

You had to be there?

John 19:16b - 42

This is my last sermon – yes I am here next week – it will be Palm Sunday and we will be remembering that with a fun interactive service with a bit of a farewell as part of it followed by a shared lunch – come along it should be fun.

As I said, this is my last sermon - but it is also my first sermon. 10 years ago my first sermon was on Easter Friday and that message was based around the passage that we are looking at today as we come to the end of the gospel of John, which we have been working through. So I have decided to preach my first sermon as my last sermon. The story we will be following is found in John 19 but we will be drawing on the other gospels as well.

I am sure you have all been in the situation when you are telling a story, something that you experienced, something significant, it may have been funny, it may have been sad, certainly it got you going, and you are trying to communicate the feeling, the atmosphere, the experience, and you get part way through or even to the end of your story and you sense that the story has fallen flat. They didn't get it, they didn't feel it, they didn't sense it..... It was a "you had to be there" experience.

I have heard and read the Easter story countless times, but when we are not there and a story is just read or told and not always told well, the story can sometimes end up being just words.

Pictures can help, they bring another dimension. Those of you who have seen the movie "The Passion", you will understand the Easter Story a bit better? However without the benefits of Hollywood, we can use our imagination as we read scripture and that helps.

There is a bloke called Ignatius, 15th – 16th Century, and His name has been attached to a type of praying the scriptures, where you take a scene and imagine that you are present in the actual scene, paying attention to the people involved, listening to what they are saying and wondering about what they are doing, in your imagination you can interact with them, or you can stand to the side as one of the onlookers and use all your senses to try and experience what is happening.

We are going to do a bit of that today. I want us to walk along the road to the cross again and look at it from other angles. To hear it from the perspective of an eyewitness telling his story. I don't so much want to teach anything but want us to experience a bit of what Jesus experienced, and through that maybe discover something new. I draw heavily from the clever preacher called Peter Marshall, he was preaching 100 years ago, anything that is good is his, anything not so good is mine. So sit back and relax, maybe close your eyes and imagine...

Imagine

Imagine being a part of the normal everyday life of the City of David, Jerusalem, as pilgrims and visitors were pouring in through the gates, mingling with merchants from the local villages; shepherds coming in from the hills, and the narrow crowded streets.

There were the elderly, stooped with years, muttering to themselves as they pushed through the crowds. There were children playing in the streets, excitedly calling to each other.

There were men and women carrying huge baskets of vegetables, casks of wine and water bags.

A donkey stood sleepily beneath his load in the sunlight. There under a narrow canopy a merchant shouted his wares in a pavement stall. It was not easy to make your way through the crowd, it never was at Passover time.

In the NZ setting it is impossible to explain the noise, the crowds, you had to be there. If you have travelled to a crowded third world country then you may have an idea of what it is like.

The Soldiers

It was especially difficult for the procession as it started out from the governor's palace.

At the front, rode a Roman centurion, a huge man, mocking, unfriendly, sneering at the children or the crippled beggars who might get in his way.

He watched, through half-shut eyes, the shouting, jeering crowd.

Before him went two legionnaires, clearing the crowd aside as best they could, with curses and careless blows.

The procession moved at a snail's pace.

The soldiers tried to keep step.

The sunlight glanced off the spears and helmets of the soldiers. There was a clanking of steel as their shields clashed against their swords as they marched.

Between the two files of soldiers staggered three condemned men, each carrying a heavy bar of wood, with its cross-piece, on which he was to be executed.

The crosses were heavy, and the first of the victims was at the point of collapse.

He had been under severe strain for several days.

He had eaten little and had not slept for two days.

What is more, he had been lashed with the whip. A leather whip with rough pieces of glass and clay tied in every thong. His name was Jesus.

The sun was hot. The sweat poured down the face of Jesus, and He swayed now and then under the weight of the cross.

There was a strange atmosphere, some seemed to celebrate, others mourning, it seemed like a depression had fallen on the soldiers, and they marched in silence, as if reluctantly.

I can't really explain it, you had to be there.

The procession

A group of women went with the procession, their faces half-hidden by their veils, but their grief could not be hidden. Some were sobbing . . .

Others were praying . . .

Others were moaning in that deep grief that no words can describe.

Some of them had children by the hand and kept saying over and over . . . "He gave my child back to me . . . How can they be so cruel? He healed my child, what harm could there be in that?"

And there were men, too, who followed as closely as they could - men who walked with the strange steps, men to whom walking was unfamiliar. They were the cripples He had healed.

Others carried sticks in their hands, sticks that once had tapped out their blind tattoo along the city streets of Judea. They did not use their sticks now, although once again they were blind . . . blinded by tears.

Most of the crowd hardly knew what was going on. They did not understand. They caught the infection of the mob spirit. They shouted to the first of the three victims. That one had a strange crown on His head, twisted from a branch of the thorn bush. It had pierced His scalp and caused blood to mingle with the sweat.

They stood in front and shouted at Him, until roughly pushed aside by the soldiers, and then in some cases, they began to shout at the soldiers. It was an ugly situation as the procession went slowly along this way.

I can't really describe the combination of compassion and anger within the crowd, it was strange, you had to be there.

Simon of Cyrene

Meanwhile - this bloke Simon of Cyrene was approaching the city gate.

He had just arrived in Judea, and was about to enter the Holy City, as a pilgrim for the festival.

He had spent the night in some village just outside, and, rising early that morning, had bathed and dressed himself carefully . . . with a tingling excitement because soon he would be in Jerusalem. It was his first time.

The wonders of Jerusalem that his friends had described, he would see with his own eyes. Yet he tried to keep calm, and as he set out on the short walk that lay between him and the city, he was very thoughtful, preparing himself for his time of worship.

He walked along the winding path that ran through the fields . . . up river beds . . . around the jagged hillsides.

As he walked along, he was thinking of the temple and its magnificence, the history of his people and the worship of his fathers . . .

Already he could see ahead of him the domes of the Temple gleaming gold in the sunshine.

As he neared the city gate he began to hear shouting that grew louder and louder. There seemed to Simon to be a sort of chant running through the noise, a refrain that came clearer and clearer until he thought he could recognize the words "Crucify, crucify, crucify."

They met right at the city gate . . . Simon of Cyrene and the crowd.

He had little time to gather impressions, and as for asking questions, that was impossible. He could not make himself heard in all the mob.

The noise and confusion with its evil cruelty made Simon shudder. Simon was aware of two moving walls of Roman steel, between which there staggered a Man carrying a cross.

There was something strange about it all, but before he could understand it, Simon was caught up in it - sucked into the procession, and swept out through the gate again.

Simon was excited, afraid . . . puzzled. He scanned face after face quickly, looking for some look of pity . . . of friendliness, of welcome, looking for a smile, but he found none. There were no smiles.

He felt the drama of the situation, the cruelty of it . . . and its horror crept over him like a clammy mist - and he shivered.

He could just sense something was wrong, but you can't really describe it, you had to be there

Carrying the cross

Simon was captured by the procession, stumbling along tightly wedged in the very heart of the crowd. Then he noticed that there were three men who staggered under the weight of crosses of rough, heavy wood on which these unfortunates were going to die.

Each man was bent beneath the weight he carried, and perspiration moistened their strained faces. Simon felt his gaze returning again and again to one Face. He noticed that blood was trickling down from wounds in the brow. On His head there was this twig of thorns, twisted around in the shape of a crown and pushed down cruelly on His head.

This public execution had driven everything else from his mind. Forgotten for the moment was the Temple, and its services, messages he brought from friends far away things he had been asked to get . . . everything was forgotten as he watched this Man carrying the cross.

And then *Jesus* looked up! His eyes almost blinded by the blood that trickled down from under the crown that was on His head . . .
Why didn't somebody wipe His eyes?

And as Simon looked at Him; He looked at Simon and the eyes of the two . . . met!

As these two looked at each other, the Man with the cross stumbled, and the soldiers, moved more by impatience than pity, seeing that the Nazarene was almost too exhausted to carry the cross any farther, laid hands on Simon and conscripted him to carry it.

He was the nearest man. He was strong. His shoulders were broad!

Simon's heart almost stopped beating. He tried to speak, but no words came. A few minutes before, he had been a lonely pilgrim quietly approaching the Holy City. And now, there he was in the midst of a procession of howling men and women, walking between two moving walls of Roman steel, and carrying on his shoulder a cross on which someone was going to die!

The look of gratitude and love that flashed from the eyes of Jesus as Simon lifted the load from those tired, bleeding shoulders did something to the man from Cyrene, and in an instant his life was changed.

Simon never could explain it afterwards how it happened!
There are moments of spiritual insight that defy the limits of words.
There are experiences that can never be poured into the form of speech.
There are some things too deep for words. . . . I guess you just had to be there

Calvary

And so they came to Calvary, a hill shaped like a skull, outside the city gates, where two great highways converged upon Jerusalem. This hill was the usual place of execution.

Only as the nails were driven in, did the shouting stop. **Bang**
 There was a hush. **Bang** Most of them were stunned . . . **bang** . . . horrified . . . **Bang**
 Even the hardest of them was silenced as the thud of the hammer faintly echoed from the city walls.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, blocked her ears and closed her eyes. She could not bear the thud of the hammer.

Simon of Cyrene from time to time wiped away his tears with the back of his hand. Peter stood on the fringe of the crowd blinded by tears that filled his eyes, while his heart broke.

It was terrible, I can't describe it . . . you had to be there.

They mocked Him.

"He saved others, yet He cannot save Himself.

Yes, He healed the cripples. Yes, He gave sight to the blind. He made withered arms whole again. He even brought back the dead, but He cannot save Himself".

"Perform a miracle now, Miracle Man! Come down from the Cross, and we will believe you.

You said you would build the temple in three days. You have nails in your hands . . . You've got wood . . . go on and build your temple".

"If you are the Christ . . . come on down from the Cross!"

They continued to shout.

The noise was so great that only a few of them standing near the Cross heard what He said when His lips moved in prayer:

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do".

One of the thieves, cried out to Jesus:

"Can't you see how we suffer?"

If you are the Son of God, take us down from these crosses. Save us and yourself".

Then a spasm of pain gripped him, and he began to curse and to swear, blaming Jesus for the pain.

But the other turned his head, so that he could see Jesus, and he said to his companion:

"Don't you fear God even when you are dying? We deserve to die for our evil deeds, but this man hasn't done anything wrong."

Then he said to Jesus: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom".

And Jesus, His face tense with pain, but His voice still kind, answered:

"This very day when this pain is over, we shall be together . . . you and I . . . in Paradise".

The women beneath the Cross stood praying for Jesus. The centurion was silent, although every now and then he would look up at Jesus with a strange look on his face. The soldiers were silent, too. Their gambling was done.

Suddenly Jesus opened His eyes and gave a loud cry. The gladness in His voice startled all who heard it, for it sounded like a shout of victory:

"It is finished. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

And with that cry He died.

They were all there that day. The friends of Jesus and His enemies
The priests, the scribes, the greedy Sadducees, the hypocrites, and the proud Pharisees, they were all there.

The people who were always talking about the church and praying in public - they were there. The unbelievers the gamblers, the prostitutes, and their customers, they were there.

Simon of Cyrene and the soldiers - they were there. Peter was there and John and Andrew, and the other disciples. They were all there . . .

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? [play Song from you tube clip](#)

When we consider who was there, while obviously we weren't literally there, but in other ways we were, we helped to put Jesus on His cross!

Every attitude present on that hilltop that day, is present in us now!

Every emotion that tugged at human hearts then, tugs at human hearts now. Every face that was there is here too. Every voice that shouted then is still shouting. Every human being was represented on Calvary. Every sin was in a nail or a spear or a thorn and forgiveness for them all was in the blood that was shed!

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? I was . . . Were you?