

## CHRIST STRIPPED NAKED ON THE CROSS

*“And they crucified Him, and divided His garments among them, casting lots for them, deciding what each should take”.*

(Mark 15: 24)

We continue to follow the suffering of our Lord on His *via dolorosa*, the road of suffering. Last time we saw Him arrive on Golgotha, where He was crucified.

We do not know the exact procedure which was followed at this crucifixion. In all the texts in the Gospels it says simply that they crucified Him. To understand the extent of Christ's suffering, however, we must know something of what was involved in this manner of execution.

The convicted criminal was most likely first tied down with ropes to the cross. This would immobilize him and facilitate the driving in of nails or spikes. We do not know whether at this point the cross was still lying on the ground or had already been erected. In the latter case, a kind of ladder would have to be used to nail down the condemned.

Most explainers agree that spikes were driven through the hands of the convicted. Whether they were always driven through the feet as well is not clear. Some suggest that the feet were placed flat against the vertical beam, thus forcing the body into a very awkward position, with the knees pushed forward. Others suggest that the spikes were driven through the lower leg, just above the feet. When we read what Christ Himself says later (Luke 24:39), "See my hands *and my feet*, that it is I myself," we may conclude that spikes were driven through the Lord's feet.

## **A SLOW AND AGONIZING DEATH**

The Holy Spirit has not revealed to us all the particulars of Christ's execution, perhaps in order to prevent all kinds of superstitious speculation. What is clear is that death by crucifixion was a very painful death, truly a method of extreme torture. To be stretched out for hours in such an unnatural position must be unbearable. The spikes were driven through the parts of the hand and feet which were the most sensitive, so that every movement caused excruciating pain. Infection invariably swiftly set in, causing fever and delirium.

Because of the victim's position, the blood could not flow properly, and this would cause extreme headache. The lungs would fill with fluid, making breathing an arduous task. There was no way that a crucified person could move to lessen the agony. Even turning the head, the only free moving part of the body, caused severe pain.

Moreover, it says in the verse immediately following our text, that they crucified Him at the third hour, that is at 9.00 a.m. The sun had risen, the temperature was climbing swiftly, as it does in the Middle East, and there was no shadow. Insects began to converge on the victim, stinging, and feeding on the wounds. It does not take long under such circumstances for thirst and exhaustion to set in; yet death on the cross remained a slow and painful process of dying.

I say this not to speculate or dramatize, but these are the hard facts which are known about death by crucifixion. The cross should not become for us some vague symbol of suffering, for it is a gruesome *reality*. What I have described with a few words is a feeble attempt to explain what Christ had to endure for our sake. There is

no way anyone can minimize it, or embellish it, or romanticize it as a martyr's death. It was a horrible death to die.

The text gives us another detail about Christ's crucifixion. It tells that He was stripped of His clothes, which were subsequently divided among the soldiers. In other words, He was crucified *naked*. We must pay attention also to this fact. For when Christ was stripped of His clothes and displayed naked on the cross, He lost both earthly honour and heavenly grace.

## **TOTALLY NAKED?**

When you see paintings or sculptures of Christ on the cross, you notice that the artists usually do not portray Christ as totally naked. Perhaps they felt that this would be too shameful. They tried to rescue some of His dignity by covering up His loins. Undoubtedly the intent of the artists is laudable, but the biblical facts give a different picture. And we are not interested in an artist's concept, but in the biblical account.

Admittedly, the opinions differ on whether Christ was stripped of all His clothes. Our text says only this: "And they crucified Him, and divided His garments among them, casting lots for them, to see what each would take." It says only "His garments." Some will argue that it does not say in so many words: all His garments. Yet it is very likely that this is what indeed happened. To strip the victim of all his garments deepened the shame and humiliation of the crucifixion. The Romans therefore customarily let their victims hang utterly naked, and why would they have made an exception in this case? On the contrary, the Roman soldiers had every reason not to make that exception in Jesus' case. I'll come back to that in a moment.

## **GARMENTS AND TUNIC**

The question is first what we should understand by the word "garments." When we look at a more elaborate parallel text in John 19: 23 and 24, we discover that what they took from Jesus was the following: His garments (which they divided into four parts) *and* his tunic. What does that tell us?

The "garments" are generally taken to be the outer garments. We would say our "clothes," again meaning the outer wear. This consisted indeed of four parts: the cloak or mantel (which was also used as a covering at night), the belt or girdle (which was tied around the cloak to keep it closed), the sandals, and the head-covering or scarf. These four necessary items essentially were the "clothes" or "garments" of every Jew. They ensured that the head, the body, and the feet were covered and protected.

Some explainers feel that Christ, perhaps, lost his head-covering or scarf, when the crown of thorns was placed on His head, so that it should not be counted at Golgotha. But there is no reason to assume that this head-covering was not taken along. As to the tunic, that was what we would call the under-garment. It was a frock, made from wool or linen, worn on the body under the mantel. Sometimes a

linen shirt was also worn under the tunic, but this under-garment was the basic covering of the body.

For the sake of interest, I mention that we read about this tunic in John 19: 23 that it was “without seam, woven from top to bottom.” According to some this indicates that it was a rather expensive item. Some explainers remind us here of the garment of the priest, which was also woven as a single garment. This would be, as some say, an indication of Christ’s claim to priesthood. But that is hardly likely, for the priest’s single garment was not an under-garment, as is the case here. The priest wore an ornate outer garment woven without seam, and Christ did not.

His outer garments, then, were divided into four parts. This is because every execution squad had four soldiers, and each was entitled to an equal share of the victim’s possessions. To determine who got what, the soldiers cast lots. They gambled for it, as soldiers often do. But they did not want to tear up the tunic into four parts, for that would have made it worthless. So they decided to keep it in one piece and cast lots over it as well. Let the dice decide.

## **LAST DIGNITY REMOVED**

John’s description, then, confirms what was the Roman practice: the victim was stripped naked. That was part of the humiliation that went with the punishment. For it was the greatest shame for anyone, but especially for a Jew, to be shown naked, and so to be robbed of even the last shred of dignity and self-respect. The only thing a man has left when facing his tormentors is his dignity, and that is in part embodied in his clothes. Strip a person bare, leave him nothing to cover himself, and he becomes totally vulnerable, a laughing-stock over whom even women and children giggle.

Prisoners and ex-prisoners will tell you that among the worst things of prison life are the constant body searches and strip-downs, and the fact that your own clothes are taken from you. It is true, you are given some kind of prison garb, but you lose your personal identity as well as your personal privacy. How much worse it is, however, to be stripped of clothes altogether.

Scripture itself tells us what it means to be rendered naked in public: it is the final humiliation. It was prophesied to Israel as a particular punishment of God. Read what Moses said to Israel in Deuteronomy 28: 47 and 48, “Because you did not serve the LORD your God. . . you shall serve your enemies. . . in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and in want of all things. . . .”

So it was also among the nations. When the LORD God through Isaiah prophesied judgment over Egypt and Ethiopia (Isaiah 20: 4), he said, “the king of Assyria shall lead away the Egyptians captives and the Ethiopians exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt.” It was a public shame, and all who trusted in Egypt and Ethiopia for deliverance from Assyria would be dismayed.

If such was the case with “common” people, how awful must it be for royalty, for kings and princes, to be paraded naked as vanquished foes. For that reason

especially the Roman soldiers will have delighted in stripping Jesus of His clothes, for did He not claim to be the long-expected King of the hated Jews? This man really needed to be taught a lesson: strip Him down.

## **THE ULTIMATE INSULT**

Do you see what is happening? It is indeed mind-shattering. Here is the Christ, the Son of David, the hope of Israel, and they hang a sign above His head stating, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews,” and what do people see? A pitiful, wretched shadow of a man, stripped bare of the last shred of human dignity, someone who cannot even cover Himself.

The ultimate insult is, perhaps, that the soldiers make a game out of dividing His clothes. His clothes have no real value: there is a faded mantel, worn-out sandals, a bloodied scarf, and a sweaty tunic. Robes fit for a king? Swearing and cursing, with rude jokes and obscene laughter, they play their game, and mock Him: if you are the King of the Jews, come down from the cross and claim these measly garments! Earlier the soldiers had put a royal robe on Him, borrowed for the occasion, and mocked Him, “Hail, King of the Jews,” and now they mock Him again, as He hangs naked.

The king’s pride is his royal robe. Think of Psalm 45, the prophetic psalm about the great King, “God, your God, with oil of happiness, has you above all other kings anointed, myrrh and sweet spices for your robes appointed.” Yes, you can compose psalms for the King: “In beauty you surpass all men around you, with glory, O our king, the LORD has crowned you,” but here hangs a man whose last shred of dignity has been torn away, whose ragged clothes are divided with the roll of the dice.

The Son of God, of whom another Psalm sings, “The LORD is King, enrobed with majesty, He girds Himself with strength and equity,” hangs here bereft of majesty, with His girdle crumpled in the dust of Golgotha. This is how the world spits out the Son of God. Naked He came, and naked He shall go; He will depart with nothing but shame.

Pious artists may try to cover the nakedness of Jesus, but in truth the King is here bereft of dignity. It is not simply that He must die. It is that He must die in this way, robbed of all earthly honour; He, the Son of God, through whom all things were made.

## **ADAM CLOTHED; CHRIST STRIPPED**

And now we go one step further. We must! For in biblical light we know that this nakedness of Christ is not just a cruel joke of Roman soldiers, but it is *the work of God*. Christ does not just lose here all earthly honour, but also all heavenly grace!

When you place this event – Christ stripped naked – beside what happened in the Garden of Eden, after the fall into sin, you notice a remarkable contrast. There the first Adam was clothed. Here the second Adam is stripped. And we understand: Adam could only be clothed because one day Christ would be stripped!

Before the fall, Adam and Eve were naked. That was then nothing to be ashamed of. It says in Genesis 2: 25, “And the man and his wife were naked, and they were not ashamed.” Not ashamed for *each other*, as the original verb may be translated. Not ashamed *for God* either. Why not? Because there was no sin! There was, so to speak, nothing to hide, nothing to cover up. Nakedness was part of the harmony of a perfect creation. There was nothing encumbered or depraved about the difference between man and woman, that is, about their sexuality. Nor was there anything between man and woman and their God. In Paradise humanity enjoyed total openness and natural harmony.

This changed, however, when Adam and Eve sinned. Then they knew that they were naked. They saw themselves as they now really were. Their outward nakedness had become an expression of their inward corruption. They could no longer go about with one another as before. The harmony had been disrupted. The depravity had become so deep that hitherto unknown forces of evil – also sexually – were unleashed. Their nakedness reminded them not only of their sinfulness, but also of their accursedness. They were utterly vulnerable, open to the righteous wrath of Almighty God.

What did they do? They realized the need for covering. They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. They needed to be protected against their own depravity and against their accursedness before God. But fig leaves are not very adequate for this purpose.

Then we read that God in His mercy gave to mankind clothes. Is it not a heart-warming scene in Genesis 3: 21, “And the LORD God made for Adam and his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.” Garments of skins, that is, durable clothing, solid protection! The LORD God Himself gave a covering for the nakedness of His children.

## **CLOTHING: GOD’S GIFT AND MANDATE**

We must understand that clothes are not a product of cultural evolution. We should not fall into the simple scheme of thinking that primitive people have fewer clothes and civilized people have more clothes because of the difference in cultural progress. In some ways our so-called civilized society promotes more nudity than many so-called primitive societies.

Clothes are a gift and therefore also a mandate of God. God gives clothes to curb and restrain the power and effects of sin, and to cover shame. And wherever you see people shedding their clothes and promoting partial or total nudity, you see the forces of deformation at work. Lack of shame, lack of decency emerge.

When God gave clothes, He was holding back His curse over a sinful humanity. He gave a covering, which would function temporarily. The full harmony of Paradise, however, would be restored only through Jesus Christ. The relationship between God and man, and between man and woman, would find its renewal in the redeeming work of Christ.

Do you see what that means for Jesus on Golgotha? He must pay the price for this covering, by being Himself rendered naked. For at this moment of truth, when the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race is unleashed in full fury, there is no covering of the depravity of man, there is no escape from the curse of God. The grace shown to the first Adam is withheld from the second Adam!

Yes, the soldiers rip off His garments and tunic. But it is God Who now begins to unleash His fury, stored up through the ages. Here the sinfulness of man will not be covered up, and the full curse of God will not be delayed. Here begins the descent into hell, where there is no grace but only judgment.

On the cross Christ does not lose only all earthly honour, He also loses all heavenly grace! This is what the Roman soldiers with their proud legionnaire's uniforms and the Jewish priests with their ornate gowns do not understand. But Christ knows it. And He undergoes it. For in this way alone can He earn for us the righteousness with which we must be clothed to stand honourably on the new earth and receive grace in the new heaven.

Adam clothed. Christ naked. The second Adam must pay the price for the covering of the first Adam. He must do this so that in Him we may obtain grace, grace forever more. And we will not be ashamed of Him who hung naked on a cross; instead, we may exult in His redeeming work. For He arose from the dead with a glorified body. And today He is seated in glory on the eternal throne of heaven. Indeed, Psalm 45: With glory, O our King, the LORD has crowned you!

## **ARE WE CLOTHED?**

The question now for us is this: are *we clothed* with the righteousness of Christ? The apostle Paul once put that question to the Corinthians, when he wrote to them about the breakdown of this earthly body. He said, "Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on, we may not be found *naked*." Dying now, for us, is not a matter of being unclothed, like Christ on the cross, but of being further clothed, receiving the glory of heaven, "arrayed in garments washed in blood" – as kings and priests in holy array, wearing the crown of life.

Indeed, Paul writes, "when our earthly tent" – this body that had to be clothed with perishable garments – "falls to the ground, all worn and rent, our God as gift to us extends a heavenly house, not made with hands!" We will be clothed with eternal glory, through Him Who was stripped naked for us on the cross.