Fr Robbie Low

(Lk 23 v 33-34. Jn 19 v17-24. Mk 15 v 24-28. Mt.27 v 35-38)

A medical report:

This morning's lecture, gentlemen, is not for the squeamish.

But, then again, you presumably would not be medical students if you were easily distressed by the contemplation of blood or pain.

Most of the time we are dealing with the morbid happenstance of human pathology. Occasionally we are picking up the pieces of the brutal consequence of premeditated inhumanity.

Crucifixion is not a novelty. It was, we believe, first employed by the Persians in the 5th century BC , enthusiastically evangelised across his empire by the remarkable general and keen sodomite, Alexander the Great and refined in cruelty by the Roman State.

As a means of discouragement to the enemies of the state it has little equal. Hoisting the condemned up into a visual vantage point and causing maximum pain is an art form. Lining the main roads with such exhibits leaves an irremovable image on the psyche of the observer. The sounds of public unashamed torture and the cries of the dying are not easily forgotten.

How does it work?

We are fairly clear that the prelude to the formal procedure was a thorough flogging of the victim – whips studded with metal or bone. This, like the picador in a bullfight, weakens the object of torture, causes blood loss,

dehydrates, subjects the corpus to profound and sustained shock.

Then the victim would be obliged to carry his crossbeam – weight anywhere between 75 and 125 pounds – to the place of execution.

This beam, the *patibulum*, translates as ‘gallows’ but is literally ‘the place of suffering’. And so it is.

In order to affix the body securely to its sky anchor, it is necessary to select points which give stability and are unlikely to tear or destabilise the writhing creature, causing embarrassment to the executioner.

Such evidence as we have indicates that the hand is no place for this.

The obvious choice is the wrist, punching the six inch nail between the ends of the radius and the ulna thereby giving both a moving hinge, for when the condemned seeks to raise himself to breathe, and the maximum agony by damaging the median nerve. To be still is to suffer terribly, to move is excruciating but necessary as the body struggles to breathe against the drowning weight of death.

Similarly, at the other end, the tissues of the feet are too feeble to sustain the infliction. The nails must be driven through the ankle joints or just above.

Again, maximum leverage, maximum suffering.

The portraits of this procedure sometimes suggest a sloping saddle halfway up the upright for respite but this seems unlikely and contrary to the device’s primary intention.

Piercing in this way continues the predictable blood loss and the growing strain on the system. Cause of death may be various and multiple. Cardiac arrest, a simple overload of the system. Asphyxiation, the growing inability to sustain a position in which the lungs could receive oxygen. Hypovolemic shock – not

enough blood or fluid in the system for the heart to function.

Those who took days rather than hours to die could be the subject of sepsis from wounds, dehydration or, overnight, animal predation.

All in all, gentlemen, not to be commended as a first choice method of departure from this mortal coil.

Two little points of historic interest.

You will all be aware that the most famous Crucifictee, if I may call Him that, was Jesus.

The position of the hand, in many depictions of His martyrdom, typifies the Median clench. That is where the last two fingers retract in response to the damage of the median nerve and the first two fingers erect themselves. This response to the agony, ironically but hugely significantly, gives the traditional position of the hand of the Christian priest in blessing the faithful.

Second.

To confirm death the attendant guards would deliver a blow to the right chest and heart. If the condemned was punctured post-mortem the fluid would flood out of the wound. If stabbed ante-mortem, before blood and pulmonary oedema saturated the lungs, no liquid would drain. This was an efficient and effective way to confirm death of those being crucified.

Put shortly, gentlemen, St. John's account was absolutely 'on the money'.

This may give you some insight into why the followers of Jesus refer to this moment as 'the Sacrifice'. And why they look with amazement and wonder and thanksgiving on the price He was prepared to pay for their salvation.