

## 13<sup>th</sup> SCRIPTURAL STATION - JESUS DIES ON THE CROSS

By Fr Robbie Low

(Lk 23 v 44 -46. Mt 27 v 45-56. Mk 15 v 33 – 39. Jn.19 v 28-30)

An Agnostic responds:

Here we are, then. The place where the crossbeam meets the upright.

The crossroads of history.

A scruffy mound outside an insignificant city in an unimportant province.

A bank holiday execution. Two terrorists and a clergyman.

All Jews, all from that self important, over-rated, much despised and peculiar people with an obsession about their little and, largely unsuccessful deity.

You only to have to look at their history to knock that one on the head.

If that's how He treats His friends, who needs enemies? And all illusion anyway. When the troops finally stormed their little temple forty years on, what did they find in their Holy of Holies, their tabernacle, their inner sanctum? Not a statue, not a votive, not a sign, not an altar, nothing, nada, zippo. Just fresh air, a void, a veritable real absence, an illusion of significance.

All gone now.

But still..... here on this unlikely hummock, on this simple and cunningly cruel engine of death, we are told, hangs the fate of the world, bleeds out the destiny of Man.

He should, by rights, not be remembered at all. He never wrote a book. He never won a battle. He never held any of the great offices of State. And yet, here we are. All men, down the centuries to come, have to encounter this

enigma and either explain Him or explain Him away. Every other religion, philosophy or political schema runs up against this strange dying, this everyday event in the Empire which somehow or other changed every day thereafter and came to rule the empire itself. Oh, yes the dying man had the last laugh, if you can say that as He chokes on blood and failing air.

According to His gang, He is or was the Son of God. Strange fate for divine royalty, but not unknown. The pagans have their dying/rising fertility gods – but that's more an excuse for a great party – girls galore then sacrifice the unwanted products of a night on the tiles to the god whose fault it was, getting you drunk, in the first place. Much like now really.

But this morphed into something different, a total cosmic schema – and 'morphed' is the word. They claim a Metamorphosis took place on another mountain earlier – Transfiguration they call it – a preview of Heaven, the gathering of History, the primordial light by which all things came to be revealed in this strange shapeshifter of infused humanity.

It will not be long now. They've beaten Him half dead already. The nails instead of ropes mean that there is no leverage, no agonising relief, just weight and pain and airless suffocating death as the heart, quite soon, will fail to take the strain or simply miss too many beats and succumb to shock or drowning in a surge of its own oedemic tide.

He has heaved Himself Heavenwards several times to speak so far.

Most of the victims I have seen weep for themselves or, dying game, shout imprecations at their torturers and life in general, a last two-fingered salute to this ungrateful and unkind world. But not this Man. He has absolved the perpetrators, the conspirators, the 'only obeying orders' job lot of them. His

regime, when it comes and when it is the real thing, will, apparently, be characterised by Mercy.

'Father, forgive them – they don't know what they are doing'.

Of course they do. They know they are unjustly killing a man, rubbing out an inconvenience to their regime and survival. But, no, they can't have even begun to guess the consequences, the universal faith that would overwhelm the world that started at this moment of history and, down all the years, advertises itself by this device of death and this dangling man.

Who is He to forgive? I believe that question has been asked before. Only God..

And there's the rub.....God. What self respecting God would allow His creatures to treat Him like this. That He become His own only worthy sacrifice for their, for our, sins. How humiliating. There is no place in our paganism for such crazy compassion. Our gods reflect our desperate humanity, capricious cruel, self serving, puppeteers of mortal man.

This, they say, is the place to which His followers return, day by day, to invest themselves in mercy, to infuse themselves with this dying sacrifice which, so they claim, will shortly burst the bonds of death and restore to rotten, ruined man his long lost place in God's eternity. They return to Calvary..... The Mass, I think, they call it or liturgy or eucharist or communion with the holy.

Return here? To Skull Hill?

Because, they say, this is the place where God takes on the final destiny of Man, involves His immortality in our mortality, breaks down the doors of the dungeons of the dead, lifts up humanity into His divinity – apotheosis – undreamt of dream of Man. This is the place, upon their altars, where, they believe, time and eternity intersect.

Truly pathetic. You won't believe this but He has just promised that wretched man on the neighbouring cross a place in paradise. Made delusional by pain, I imagine. But no, His followers, it turns out, are equally indiscriminating. Any old ragbag of a sinner can join. At least at my lodge there is a proper procedure, vetting, approval of status, calculation of finance, civic worthiness. Imagine just letting anyone in? Who would want to join such a club? Who would want to share the mystic secrets of the hierarchy and the ritual keys to the divine ascent with the offscourings of humanity. Standards, please.

Ah, now we come to it. He cried out, I know the Aramaic to which He now returns. 'My God, why have you forsaken me?'

'Well, I suppose, at least He still believes in God. But now He is finally admitting that it's all been a terrible mistake. Tragic, really. I almost felt a wave of pity for the poor misguided fellow. What a moment to realise it's all been for nothing. God is a definite no-show on this unforgettable date.

It was a few days later, in a downtown bar, post-festival, I met one of His covert followers, Nick, I think his name was. He got out the old hymnbook and pointed up the Psalm the dying man was quoting. Word for word a description of the crucifixion, a prophecy – written a thousand years before by King David. You could have knocked me down with a feather.

And that wasn't the end of it. The psalm ends very differently, listen.....

'All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord;  
and all the families of the nation shall worship before him.  
For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

To him shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,

and I myself shall live for him.

Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord  
and proclaim his salvation to a people yet unborn,  
The Lord has done it.'

Extraordinary. Nick started to tell me the things that had happened over the  
last few days. Highly implausible, I thought, but was too polite to interrupt his  
excited chatter.

I just recall hearing the dying man commend His soul to God and cry out,  
'It is finished.'

You, of course, with your great leader Captain Hindsight, know what he meant.  
I was not alone, at the time, in thinking that it really was – finished, that is.