

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Good Friday
St. John 18:1–19:42

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

“Crucifixion as a penalty was remarkably widespread in antiquity. It appears in various forms among numerous peoples of the ancient world, even among the Greeks.... [It] was and remained a political and military punishment. While among the Persians and the Carthaginians it was imposed primarily on high officials and commanders, as on rebels, among the Romans it was inflicted above all on the lower classes—slaves, violent criminals, and the unruly elements in rebellious provinces, not least in Judea. The chief reason for its use was its allegedly supreme efficacy as a deterrent; it was, of course, carried out publicly.... It was usually associated with other forms of torture, including at least flogging.... By the public display of a naked victim at a prominent place—at a crossroads [or highway], in the theatre, on high ground, at the place of his crime—crucifixion also represented his uttermost humiliation... quite often its victims were never buried... they served as food for wild beasts and birds of prey. In this way his humiliation was made complete. What it meant for a man in antiquity to be refused burial, and the dishonour which went with it, can hardly be appreciated by modern man.”¹

In 4 BC, the Syrian governor, Publius Quinctilius Varus, needed three legions as well as auxiliary troops to quell revolts, including three major messianic uprisings, in the Jewish homeland immediately after the death of Herod the Great that year. When he arrived at Jerusalem, he crucified, according to the historian Josephus, “two thousand” of the rebels. Mass crucifixions also framed the beginning and ending of the First Roman-Jewish War. In the early summer of 66 AD, a successor to Pontius Pilate, ordered his troops to attack inside the city itself. The total number of that day’s victims, including women and children, amounted to about 3,600. The calamity was aggravated by the unprecedented character of the Roman’s cruelty. “For Florus ventured that day to do what none had ever done before, namely, to scourge before his tribunal and nail to the cross men of equestrian rank, men who, if Jews by birth, were at least invested with that

¹ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977)

Roman dignity.”²

Four years later, in the early summer of 70 AD, Titus’s army had completely encircled Jerusalem and the siege was being pressed toward its awful consummation. Again, Josephus tells us, “The majority [of those who slipped out from the encircled city in search of food] were citizens of the poorer class, who were deterred from deserting by fear for their families.... When caught, they were ... scourged and subjected to torture of every description, before being killed, and then crucified opposite the walls ... five hundred or sometimes more being captured daily.... The soldiers out of rage and hatred amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different postures; and so great was their number, that space could not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies.”³

Have you had enough? Violence upon violence. Brutality begets brutality. Revenge; hatred; on and on it goes. It you are feeling glad you were not born in Jesus’s day; remember that we have just finished one of the bloodiest centuries in human history—two world wars followed with civil wars in Africa and the Middle East, with lethal acts of terror executed across the globe, with the poorest of the poor countries and innocen school children targeted the most. The gospel evangelists point the finger at the Jewish authorities for Jesus’s crucifixion and make Pilate look like the good guy. Make no mistake, everything Jesus proclaimed and did—His rejection of class division and lifting up of the poor; His proclamation of the kingdom of God and profession of Himself as the Son of God; His threat of the destruction of the Temple and its symbolic cleansing—were more than enough to turn Pilate’s face toward brutality and crucifixion and wash his hands of any guilt of killing an innocent man. Equally so for the conspiring Jews. When given the choice all Jerusalem chose Barabbas over Jesus. They chose violence over peace and in forty years, they, their children and their children’s children were among those 3,600 hanging on crosses.

Violence, brutality. Have we learned nothing in the last 2,000 years? Sabre-rattling is once again the order of the day, getting louder and louder. The nuclear arms race is rekindling. There is talk of arming our children’s teachers and weaponizing our schools.

2 Josephus, *War* 2.306-308.

3 *Ibid.*, 5.447-451.

This is what Jesus faced when He entered Jerusalem. Like a lamb, He was led to slaughter. It was no mistake; there was no miscalculation. There would be no point in going—in dying—if He did not believe His life and His work would continue.

God went to Jerusalem to give us an alternative—a kingdom in which we are free as victors over brutality and violence—a kingdom that has no end. Its power is love not hate; its fuel is blessing not bullying; its goal is “to change the creation from the nightmare that is often made of it into the dream that God intends for it.”⁴ Jesus gave His life to the slaughter to roll open the stone of our sealed graves and show us that not even the powers of death can stop the love of God. Christianity is a movement from death to life.

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

4 From Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s Easter Message, 2017.