

FACES AROUND THE CROSS

INTRODUCTION

- A. Isa. 53:7. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.

I. WERE YOU THERE WHEN THEY CRUCIFIED OUR LORD?

A. The Roman Soldiers

1. To them, post-graduates of a lifelong schooling in callous disregard for human life, this execution was but a routine task. They treated it as such. We cannot judge them too harshly, however, because they were merely the instruments of the state, victims of a cruel, fatalistic system; nor can we censure them too severely for turning the tragedy into horseplay and jest at times, because their irreverence was but the legitimate offspring of their training and incidental to their cynical attitude towards life. The soldiers mocked Him, Luke says. This is a word picture: Pais means a child, whence Paizo as used here means to play in the manner of children. and what after all were these poor souls but children! How could they have known better? How could they be expected to have understood the awful significance of that sublime tragedy in which they were participating!
2. Particularly was the superscription, which Pilate had caused to be painted and nailed to the Cross above the Master's head, a source of merriment to them. "King of the Jews!" they sneered; "if thou art a king of the Jews, save thyself!" I am convinced, however, that this taunting wasn't intended for the Sufferer so much as it was for the ears of those Jewish scribes and priests who were standing close by. Here was an opportunity to pour a little salt into a raw wound and those Romans were more than willing to take advantage of it. "When the Cross was uplifted," says Farrar, "the leading Jews, for the first time, prominently noticed the deadly insult in which Pilate had vented his indignation. Before, in their blind rage, they had imagined that the manner of His crucifixion was an insult aimed at Jesus; but now that they saw Him hanging between the two robbers, on a cross yet loftier, it suddenly flashed upon them that it was a public scorn inflicted upon them. For on the white wooden tablet smeared with gypsum, which was to be seen so conspicuously over the head of Jesus on the cross, ran, in black letters, an inscription in the three civilized languages of the ancient world ... informing all that this Man who was thus enduring a shameful, servile death - the Man thus crucified between two sicarii in the sight of the world - was "THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Life of Christ, pp. 513-514).
3. Their indifference is particularly noticeable in the irreverent manner in which they sat down at the

foot of the Cross and cast dice for the Savior's garments. "Look at them!" writes Dr. Stalker, "chaffering, chattering, laughing; and above their heads, not a yard away, that Figure! What a picture! The Son of God atoning for the sins of the world, whilst angels and glorified spirits crowd the walls of the celestial city to look down at the spectacle; and, within a yard of His sacred Person, the soldiers in absolute apathy gambling for these poor shreds of clothing." Yes, those soldiers were instinctively gamblers! Life to them was a gamble, and they gambled with everything in life! Greed may have also motivated them. As someone has written: "Nothing but utilitarian interest - that's all. A game of chance played at the foot of Calvary! Nothing is sacred in the eyes of greed. Religion, chastity, morals must go, when greed lays hold on a man's heart. Divine sacrifice and human greed met at the Cross. They meet today in every walk of life!"

4. "And sitting down, they watched him there.
The soldiers did;
There, while they played with dice,
He made his sacrifice,
And died upon the Cross to rid
God's world of sin.
He was a gambler, too, my Christ --
He took his life and threw
It for a world redeemed.
And ere his agony was done,
Before the westering sun went down,
Crowning that day with crimson crown,
He knew that he had won."

5. After all in what respect were those Roman soldiers so different from thousands of our own day and age, even in so-called Christian lands, who live in abject irreverence and indifference,

"Just as if Jesus had never lived,
As if He had never died?"

B. THE JEWISH LEADERS

1. They scoffed at Him, Luke says (23:35). Here we have another word picture: from mukter, "the nose," comes mukterizo, which means "to contract the nose in contempt."
2. They pelted Him with epithets uttered in derision and scorn, such as "the Son of God," "the Chose of God," "the King of Israel," "the Christ," "the King of the Jews," etc.-- names and titles which had been applied to Him or which He had assumed for Himself in His teaching. "Thou that destroyest the temple and buildest it up in three days!" "If thou art the Son of God, come down from the cross!" "He saved others; himself he cannot save!" Thus "they poured out the gall which had long been accumulating in their hearts;" not noticing, in their venomous abandon, that they were using the very expressions attributed in the twenty-second Psalm to the enemies of the divine Savior. Of course Jesus

might have answered them had He so desired or had there been anything to have been gained by it. One wonders whether or not He was tempted to come down from the Cross on hearing these challenges from all sides. How easily He could have allowed His glory to blaze forth to confound them or have called down fire from heaven to consume them! But had He saved Himself, He could not have been the Savior of mankind. "Had He saved Himself, He would not have been the Savior. Yet the power that kept Him on the Cross was a far mightier One than would have been necessary to leave it. It was not by the nails through His hands and feet that He was held, nor by the ropes with which His arms were bound, nor by the soldiers watching Him; no, but by invisible hands, by the cords of redeeming love and by the constraint of a Divine design" (Salkner, Trial and Death of Jesus Christ). So He answered not a word. "When he was afflicted he opened not his mouth; as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." (Isa. 53:7).

C. THE CROWD AT THE CROSS

1. The people at first followed the example of their rulers, so that "the crowd under His eyes became a sea of scorn, whose angry waves dashed up against His cross." Such fury, however - manufactured fury, the fury of the mob - soon spends itself. The people were soon sickened by the brutality of the affair. Moreover, the kingly silence of the Man of Sorrows, "joined to His patient majesty and the divine holiness and influence which radiated from Him like a halo" was sufficient to quell the most riotous demonstration. And when the darkness began to settle down over the land, the tumult of derision subsided into a hub of superstitious awe, broken only here and there by cries of fear. Many, alarmed by the lowering of that mysterious darkness, fled from the Hill of the Skull as if ten thousand phantoms were pursuing them; but many no doubt remained there, waiting for the death-rattle to be heard in the Victim's throat. Then at the last came the earthquake. This was sufficient to strike fear into the hearts of the most skeptical, so that many of those who lingered to the end went back to their homes, when it was all over, "smiting their breasts" in an agony of remorse (Luke 23:48); "probably a prophecy of Israel's future repentance and mourning as they 'look at him whom they have pierced'" (Erdman, The Gospel of Luke).

D. THE WOMEN

1. The most pathetic group of all was that little band of disciples who "stood afar off" gazing upon the scene in bewilderment. For them the significance of the Cross would not begin to dawn until their meeting with the risen Lord, the Conqueror of death and the grave. Just now they were waiting, hoping against hope, for a miracle, for God to open the gates of glory and walk out in thunders and lightnings as He had done at Sinai in days of old. But

when no miracle came, and when there was no longer any doubt that their Master was dead, they straggled away from the place disappointed, disillusioned, heartsick, their hopes as dead as the body which hung upon that middle cross! They said one to another, "But we hoped that it was he who should redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21).

2. Among the disciples present were the few women who had served Him so faithfully in His public ministrations. They were huddled together as near the Cross as they dared be; no doubt they would have rushed forward and thrown their arms around His limbs and bathed His feet with their tears, had it not been for those unfeeling legionaries sitting there casting dice for His garments. The names of these few women have gone down in the list of the world's immortals. First of all there was the heart-broken Mother, who had once been the Virgin Mary. With her were Mary Magdalene, Mary the wife of Cleopas, Salome the mother of James and John, and perhaps also Joanna, wife of Chuza. What must have been their varied emotions in this crisis! The same growing despair, the same sickening disappointment the disciples felt on seeing the cause collapse to which they had given themselves for time and eternity! But at the same time an overwhelming love for the Crucified One, an overpowering pity as they suffered with Him, and a profound comfort and support. He was sustained all through His sufferings by the thought of the multitudes without number who would benefit from what he was enduring; but here before His eyes was an earnest of His reward; and in them He saw the travail of His soul and was satisfied."

"Mary the Mother of Christ was there
And John whom He'd chosen to care for her;
Simon who'd helped Him His Cross to bear
And Joseph who'd offered his sepulchre;
He who had come under darkness' guard
And she that 'loved much' on her bended knees,
Magdalene, bringing her precious nard;
All Christendom stands at the Cross with
these."

CONCLUSION:

"Has it ever occurred to you to ask in which group you would have been had you been there? This is a searching question. Of course it is easy now to say which were right and which were wrong. It is always easy to admire the heroes and the causes of bygone days; but it is possible to do so and yet be apathetic or antipathetic to those of our own. Even the roman soldiers at the foot of the cross admired Romulus and Cincinnatus and Brutus, though they had no feeling for the One at their side greater than these. The Jews who were mocking Christ admired Moses and Samuel and Isaiah. Christ is still bearing His Cross through the streets of the world, and is hanging exposed to contempt and ill-treatment; and it is possible to admire the Christ of the Bible and yet be persecuting and opposing the Christ of our own century. The Christ of today signifies the truth, the cause, the principle of Christ, and the men and women in whom these are embodied. We are either helping or

hindering those movements on which Christ has set His heart; often, without being aware of it, men choose their sides and plan and speak and act either for or against Christ. This is the Passion of our own day, the Golgotha of our own city" (Stalker, Trial and Death of Jesus Christ).