



As we reflect today on the death of our Lord, I wish to adopt a similar approach to that taken on Palm Sunday, whereby we consider some of the historical aspects, this time of crucifixion, in the hope that our appreciation of the events of Good Friday will be deepened. We should keep in mind that, as with the historical Jesus, our tendency is to see the cross from behind the lens of a 2000-year history of the Church. In as much as our picture and understanding of Jesus has been sanitised and beautified, so too has our understanding of the cross. Try as we might we will never fully appreciate the scandal which the cross was to Jews and Gentiles 2000 years ago. Perhaps we can get a bit closer though.

First, we will consider the cross from within a Roman context (as it was after all a form of Roman execution) and then from within a Jewish context. Crucifixion was one of the *summa supplicia* – a category of public execution regarded, in Roman culture, as the worst possible death. The other two forms of execution in this category were burning at the stake and being fed to the beasts in a public amphitheatre. The reason these three deaths formed a special category, and were regarded as truly reprehensible by Roman citizens, was not just the pain and brutality of the death but the fact that by virtue of the death itself, one was not afforded any kind of burial. This was unimaginable in Roman culture. Being one predicated on honour and prestige, not to be buried would have annihilated any trace of honour anyone might have had.

Importantly then, as already intimated, the *summa supplicia* were reserved for non-Romans (there were in fact restrictive laws around any kind of corporal punishment for Roman citizens Acts 22:25 demonstrates) and in the case of crucifixion, exclusively for political dissidents. This may strike you as strange, until we begin to reflect on some of the rationale of the punishment.

Again, apart from being an agonisingly painful way to die (it was also a very humiliating death as people were crucified naked) crucifixion functioned as form of advertisement. Indeed, each crucified body functioned as a kind-of billboard displaying the might and brutality of the Roman empire – and thereby importantly, also acted as a deterrent to would-be dissidents. It is for this reason, and that mentioned previously of the fact of lack of burial, that some scholars have, controversially, posited the unlikelihood of Jesus' own burial.

We have now covered some of the association of crucifixion in the Roman context, what does the cross and crucifixion mean in the context of Judaism? Here the cross is equally reprehensible but for different reasons. Paul helps us understand this when he references Deuteronomy 21:23 in telling us that those who are publicly hung or executed are, according to Torah, cursed. There is if you like, a two-fold aspect to this. The victim has already been judged criminal, hence the punishment. Thus, in abstract sense, the victim stands outside of the law. To stand outside of Torah is to be cut off from God, since in Judaism, Torah mediates between God and people. But then we have the specific decree in Deuteronomy 21 that those publicly executed are cursed. This, by the way, seems to support the position that Jesus' body was removed from the cross since, in the Gospels, this was the apparent motivation, i.e. that Jesus' body, being cursed or unclean, risked defiling the land before Passover/Sabbath. So again, for emphasis, Jesus, the supposed Son of God was, in a very clinical and legal way, deemed cursed or cut off from God. To die in this state would, to the Jewish mindset, have been unconscionable for any Jew and utterly ridiculous in the case of the Messiah.

And so we begin to understand some of the meaning of verses like 1 Corinthians 1:23, that the cross was foolishness to Gentiles and a stumbling block to Jews. In fact, the word often translated in English versions of this verse as "stumbling block" is the same word from which we get the English word scandal, and in its Greek context meant to cause to sin. Again, this seems like a strange notion – the cross is meant to confer grace and salvation, not to cause people to sin. But if we understand what the cross designates, that it literally and in a quite legal way, confers upon Jesus the sin and guilt of the world, perhaps we can better appreciate this idea.

As you contemplate these things this Good Friday, brother and sisters, I pray God's hand of blessing upon you.

Amen