

We believe in His Crucifixion ‘suffered under Pontius Pilate’ (I Corinthians 1:18-2:5)

Introduction

All of us at times have listened to people's stories and tried to understand what they are going through. In some settings, it is easy to identify or at least to grasp the broad picture of what is going on. However, there are other contexts where it is a real struggle to stand in 'another person's shoes' as their experiences are so different to our own. As we step back in time in human history, this can become even more of a challenge. We come to the next declaration in this early Christian statement of belief: 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. Who was this man and where does he fit into the beginnings of the Christian Church two thousand years ago? He was the Prefect (Governor) of Judaea 26-36AD. He made his headquarters at Caesarea Maritima, a modern urban facility built by Herod the Great that the Romans took over in AD6. Pilate only travelled to Jerusalem for essential matters of business during his years of office. In 1961, archaeologists working on that site uncovered a fragment of a monument erected to him during his time in office. It was during Pilate's time in office that Jesus was crucified in AD33.

We need to understand how not only the Roman authorities but also the people of their empire viewed this form of execution two thousand years ago. The nearest point of reference for us today is when we view pictures of Auschwitz or other extermination camps from World War Two where millions of people, primarily Jews, were brutally murdered. The horrors of what took place are something we still struggle to comprehend today. In the 1st century AD, the Romans ruled by terror, crucifixion of people in public was the ultimate deterrent. It was not hidden away, but in the most prominent places where you could not miss what was going on. It was the ultimate deterrent to anyone thinking of rebelling against the Roman occupation of their country. However, a remarkable movement began in a backwater of the empire in Judea where following the death of Jesus of Nazareth, a small but steadily increasing number of people viewed His execution by crucifixion in a very different light. In the light of His death and subsequent bodily resurrection from the dead, they proclaimed a completely different message about the purpose of our lives, death and life beyond the grave. These communities of very ordinary people would form a Church that outlasted and survived the collapse of the Roman Empire. But what is most important to grasp is at the centre of their faith was a message of transformation that came about through the crucifixion of the head of the Church. A symbol of fear and despair, became for them one of hope and victory. To the average Jew or to the typical resident of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago, it appeared a public relations disaster to highlight that the person you are commending to them as your Lord and Saviour had been crucified. In Rome, in 1856, archaeologists uncovered a plaster wall of a training centre for servants of the Emperor's household. It had all kinds of graffiti on it. This wall had been hidden from view for many centuries. It contains one particular image that highlights how many people of the first couple of centuries AD viewed the newly formed Christian Church and the message they were proclaiming about Jesus and what He has done for us. It contained a mocking inscription of a Christian called Alexamenos. The anonymous artist had drawn a picture representing Alexamenos worshipping his God.



'Alexamenos worships his god' graffiti' in Rome c.200AD

The image of the crucified human figure with the head of a donkey conveys a very clear message. The folly of trusting in the God of Alexamenos. The image of a human with a donkey's head continued to be used as a way of ridiculing both Jews and Christians into the early third century AD, Tertulian, the North African Christian scholar in his book offering a defence of Christianity makes reference to such claims still being used in his day. It is in this cultural context that Christians declared their belief in one who suffered death by crucifixion under the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate. It helps very much in setting the context for explaining the apostle Paul's words in I Corinthians 1:18-2:5, to which we now turn.

1. **The offensiveness of the cross** (I Corinthians 1:18-22)

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' ²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom...

When Paul is writing this section of the first letter to the church in Corinth, he is well aware of the biggest challenge to the credibility of the gospel message both in the Jewish community as well as in the wider Gentile Roman world. He could not have spelled it out more clearly than he did in I Corinthians 1:23b: [The cross is] ...*a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*. How was it, first of all, a stumbling block to Jews?

(a) **The offensiveness to Jews** The passage in the Old Testament that immediately would come to mind is: Deuteronomy 21:22-23: "*If someone has committed a crime worthy of death and is executed and hung on a tree, ²³ the body must not remain hanging from the tree overnight. You must bury the body that same day, **for anyone who is hung is cursed in the sight of God.** In this way, you will prevent the defilement of the land the Lord your God is giving you as your special possession (NLV).* It was viewed as the most degrading and humiliating of deaths for a Jewish person to be convicted in a court of law and executed in this brutal public manner. Of course, the particular form of capital punishment meted out

through crucifixion was only devised much later in history, probably only becoming an established practice in the Persian Empire in the sixth century BC for criminals and then spread by the Greeks under Alexander the Great. The extremely efficient Roman Empire probably executed more individuals and did so for the express purpose of terrifying the general population of occupied countries from considering resisting further occupation. In Deuteronomy, the message was clear that to suffer this fate was shameful and completely dishonouring to you and to your family name. The idea that the Messiah or anyone else of significance in the nation could undergo such a fate was inconceivable.

However, such a partial reading of the Old Testament failed to take account of the astonishing words of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, the account of the suffering servant of the Lord. *He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces He was despised, and we held him in low esteem.* ⁴ *Surely He took up our pain and bore our suffering yet we considered Him punished by God, stricken by Him, and afflicted.* ⁵ *But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by His wounds we are healed.* ⁶ *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the Lord makes His life an offering for sin, He will see His offspring and prolong His days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand.* ¹¹ *After He has suffered, He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by His knowledge **My righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities.*** (Isaiah 53:3-6, 10-11). Here it is expressly stated that it was God's will for His Servant, though innocent of crimes, to die this brutal death and as a result to pay the penalty for the sin of others to bring us back into fellowship with God. The substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus on the cross in our place is clearly described in the Bible owned and used in the synagogue services. What is more, in his letter to the church in Galatia (southern Turkey today), Paul directly referenced the troubling words from the book of Deuteronomy. *But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When He was hung on the cross, He took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."* ¹⁴ *Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing He promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith* (NLV) (Galatians 3:13-14). Jesus took that curse upon Himself in our place to reconcile us to God the Father. The cross the symbol of judgement had become a symbol of hope and forgiveness. Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus through what He did on the cross in the place of sinners like you and me?

(b) **The offensiveness to Gentiles** In the Roman world 'might is right'. Power was what mattered. Rome had that military might and for centuries armies numerically much larger could not overcome it. The biggest celebrations and triumphal parades in Rome were reserved for their military heroes. This is where status came from and by which success was measured. In this social and cultural context, at the height of its powers, the awesome Caesar Augustus was so dominant in imposing the Pax Romana (Roman peace) across his domains. He was a person whose followers referred to him as 'the saviour of the world' In 9BC, in Priene, a Greek city in what is now Western Turkey, Paullus Fabius Maximus, proconsul of the Roman province of Asia (western Turkey today) issued a proclamation to honour Caesar Augustus by changing the local calendar to fit with the Roman calendar that began the year on the Emperor's birthday. This is a translation of part of his speech: It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia, in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus: "Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, **sending him as a saviour**, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and **arrange all things**, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, **and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done**, and since the birthday of the god Augustus **was the beginning of the good tidings** [gospel] for the world that came by reason of him," which Asia resolved in

Smyrna [Craig Evans, 'Mark's Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel' in *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*. 1: 67–81 (2000)] When the first Christian preachers took their message to Gentile hearers there was no doubt that this view of the great recently deceased Roman Emperor was in their minds. What could a Jew crucified in Judea offer to a citizen of the Empire? What good news could His followers possibly give to Romans who had everything they wished in terms of power and military success? I don't need what you are offering was undoubtedly the response of the majority of hearers of their message. In material terms, these people who mainly were the poor and marginalised must have looked as appealing as Jehovah's Witnesses do to most people on the roadsides at bus and train stations and in the city centres in our country today. What could their saviour offer us that Caesar Augustus has not already given? For many people today so comfortable in Western countries with their material possessions that they too think I don't need a saviour – I am doing just fine thank you! How tragic that they have missed the point about why Jesus came to die on the cross in the place of sinners.

2. The proclamation of the cross (I Corinthians 1:23-31

...but we preach Christ crucified...

²³ *but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,* ²⁴ *but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* ²⁵ *For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.* ²⁶ *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.* ²⁷ *But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.* ²⁸ *God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are,* ²⁹ *so that no one may boast before him.* ³⁰ *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.* ³¹ *Therefore, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.'*

The central message of the Christian faith is about the events of that first Easter. A preacher who omits the cross and the sacrifice of Jesus in the place of sinners is not preaching the gospel. A preacher who proclaims that through our good works we can earn our way to heaven is misleading their congregation. Jesus came to save us from our sins. Has there been a time when you asked for your sins to be forgiven? Have you even more importantly had a time when you recognised that you were a sinner in need of God's free gift of salvation through Jesus? It is humbling to have to admit that we cannot save ourselves. It is humbling to admit that we cannot earn our way to heaven by our good works. God did not set His love upon you and me because we are better than other people, because we are not! He loved us with an everlasting love because we are a people whose sins have been paid for by the precious gift of His dear Son in our place on the cross. As Paul puts it in II Corinthians 5:21: *God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.* When God the Father looks on forgiven sinners He sees us clothed with the righteousness of His beloved Son and treats us as if we were as righteous as Him. Why? because one day in eternity we will be sin-free like Him. We will always be creatures of our Creator, but on that day our fellowship with Him will be as God intended for all His creation when He brought this world into being. The cross gives us a hope for the future in a messed up grieving and sin-damaged world. Remember John's words in I John 3:1-3: *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him.* ² *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.* ³ *All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure.* Do you have this hope in Him?

3. The purpose of the cross (I Corinthians 2:1-5)

... so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

2¹ And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

What is the purpose of the cross? I cited earlier the first half of I Corinthians 1:18: *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* What does it accomplish for us? It is a sacrifice of infinite worth for us. We are:

(a) Saved from God's wrath Romans 5:9: *Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him!* God settled anger against sin and the damage it causes in people's lives was satisfied through the Jesus' death on the cross for us. He bore the wrath of God so you and I never need to – as a result of His amazing grace.

(b) Reconciled with God Ephesians 2:16: *His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility.* Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) together are saved in exactly the same way and equally invited to be children in God's family, together, through what Jesus did for us on the cross. Have you been reconciled with God?

(c) Powers of evil defeated Colossians 2:15: *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.* Satan and his demonic forces lost their power over us. We have no excuse for sinning, because: *You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.* (I John 4:4). Hallelujah! In this life, sometimes, it seems that evil triumphs, but through the victory of Jesus on the cross God and good will have the final word of triumph.

(d) To help us live holy lives I Peter 2:24: *'He Himself bore our sins' in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness;* Our calling, because of the cost of our redemption is to live holy God-honouring lives. Hebrews 12:14 gives us this challenge: *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.* Jesus endured all that suffering on the cross so that I might be motivated to live a life pleasing to Him. No wonder the apostle Paul can testify so highly concerning what the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross meant to him: *May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world* (Galatians 6:14). The question for you and me is this: what does the cross mean to us today? How does its' significance affect the choices we make day by day? I pray that we may be motivated to be the best we can be for Him in the light of all He has done for us, Amen

Questions for Reflection: The apostle Paul wrote: *May I never boast except on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Galatians 6:14a). What Jesus did on the cross for him was his motivation for Christian service. To what degree does Jesus' sacrifice for you motivate you to live and serve for Him?

Song for Reflection: 'Oh to see the dawn- The power of the Cross'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPFv-ywTY-c>