

This is an excerpt from an article written by Father Richard Losch, Rector of St James' Parish, Livingston, Alabama, which appeared in the Fall 2009 issue of "The Anglican Digest."

The Meaning of Crucifixion

Crucifixion long precedes Roman times, but the Romans honed it to a fine art of unimaginable cruelty. By the time of Jesus it had become the standard method of execution for any criminal who was not a Roman citizen.¹ When Herod the Great died in 4 BCE, there was an uprising in Jerusalem. The Roman prefect Publius Quinctilius Varus² punished the rebels by lining the road from Jerusalem to Caesarea³ with crucified Jews. According to the historian Flavius Josephus, there were over two thousand. Seventy-four years later the general Titus Flavius Vespasianus (later the emperor Titus), in reprisal for another rebellion, looted the Temple, leveled the city of Jerusalem, and crucified 500 Jews a day until, according to Josephus, they literally ran out of wood to make crosses. From the time Pompey took Syria in 63 BCE until the Jews were finally expelled from Palestine in 120 CE, a day rarely passed when the Jews could not look in any direction and see a victim hanging on a cross. To the Romans, it was a deterrent to criminals. To the Jews, it fed their hatred for Rome.

Because of the atrocities that the Jews had undergone for 150 years, there was no more perfect symbol than the cross to denote their suffering. It should have served as a token of the identity of Jesus with his people. As a Jew, he suffered with them at the hand of their oppressors. However, there were difficulties with the Jews accepting the cross as a token of the Messiah. The Law was clear that anyone who was "hung on a tree" was cursed by God:

If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because *anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse*. You must not

desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance. (Deut. 21.22f).

In several passages in the New Testament, Jesus is referred to as having been hung on a tree:

The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree (Acts 5.30).

The Christian use has a double meaning. It is a reference to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, from which mankind was cut off. The death and resurrection of Christ restored our access to the Tree of Life by giving us everlasting life through his redemption of us (Rev. 2.7). Paul, however, also used the analogy to the curse of being hung on a tree:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Gal. 3.13f).

What he is saying is that as we were cursed by virtue of our sin (allegorized as mankind's expulsion from Eden), Christ took that curse from us by taking it upon himself for us by being crucified ("hung on a tree"). Allegorically, then, our access to the Tree of Life was restored.

To Christians, this makes solid theological sense. To the Jews, however, the deeply rooted tradition of the curse of being hung on a tree was a stumbling block. Even the worst criminals, if they were hung on a tree, would be

¹ This is why Saint Paul was not crucified. He was a Roman citizen, and thus was beheaded instead of being tortured and then crucified.

² This was the same Varus whose arrogance would later cost the lives of two Roman legions (about 12,000 men) in an ambush in the Teutoberg Forest in Germany. Disgraced, he fell on his own sword.

³ Caesarea was the Roman capital of the Province of Syria, the province that contained Judea. Varus copied the example of Marcus Licinius Crassus, who 70 years earlier crucified 6,600 of Spartacus' followers. He lined the Appian Way from Rome to Brundisium with a cross every 200 feet on both sides.

taken down and buried before sundown. It was not for the sake of the criminals, but to keep from defiling the land that God had given them (Deut. 21.23 above). This meant so much to the Jews that the Romans, to avoid trouble, allowed the bodies of the crucified to be removed from the crosses before sundown on any Sabbath (John 19.31). They might leave bodies on the cross for days, but allowed the Jews to remove them before a Sabbath.⁴

Another stumbling block to the Jews was the type of Messiah most of them were seeking. Some sought a military Messiah, another Judas Maccabeus, who would raise up an army of rebels, expel the Romans, and reestablish Israel's independence.⁵ Others looked for another David, who, with the help of God, would restore the Davidic throne and bring Israel back to the glory and world influence it knew in the days of David and Solomon's United Monarchy. Neither of these messianic images could tolerate the idea of a Messiah who would die, especially at the hands of foreign oppressors like the Romans, and more especially not in the humiliation and curse of crucifixion. They could accept the idea of a suffering Messiah such as in Isaiah's Suffering Servant (Isa. 53.2) or in the Forsaken One of Psalm 22, but death was not in the mix. This is undoubtedly why Jesus so often told the Twelve how he was to die, but then told them not to tell anyone else until it happened. The people were not yet ready for that concept.

The cross was also a stumbling block for the Gentiles, most of whom were either Greeks or thoroughly immersed in Greek thinking. To the Greeks, death meant being freed from the burden of the flesh, which they thought to be corrupt and evil. To them the idea of resurrection was completely unacceptable—why would anyone want to return to the flesh by being resurrected, after he had finally been freed from the carnal prison? They could accept the idea of death and revivification (being brought back to life). Their mythology was full of such stories, and the revivification of Osiris in the mythology of Egypt and of Mithra in that of

Persia was no problem to them. They also would have had no problem with the raising of Lazarus, because that was also nothing more than revivification. Resurrection, however, the everlasting continuation of life in a mystical perfected body, was nonsense to them (Acts 17.32). Most Jews except the Pharisees, for whom resurrection was a basic religious tenet, also rejected it.

Paul confronted this in his first letter to the Corinthians (1.20ff):

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 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. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

The cross was a symbol of piety to the Jews long before the Christians used it as a religious symbol. Because of decades of unjustified crucifixions by the Romans, crucifixion to the Jews became almost a badge of honor. The idea of the curse of being hanged on a "tree" faded in the light of the idea that if the Romans hated and crucified you, you couldn't be all bad.

In the eyes of many, being persecuted for righteousness became in itself an act of righteousness. Along this line of thinking, Jesus as the suffering Messiah would have made perfectly good sense to the Jews. The idea of the death of the Messiah, however, was still a stumbling block to all except a few of the Pharisees, who could make the connection between resurrection and the overcoming of sin and death.

⁴ The Romans generally left the bodies on the crosses until they rotted off or were torn down by animals. This was to add to the horror of the punishment, which they saw as a deterrent to other criminals. The Deuteronomic curse meant so much to the Jews, however, that the Romans realized that to violate it would simply cause more trouble than it was worth.

⁵ This may be why Judas betrayed Jesus. His name indicates that he was probably a Zealot, one who looked for a military Messiah. As it became increasingly evident to him that Jesus had no intention of being such and yet people were coming to accept him as the Messiah, Judas may have thought it necessary either to force his hand or get him out of the way so the people would turn to a military leader.