

## **At the Foot of the Cross**

Port Macquarie – March 26, 2005

### **Introduction:**

At Passover time in Jerusalem in AD 31 over a million people would camped within and without the city. Over half a million people had to have their lambs killed in a two hour period just before twilight.

Thankfully, there was a dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees about the reckoning of time – the Pharisee's and half of the Jews taking the day from sunrise to sunrise, and the Sadducees and the other half taking it from sundown to sundown. Therefore, they were able to split the killing over two days.

But still, to get 250,000 pure, white lambs killed in two hours they would have had to have had over 500 priests killing at a rate of 4 per minute to get all the lambs killed. It was said that the blood flowed like a torrent down the Kidron Valley for quite some time.

While all this was going on, the spotless Lamb of God, was going to the cross, to let His own blood flow, so that whosoever believe on Him, would never have to kill a lamb again.

At about 9AM on Friday morning, having not slept since Wednesday night, and probably then only very little knowing the time He needed to spend with His Father, Jesus is found nailed to the cross.

Desire of Ages tells us that a "vast multitude" were at the foot of the cross – and it is the make up of that multitude that I want to have a look at this morning.

Friends, I believe that at the foot of the cross on that Friday in AD31, you will find representatives of every person that has lived on this earth, and it is how we react when placed at the foot of the cross and who we choose to represent us there, that determines our destiny. Let me explain what I mean.

## 1. The church leaders and members:

These men, led by Caiaphas the Sadducee, had conspired, plotted, planned and schemed this moment for a long time. They were gloating, smiling, mocking, jeering, slandering the Son of God.

It is important to understand how incredibly religious these men were:

- They would write parts of Moses law on parchments and strap it to their body
- They stood in the temple courts and prayed loud, elaborate prayers
- They tithed garden herbs
- They strained all their water in case a minute insect was in it and they might accidentally drink an unclean animal
- They would have heated theological discussions in the streets so that people were impressed with their knowledge.
- They had an extremely elaborate set of Sabbath keeping rules
- 11 special laws related to the making of bread
- 12 regarding the making of clothes
- 7 regarding the preparing of the carcass of a deer

But at the same time they were prepared to set aside every rule of fairness and law to kill the Son of God. They were members of the Sanhedrin that had an elaborate set of guidelines for legal practice:

- Two credible witnesses had to be found – Matthew 26:60 clearly says that the witnesses were false, and Mark 14:54 says that the witnesses did not agree.
- The Sanhedrin was supposed to act as an independent party and the prosecuting was to be done by others – but it was the chief priests and elders that were soliciting evidence against Jesus
- The trial had to be a public one – but it took place at night, at Annas's house
- The defense had to be given the right to give evidence – no right was granted
- There was no indictment (charges laid) before he was asked to answer his accusers
- The members of the Sanhedrin were certainly not supposed to hit and spit on the accused, which is exactly what they did as recounted in Matthew 26:67-68.

Now at the foot of the cross they are still at it.

They were keen to see their man killed so they could make sure they were home in time to kill their Passover Lamb and have a blessed, happy Sabbath.

They strutted and swaggered among the crowd saying “He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He be the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God, let Him deliver Him now, if He will have Him.”

Of all the people at the foot of the cross – these were the most culpable. These are the ones that should have known better.

## **Represents:**

The chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees and Sadducees represent a class of people today who, when found at the foot of the cross are very religious, but are not one bit godly. People like that still exist.

- In the name of religion Protestants kill Catholics, and Catholics kill Protestants in Northern Ireland.
- In the name of religion Jews kill Muslims and Muslims kill Jews in the West Bank and Gaza strip
- In the name of religion terrorists feel honoured to kill innocent people because they represent an ideology
- In the name of religion priests kill the innocence of little children by molesting them

Bringing it a little closer to home:

- sometimes people come to church and refuse to talk to the people sitting in the next pew. Jesus said “that whoever is angry at his brother without a cause” is killing him.
- Jesus said that some will come to Him saying “Lord, Lord, we have prophesied in your name, cast out devils, done wonderful works”, but He will say, “I never knew you, depart from me – Ye that work iniquity!”

There is a class in the world that at the foot of the cross are very religious, but not very godly.

We can be very religious, but being religious doesn't get you to heaven.

It's not how regularly you attend church

It's not how much tithe you pay

It's not how many times you've taken the lesson or preached a sermon

It's not what you do and don't eat

Understand me now, those things are all important, and are the fruit.

But friends the most important thing is how well you know Jesus:

- How much time did you spend this week talking to Him?
- How much time did you spend this week learning of Him through His word?
- Did you give Him your heart every morning?

Friends, let not play religious games like the church leaders were at the foot of the cross, let's come to the foot of the cross with an earnest desire to know Jesus, and go from there empowered to live a godly, not just religious, life.

## 2. The mocking majority

In Matthew 27:39 it says that “those that passed by reviled him” or in the New International Version “those that passed by hurled insults at him”.

It was Jewish law that a person should be executed “outside the camp”, or “outside the city (Numbers 15:35) for fear of defilement. The Romans also executed “outside the camp”, but for a different reason. They would select the busiest thoroughfare so that the criminal was made an example of, for both public humiliation for the criminal and a deterrent to passersby.

BUT, what would cause someone who was just passing by to hurl insults at Him? Why would they be interested?

You can understand someone that had come to the crucifixion for a purpose hurling insults at Him, but why those that “passed by”?

I think the secret is found in Desire of Ages p743.

“Of the multitude that followed the Saviour to Calvary, many had attended Him with joyful hosannas and the waving of palm branches as he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem. But not a few who had then shouted his praise, **because it was popular to do so**, now swelled the cry of “Crucify Him, Crucify Him!”

Could it be that not only those that followed him to the cross but also many of those that were passing by simply got caught up in the mood of the day – the popular sport, if you like?

Inspiration also tells us that many of those that were in the crowd, spurred on and encouraged by the priests and elders, had never even laid eyes of Jesus before this time. Ellen White calls it a “satanic frenzy.”

She also says that these same people, having hurled insults at the Son of God on the cross, were silenced and fearful when darkness fell on the scene and they beheld the final death of Jesus. She says many went home in silence and about 7 weeks later were converted by the preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost.

At the foot of the cross, were they looking at the cross, or what was going on around them? Primarily what was going on around them and what it was popular to do.

What does that tell us about human nature? We are prone to “go with the flow”. It’s not popular to make a stand that is contrary to majority view, and we try so hard to be popular.

## **Represents:**

The mocking majority represent a class of people today who, when found at the foot of the cross may be religious, but are simply living on the experience of others, and will go where the popular mood of the day takes them. People like that still exist.

Lacking the depth of experience with Jesus themselves they attempt to gain an experience through others.

That was the problem with the foolish virgins in the parable of Jesus.

- They wanted to meet the bridegroom
- They wanted to attend the marriage supper
- They were associating with those that had an authentic experience.

But they did not have the spirit for themselves.

Friends, look at your own experience – does it bear any resemblance to that outlined in that passage?

If we wanted to fill this church, it would be easy.

- Put some video screens up the front here
- Maybe some strobe lights, and smoke machines
- Loud music
- A speaker that jumps up and down and shouts a lot and tells lots of cool stories

People will follow that – but will they leave it with an authentic, saving relationship with Jesus Christ?

Remember the process of the mocking majority:

- Palm branches and hosannas one week
- Mocking and hurling insults at the same person the next week
- True conversion a few weeks later

There is a grave danger in your religious experience if it is based on what is popular. It should only be based on what you see on the cross when you are standing at its foot, not on what is happening around you.

### **3. The heartless Roman soldiers:**

#### **Matthew 27:26-30**

A Roman soldier would have seen many a crucifixion, many a flogging, many a cruel treatment dished out to criminals. Like Jews killing Passover Lambs, they had become benumbed by familiarity and repetition. So they could torment, mock, insult, batter, break bones, rip flesh, bruise, spit, curse and deride all day, and not be too concerned about it.

And on this occasion they had a large, enthusiastic crowd to play to.

On this occasions they would have thought it just another religious extremist from this troublesome part of the Roman empire.

A Roman cohort was a band of 600 soldiers, so the atmosphere that could be generated with so many persons motivated by hatred was frightening.

Remember he had already been slapped around by the Jewish leaders. He had already been flogged until his back was a mush of torn flesh, quivering muscles and black bruises. And now, for sport, the Roman soldiers mocked him.

They slapped Him with open hands, and laughed.

They spat on his face, and laughed.

They hit his head with the reed, and laughed.

They placed the cross on His soldiers (approx 90 kgs), and laughed.

They pushed him roughly toward Calvary, and laughed.

They nailed spikes through his wrist, and laughed.

They dropped the cross crudely into a hole in the ground, and laughed.

They didn't know who they were doing it to, but that does not lessen their guilt.

## **Represents:**

The heartless, Roman soldiers represent a class of people today who, when found at the foot of the cross are irreligious, but have a violent and passionate disregard for those that are. People like that still exist.

- Muslim's are forbidden to become Christian under threat of death
- Extremists in Hinduism and Judaism violently oppose Christian efforts to evangelise.
- The Satanic and pagan churches are growing rapidly and are very strongly opposed to Christianity.
- The Harry Potter books and their concentration on magic and the occult are causing people to look with more scorn on Christianity.

There is a class at the foot of the cross that are not Christian, and are violently opposed to those that are.

And the big challenge to the Christian is to love them anyway. Jesus said "Forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

There's a challenge:

Have you had your name tarnished by a fellow Christian? Love them anyway

Have you been ridiculed for your religion? Love them anyway

Have you had to suffer peer pressure to conform to a worldly practice? Love them anyway

That's hard yakka, isn't it? But if you really know Jesus, if He is controlling your life, you can do it.

#### 4. The traders for Jesus garments

Every gospel mentions this event, but the one that provides the most detail is John. Read **John 19:23,24**

The usual clothing worn by men at that time was: sandals, a robe-like inner garment, a headpiece, a belt, and a tunic. There were usually four soldiers involved in a crucifixion, so that gave them one piece of clothing each and the need to draw lots over the final piece.

So while Jesus was dying there was a group gambling over his clothes.

#### **Represents:**

The traders for Jesus garments represent a class of people today who, when found at the foot of the cross are too busy with the cares and commerce of this world to bother about a Saviour that has died for them.

Friends, the devil's system of government demands that to have worth you must have money. And the more money you have the more worthwhile you are.

- And it is ripping our society apart.
- It is ripping our churches apart      The avg credit card debt in US \$6000
- It is ripping our individual souls apart

As a society we are more affluent than we have ever been, but we are more miserable than we have ever been, because we are chasing wealth at the expense of our relationships.

Our possessions are becoming a big G-clamp, clamping us down to this world – and the more we buy the tighter the G-clamp is screwed down.

Friends, we can be in danger of sitting at the foot of the cross in the Seventh-day Adventist church, and be too busy with our business dealings, wage earning, possession getting to spend time casting an eye up at the Saviour and seeing how meaningless and fruitless that all is.

Jesus says “You are a child of mine and I love you, not because of what you do or what you have got, but because I created you and you are my blood-bought possession. That gives you all the worth you need.”

There is a class at the foot of the cross that are too busy seeking possessions to know that Jesus is dying for them and thereby making them priceless.

How is it with you? What do you talk about a lot? What do you think about a lot? Is the maintenance of lifestyle more important than your imperative to minister for Jesus?

## 5. The bewildered disciples

### Luke 23:49

The poor old disciples – In Mark 8:31,32 it says that Jesus “began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. **And he spoke that saying openly.**”

But at the garden of Gethsemane they all scattered and at the foot of the cross they are “standing afar off.”

Ellen White says “For long hours of agony, reviling and mockery have fallen upon the ears of Jesus... With longing heart He has listened for some expression of faith from His disciples. He has heard only the mournful words, “We trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel.” DA 750

How could they have not understood – hadn't they been at Jesus side for three years?

After his death, the disciples gather together in a room, and lock the door for fear of the Jews and mope around, having their hopes dashed.

If they had only known that at the moment that Christ uttered the words “It is finished” all of heaven erupted in the most spontaneous, unrestrained joy imaginable! But rather, they believe that their hopes of temporal benefit are gone.

## **Represents:**

The bewildered disciples represent those that are very religious, spend a lot of time doing religious things, but want religion on their terms, not Jesus.

Some want the:

- Prosperity preaching religion – as it suits their desire for material gain
- Charismatic religion – as it gives an emotional high and doesn't demand too much lifestyle change
- Religion of contemporary Christian music and won't attend church if the music isn't a certain way.
- Religion of institutional criticism – and aren't happy unless they have some piece of salacious gossip, or can create an argument.

Jesus said “Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly of heart; and ye will find rest upon your souls.” Matthew 11:29.

Friends, as disciples of Jesus, we need to be listening to what Jesus is saying, not what we want Him to say, or what we think He should say. That's a big challenge!

And we shouldn't be standing “afar off”, but right there next to the cross, looking at the dying form of Jesus, and there getting the humility and grace to help in time of need.

## **6. The converted Centurion:**

### **Mark 15:39**

In the intense drama of the crucifixion scene, at the moment that the earthquake accompanying Jesus death is silent, there is a lone voice.

Ellen White says that the Roman soldier didn't just whisper these words, but said them so loudly that the crowd turned their heads around to see who had said it.

The text hints that the Centurion sensed something supernatural about the way Jesus cried out.

Remember the Centurion had been there through the whole thing:

- Heard Him pray for his killers
- Saw the noble way he died
- Heard Him cry out to His Father
- Had been there for 3 hours of supernatural darkness
- Had experienced the earthquake

And unlike the religious leaders of the day, he was forced to the conclusion that this was the "Son of God."

Luke says that the Centurion "glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man." Luke 23:47. So the conversion was complete.

### **Represents:**

There are those that see the signs and wonders that Jesus wrought, and use that as a basis for their faith. I not suggesting that the Centurion wasn't genuine, he most certainly was. But it wasn't until the supernatural events occurred that he declared his faith.

There are some that will be bought to the truth this way – Jesus will grant them to see miraculous things and it will be the trigger that brings them to the Lord.

Remember what Jesus said to Thomas, "Thomas, because though hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." John 20:29.

Thomas wasn't rejected by Jesus, and neither was the Centurion, but it took clear evidence of a supernatural miracle for them finally to believe.

## 7. The thief on the cross

There was one final party at the cross.

Matthew records that both thieves were initially throwing abuse at Jesus. But turn with me to Luke and let's see a wonderful thing that happened to one of the thieves:

### **Luke 23:39-43**

Notice what the thief does:

- a. He confesses that he is a sinner – v41
- b. He proclaims that Jesus is sinless – v41
- c. He confesses his belief in Christ calling Him Lord – v42
- d. He demonstrates faith that Jesus can save him – v42
- e. He receives an immediate answer – v43

Ellen White says that the prayer of the penitent thief is Jesus “one gleam of comfort”.

Here is a sin-drenched criminal. An outcast that no-one mourned for. A villain. One of the most thoroughly degenerate people at the scene of the cross.

But he acknowledged his guilt, asked for forgiveness, and received it.

Friends, righteousness by faith is simply that.

The thief on the cross had no opportunity to do anything meritorious to earn salvation. He had spent all but the last few hours of his life being a criminal, and he now receives a direct promise of salvation from Jesus.

Did he deserve forgiveness? Not a bit.

Did he receive forgiveness? Full and free.

## **Represents:**

The thief on the cross represents the experience that every saint of God must have.

- A realization of their sinfulness
- A belief that Jesus is Lord
- And a faith that he is forgiven

Here we have someone to aspire to, someone we can relate to, someone we should emulate – a career criminal.

Because, that's what we are aren't we? Let's not emulate his life of crime, but let's emulate his simple faith, a faith that was rewarded by Jesus.

You have no salvation merit.

You have no overcoming ability

You are a sinner, I am a sinner

But, praise be to God, I am a forgiven one! How about you?

Have you asked Jesus to forgive your sins?

Do you believe that He's done it? **BELIEVE IT!**

It's only when we recognize the fact that we are career criminals, that see more clearly the wonderful merits of Jesus, and cry out with the thief, "Lord, Remember me..."

**Conclusion:**

There was a vast crowd at the foot of the cross. People from many nations, tongues, classes, but Ellen White says that they had one thing in common

- The thief on the cross that acknowledge his guilt and found mercy

“The scenes of Calvary call for the deepest emotion. Upon this subject you will be excusable if you manifest enthusiasm.” 2T 213

“As soon as we have a correct view of the love of God, we shall have no disposition to abuse it.” 1SM 312

**That experience only exists at the foot of the cross!**