
The Minor Characters about the Cross

Every preacher has preached about the major characters involved in the death of Jesus. Over the years I have preached on Peter and John, Herod and Pilate and so on. But I have never heard of anyone doing a study on the minor characters about the Cross. But in the Gospels we find many minor characters about the Cross, whose stories repay careful Bible study, especially in the light of recent archaeological discoveries. Why was a man carrying a water-pot in the middle of the day? Some secret signal to the disciples? Why did the young man run through the garden at mid-night naked? Why the special mention of the soldier Peter wounded? What did the servant girl see in the courtyard of the High Priest? Who was the African stopped while Jesus was going to the Cross? What did the Roman see at the foot of the Cross? Who was carrying the species and why on Sunday morning?

What did the Servant Girl see?

Lent: Minor Characters About Calvary. No 1
Scripture: Mark 14:66-72

I remember a student friend of mine, a former farmer named Cliff. He was a big strong rugged fellow but he had problems with some of his words. He would frequently use a wrong word that sounded something like the right word, sometimes with disastrous results. He was preaching in the other little wooden church at Ascot Vale one day close to Easter. He was telling the story of how the Apostle Peter betrayed Christ on the night before his crucifixion. Cliff made the point quite clearly that Peter followed Jesus into the courtyard of the High Priest, and stood round the fire as it was burning in the centre of the courtyard.

Using a touch of dramatic realism Cliff said, "And there stood Peter, in the High Priest's courtyard, warming his hands on the brassiere." From that moment on none of the women in the congregation could stop laughing and several of the men guffawed out loudly. Poor Cliff's sermon was lost, but I am quite sure that he learnt the distinction between a brazier and a brassiere.

What was going in the Courtyard of the High Priest's house while Peter warmed himself by the brazier? In this Lenten series of sermons on the minor characters about Calvary, I will look at the drama through the eyes of a number of minor characters. I have always been intrigued by what the servant girl saw in the courtyard of the High Priest's house. The Temple police had taken Jesus into custody while He was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. His disciples had been dozing nearby. Jesus was taken to the High Priest's house.

Mk 14:53 "The temple police took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders and lawyers came together. Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards warming himself at the fire." What was Peter doing there? While Jesus was being mocked, spat upon, and beaten in the upstairs room of the high priest's palace, Peter was in the courtyard. Mark 14:66 He was waiting to see what would happen to Jesus. The fact that Peter was there at all indicates that he loved Jesus and was concerned about him. It also reveals his courage.

The servant girl, near "the door," John 18:17 recognized Peter as he stood in the light of the fire. Perhaps she had seen Peter with Jesus in the temple during the days immediately preceding or remembered that she had admitted him at the request of John, another one of Jesus' disciples. Her contempt for Jesus is revealed in the order of the words she used to speak about Jesus -"that Nazarene, Jesus." Peter denied her charge that he had been with Jesus. It is one of the most dramatic moments in the hours before the crucifixion. Mark, who was a young man who traveled with the Apostle Peter and his wife years later on his great missionary journey to Rome, recorded Peter's memories of Jesus as they traveled, and his record of those accounts are what we today

call, "The Gospel of Mark". This account of Peter in the courtyard came directly from the great man himself. And Peter pulls no punches about what happened, and he makes no excuses. What did the servant girl see in the courtyard? List to how Mark records the events as retold by the Apostle Peter:

Mk 14:66 "While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept."

Peter used the form common in rabbinical law "I do not know what you are saying", in replying to the servant girl. That was a lawyer's evasion to avoid giving a direct answer. Fearful of being identified and apprehended, Peter retreated into the shadows of the archway that led into the street. He was anxious for his own safety, yet he wanted to overhear anything about what would happen to Jesus. So he slunk into the darkness and safety of the archway. But his retreat to safety was short-lived. The servant girl saw him slip into the entryway and reiterated her contention-this time to "those standing around," presumably the guards. Her words — "This fellow is one of them"- seem to show that she recognized Peter as part of a group or movement whose leader was Jesus. Peter's second denial Mark 14:70 was not convincing.

So the others, having their suspicions aroused by her and detecting Peter's Galilean accent (Jesus was known to have come from Galilee), accused him. Peter was now like a cornered animal. He called down curses on himself if he was lying and swore that he didn't know "this man you're talking about" The third denial was followed by the second crowing of the rooster. Mark 14:72 Luke 22:61 tells us that at that very moment the Lord came out the door, "turned and looked straight at Peter." The first time the rooster crowed, Peter's conscience was not awakened. This time he remembered what Jesus had said about his denial of him. The look of Jesus and the reminder of the crowing rooster proved too much for Peter: "He broke down and wept."

The importance and relevance of Peter's denial for the church to which Mark writes is obvious. To a church under severe pressure of persecution it provided a warning. If denial of Jesus Christ was possible for one of the leaders of the apostles, then they must be constantly on guard lest they too deny Jesus. The story also provided assurance that if anyone did fail Jesus under the duress of persecution, there was always a way open for repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. But the servant girl also saw the face of Jesus. That would have had an impact upon her.

I remember Dr Frank Rayward, our retired Superintendent telling me how he discussed with the famous artist, Herbert Beecroft, how he came to paint one of the world's most loved portraits of Jesus. He was moved to see the face of Jesus. Herbert Beecroft was an English portrait artist who was born in 1864. He painted hundreds of portraits.

He was invited to lecture in Australia in 1905 and then settled in Woollahra. He attended the Pitt Street Congregational Church. He told Dr Rayward that while he was praying one day in 1928, he was thinking of the scene outside the high priest's house when Jesus was being taken after judgment through the courtyard at night when he heard Peter denying he even knew Jesus. The words of scripture flashed into his mind: "The Lord turned and looked upon Peter, and Peter remembered." Luke 22:61 When Herbert Beecroft opened his eyes he saw a vision of Jesus standing before him. He rose and told his wife: "I've seen the face." He had no need to say whose face. She replied: "I knew you had from the look on your own." He started painting and she kept

him at it day and night for a fortnight until it was completed. His painting has become one of the most loved in the world.

What is this about Peter's Galilean accent? Philip Yancey, the American author says: "Galilee got little respect from the rest of the country. It was the farthest province from Jerusalem and the most backward culturally. Rabbinic literature of the time portrays Galileans as bumpkins, fodder for ethnic jokes. Galileans who learned Hebrew pronounced it so crudely that they were not called on to read the Torah in other synagogues. The Aramaic words preserved in the Gospels show that Jesus spoke in that northern dialect, no doubt encouraging scepticism about him. "How can the Christ come from Galilee?" "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Peter's accent betrayed he had been with Jesus. I wonder if your accent on life shows you have been with Jesus? What did the servant girl see in the Court yard? She had seen Peter: lying, tearful, regretful. He was so self-confident and courageous. Every fisherman on Galilee had to be courageous. I have seen the sign on Lake Galilee 'Beware of the westerly whips' warning fishermen today. The early church told how Peter, full of confidence, attempted to walk on water but sank. They told how he drew his sword to defend Jesus from the Temple police. Why then did such a courageous man deny Christ? Jesus had predicted His disciples would fail him. But Peter said, 'Although the rest may deny you, I will never deny you.' You can see his strength and self-confidence. 'Lord I am ready to go to prison with you and to die with you!' 'I tell you, Peter,' Jesus said, 'the cock will not crow tonight until you have said three times that you do not know me.'" Matt 26:33-34 But why should he deny he ever knew Christ? A young servant girl recognised him.

I think bravery led him to follow the captured Jesus to the house of the High Priest Caiaphas. Why was he there? I think he was listening — trying to find out what would happen to Jesus. He was waiting for some word from a servant or soldier. While listening, waiting, thinking if he could rescue Jesus, he was recognised. Then Peter denied he knew Jesus. That denial was not cowardice to save himself. But as an act of bravery trying to remain under cover. When a servant-girl said, 'He was with Jesus of Nazareth,' Peter replied, 'I swear that I don't know the man!' When challenged again, he said, 'I swear I do not know the man!' Then a cock crowed and Peter remembered, and was heart-broken at his denial.

After the resurrection, Jesus appeared a week later along the Galilee Lake shore. Peter and the others were fishing. Jesus called to them to come ashore and have some breakfast. John 21:15-19 "When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. Follow me!" With each fresh question, one of the denials was erased. These last words to Peter were same same as His first words on the same shore of Galilee, 'Follow me!'. For the next thirty years, Peter was to lead the most incredible life as he followed the way of Jesus and cared for the young church.

What comes after "failure" in the dictionary? Faith! Faith is the answer to every failure. Faith to be forgiven. Faith to start again. Faith to find new ways. The future lies in faith. Our failure to honour Him may even be the means to come closer to the Saviour. You can start afresh by faith if you come to know Jesus Christ as both Lord and Saviour. Accept Jesus Christ by faith now. Learn to live that people will recognise that you have been with Jesus!

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Philip Yancey, "The Jesus I Never Knew." p60.

How did Malchus lose his ear?

MINOR CHARACTERS ABOUT CALVARY. No 2.

Scripture: Luke 22:47-53.

In the 16th Century England and Spain were deadly rivals. This continued in the wrestle for sea power, for trade in Europe and the new Colonies of the Americas. The defeat of the Spanish Armada under Queen Elizabeth 1st made the Spanish more determined to rule the seas to preserve Spanish trade ships bringing back to Spain the wealth of the Americas. In the 18th Century, fury in England reached its zenith, over tales of mistreatment of her merchant seamen. The war took its name from Robert Jenkins, captain of the ship Rebecca, who claimed Spanish coast guards had cut off his ear in 1731. He exhibited the ear in the House of Commons and so aroused public opinion that the government of Prime Minister Robert Walpole reluctantly declared war.

Basically, the war was one of commercial rivalry between England and Spain. Britain wanted to participate in the slave traffic with the Spanish colonies. So "The War of Jenkins' Ear" began in Europe, merged into the War of Austrian Succession, and spilled over into the American southern colonies in a dispute over the boundary of Florida and Georgia. The citizens of Georgia and South Carolina invaded Florida. The Spanish retaliated by attempting to invade those colonies by sea. Governor James Oglethorpe invaded Spanish Florida, and a Spanish counterattack against Georgia and South Carolina was repulsed in the last battle of the War of Jenkins' Ear in 1742. It is not surprising then that the cutting off of a man's ear in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was captured by the Temple guard led almost to widespread fighting and bloodshed.

1. BETRAYAL LEADS TO BLOODSHED.

The betrayal of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is well known, but in it is a minor character of interest. Matthew says: "While Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for." Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" At that time Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled."

Judas pointed out the right man in the dark by kissing Him on the cheek. "Greetings, Rabbi." "Friend, what have you come for?" Jesus is not seeking information as to why Judas has come, but he is administering a rebuke for He knows very well why Judas has come.

2. THE DISCIPLES WERE READY TO DEFEND JESUS.

Peter pulled out his sword to defend Jesus. A number of the disciples were armed. There is more than one sword mentioned. They had recognized the potential dangers and were ready. Luke puts it: 22:49 "When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear." The disciples had swords. The action of Peter illustrates the curious combination of loyalty and obtuseness that characterized him. Realizing that Jesus was endangered, Peter was courageous

enough to come to his defense and risk his own safety as he did later when he followed the guard right into the High Priest's Courtyard.

To this extent he justified his boastful promise that if all others should forsake Jesus, he would not. Peter was better as a fisherman than a soldier and missed his aim, cutting off the right ear of Malchus. John (18:10) tells us his name was Malchus. The grammar indicates Malchus was "the" leader from the high priest in this action and that he was in the forefront of the confrontation. John remembered the man and his name. This is eyewitness testimony.

The disciples made many mistakes. They thought Jesus intended to establish an earthly kingdom. They failed to grasp the spiritual and eternal Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus. Jesus had predicted His death and forewarned the disciples, giving them extensive training for months, yet they refused to give up their preconceived ideas and accept what Jesus was saying about the eternal salvation through His death on the Cross. They also did not wait for instructions.

They acted on their own, took matters into their own hands. The disciples had asked, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" Before Jesus had answered, they went ahead and acted on their own. Those mistakes are frequently found among Christians today. The primary concern of Jesus was for the wounded man. Malchus' life was changed forever by the man who was getting ready to die for him and the rest of the world.

The touch of Jesus can change your life and heal your hurts. Why wasn't Peter arrested? Probably because Jesus not only quickly cooled the situation but healed the wound. It was one thing to escort a non-resisting prisoner quietly into the city; it was another to escort twelve men, eleven of them ready to fight. Nothing happened so the disciples fled in the darkness. v56

3. JESUS NEVER NEEDS DEFENDING BY VIOLENCE.

When Peter cut off Malchus' ear "Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns."

The word "cup" connects this statement with His prayer in Gethsemane. Jesus accepted the Father's will and calmly moved to its fulfillment. He does not require that we defend him. T.S.Eliot, that great twentieth century American poet shows this in his "Gerontion." (1920) He presents all the powers of evil as seen in the first World War confronted by a baby, born in a barn, "the word within a word, unable to speak a word," the innocent Redeemer, swaddled now in the darkness of the world. But there was no need for us to protect Him: "In the juvencence of the year, came Christ the tiger." You do not need to defend the Lion of Judah, you just let Him loose!

Some take Jesus' response: "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" v 52 as a call to pacifism, to give up completely all arms. Others observe that Jesus told Peter not to throw away his sword but to put his sword "back in its place." Violence in defense of Christ is completely unjustified.

We need to tell that to crusaders in every age, and in every place like Northern Ireland: He does not need us to defend Him. Jesus believes He could call for instant aid from his Father, but He bows to divine sovereignty in obedience to His Father's will. Jesus was more interested in healing those who are hurt: "Jesus answered, "No more of this!" and He touched the man's ear and healed him."

I believe we can defend the innocent when their lives are at risk from tyrants, but we must not pretend we are doing it to protect Christianity. Jesus Christ does not need us to use our little

swords to defend Him. Instead, like Him, we should put our resources to touching the afflicted and healing the wounded.

The gospels speak no more of Malchus but it is fair to assume that his encounter with Christ must have left a lasting impression upon him. Jesus' healing of Malchus, even in the midst being arrested, radically demonstrated the principle he himself taught: "Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you." Jesus "touched his ear and healed him." Malchus, who moments before by the swipe of Peter's sword was condemned for the remainder of his time on earth to be without his ear, was now whole again.

Jesus amidst the savage crew of soldiers and high priest representatives, whose desire was to take Him captive, took time to heal the wounded. Took time to heal an enemy. Malchus was clutching the side of his head in anguish one moment, and the next, his hand gently touched the ear he'd lost, in amazement, for it was back in its rightful place.

Malchus went along with the other servants and guards in taking Jesus to the high priest. But what was going through his mind? He had just felt the power of God. He had been healed from a wound that would have haunted him for life. He was made whole again. We have no idea whether Malchus ever obeyed the gospel. We do know that he had reason to. He was a first hand witness, and recipient of the grace of God. Jesus healed his physical body. Did Malchus return for a spiritual healing as well? We hope so, but many of us have known the healing of Jesus, but have not responded in commitment to Christ. Do so now.

Jesus' command to Peter declared his disapproval of Peter's sudden and violent intervention. Had Jesus desired defense, he could have summoned angelic aid, but he did not do so. Matthew 26:52-53 "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" expresses both the necessity of his suffering and his absolute commitment to the fulfillment of the Father's purpose.

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Who was the teenager who streaked in the Garden of Gethsemane?

MINOR CHARACTERS ABOUT CALVARY. No 3.

Scripture: Mark 14:43-52.

Last Saturday night, while we were here proclaiming the Gospel, outside my Parliamentary office overlooking the Domain, 100,000 people gathered to watch on four huge screens the Sony Tropfest. This short film festival last Saturday even had a streaker!

It is hard to have any event these days, without some exhibitionist, fueled by alcohol, taking off his or her clothes and running over the pitch, court, grass or track. Police and security have to be ever vigilant against those who would have their five minutes of fame amusing the crowd but distracting the concentration of the players or competitors.

It is a new phenomenon, so who would have imagined a streaker in the Garden of Gethsemane? The only difference was they do it to attract attention, this "certain young man" tried to escape and hide from attention.

Mark's Gospel, the only one to make reference to it, says: "A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind." These are two strange and fascinating verses.

At first sight they seem completely irrelevant. They seem to add nothing to the narrative and yet there must be some reason for them being there. Like the servant girl in the High Priest's courtyard, and the temple guard who had his ear slashed off, this young streaker is a minor character about Calvary, yet whose story adds to the authenticity of the narrative and may also give us some insight into the passion of the Christ.

1. WHO WAS THIS NAKED YOUNG MAN?

We can identify him. He was the Gospel writer, "John whose surname was Mark" Acts 12:12, 25 Mark or Marcus, Col. 4:10 as he is sometimes called, was his Roman name, which gradually came to supersede his Jewish name John. He lived in Jerusalem with his mother Mary. Acts 12:12 The home is spoken of as hers. The father was probably dead.

The description of the house, with its large rooms and porch and Greek slave, suggests a family of wealth. They were probably among the many zealous Jews who, having become rich in the countries around Palestine, retired to Jerusalem, the center of their nation and faith. Mark was "cousin" to Barnabas of Cyprus. Col 4:10 who was a man of means. Acts 4:36 Possibly Mark also had lived there.

2. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT HIM?

The house of John Mark's mother was well known to the disciples. Jesus had made arrangements with her to observe the Passover in its large Upper room. It was here that the disciples gathered after the Resurrection and Jesus twice appeared to them. It was here, the disciples gathered with a large number of believers where the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost. It was here that when the persecution of the early disciples began, the believers gathered to pray, and it was here, after Peter was miraculously released from prison, he went to meet with those who were praying for his release. From the beginning John Mark was in the same large house.

Mark knew Jesus and later in his mother's house Mark was converted by Peter, who calls him his "son". 1 Pet. 5:13 Mark is first mentioned when Acts 12:25 he went with Paul and Barnabas on their first journey about A.D. 47 as their helper. Mark and his mother are already Christians. 44 AD and he was already esteemed by the church, which chose him to accompany Barnabas and Saul to Antioch.

The home was a retreat for Christians, so that Mark had every opportunity to become acquainted with leaders such as James and John, and James the brother of the Lord. His kinship with Barnabas, knowledge of Christian history and teaching, and proved efficiency account for his being taken along on the first missionary journey as “minister” to Barnabas and Saul. Acts 13:5 This term suggests that he was to teach in newly founded churches similar to that of the synagogue, and so to be their “helper” in preaching and teaching.

But for some reason Mark turned back when they reached Perga in Turkey. Acts 12:25; 13:13 Three years later a “sharp contention” arose between Paul and Barnabas Acts 15:36-40 because Paul would not take Mark with him again. So Barnabas and Mark went together while Paul and Silas went together. Acts 15:36-40 Mark, however, was at length reconciled to Paul and was with Paul in his first imprisonment at Rome. Col. 4:10; Philemon 24 At a later period he was with Peter in Babylon, 1 Pet. 5:13 then a main centre of Jewish learning. Mark was with Timothy in Ephesus when Paul wrote him during his second imprisonment. 2 Tim. 4:11 He then disappears from view. Why did he turn back at Perga? Acts 13:13 Not because of homesickness, or anxiety for his mother, or the desire to rejoin Peter, or fear of perils on the journey.

He turned back because he objected to Paul’s offer of salvation to the Gentiles on condition of faith alone. There are hints that Mark’s family was zealous, and it is significant that here Acts 13:5, 13 he is given only his Hebrew name.

Paul’s reaction was very strong, Acts 15:38 and we know that nothing stirred Paul more than this very question. The explanation may be in what happened when the Roman Sergius Paulus became a believer. At that time Paul (the change of name is here noted by Luke) stepped to the front, and henceforth, Luke speaks of Paul as leader.

At this time, Paul stood almost alone in his conviction. Barnabas had misgivings. Galatians 2:13 Perhaps, too, Mark who did not like Uncle Barnabas taking second place.

We hear nothing further of Mark until the beginning of the second missionary journey two years later, when Paul’s unwillingness to take Mark with them led to the rupture between Paul and Barnabas and to the mission of Barnabas and Mark back to Cyprus. Acts 15:39 He is here called Mark, and in that quiet way Luke may indicate his own conviction that Mark’s mind had changed on the great question. Mark had learned from the discussions in the Council at Jerusalem and from subsequent events at Antioch. Eleven years later, Colossians 4:10 Mark is in Rome with Paul. The breach is healed. He is now one of the faithful few among Jewish Christians who stand by Paul. He is Paul’s honored “fellow-worker” and a great “comfort” to him.

Mark then met Peter and went with him to Babylon. 1 Peter 5:13 Peter sends Mark’s greeting along with that of the church in Babylon. Thence Mark returns to Asia Minor, and 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul asks Timothy, who is at Ephesus, to come to him, pick up Mark by the way, and bring him along. In that connection Paul pays Mark his final tribute; he is “useful for ministering” so useful that his ministry is a joy to Paul’s heart.

The most important and reliable tradition is that Mark wrote his Gospel based upon the accounts of Peter. Later Mark remained in Cyprus until after the death of Barnabas (who was living in 57 AD). 1 Corinthians 9:5 Then he went to Alexandria, founded the church there, became its first bishop and there was martyred in the 8th year of Nero. 62-63AD

In 815 AD Venetian soldiers stole his remains from Alexandria and placed them under the church of St Mark at Venice where they remain to this day.

3. WHY DID MARK INCLUDE THE STREAKER BIT?

Why would he insert such a trivial detail in so solemn a story? Was this Mark’s way of saying, “I was there”? Why he was there is not explained.

Alfred Hitchcock was famous for including himself in each of his films in the most minor way, as a person standing in a crowd, or in the queue waiting to get on the bus. John includes himself in his gospel, and Mark does here. This young man had only a sindon, an outer garment gathered around a person at night like a blanket. Usually this garment was made of wool. His, however, was linen, an expensive material worn only by the rich. When he fled without his sindon, he was actually naked. v51

Perhaps the main point of the story—and the reason Mark included it—was to show that the forsakeness of Jesus was total. Even this youth forsook him. Mark was probably raised from his sleep by the noise which the rabble made who came to apprehend Jesus.

He wrapped his blanket about him, becoming more conspicuous. He was seized; but he spun out of their grasp, leaving them holding the blanket and so escaped out of their hands.

The early missionaries in India were told their European clothes were dangerous if they caught fire from the ground level open fire. Indians wore loose clothing from which they could disengage themselves. Matthew and Luke used Mark as the basis of their work and that they include in their gospels practically everything that is in Mark. But they do not include these two verses. Why? Because this incident was interesting to Mark and not really interesting to anyone else. Why then was this incident so interesting to Mark that he felt he must include it? The most probable answer is that the young man was Mark himself, and that this is his way of saying, “I was there.” May be Mark was present at the Last Supper. He was young, just a boy, and maybe no one really noticed him. But he was fascinated with Jesus and when the company went out into the dark, he slipped out after them when he ought to have been in bed, with only the linen sheet over his naked body. It may be that all the time Mark was there in the shadows listening and watching. That would explain where the Gethsemane narrative came from.

It may be that the one witness was Mark as he stood silent in the shadows, watching with a teenagers’ reverence the greatest hero he had ever known. We may take it as fairly certain that Mark put in these two verses because they were about himself. He could never forget that night. He was saying: “I, too, when I was a boy, was there.”

What a privilege to say “I was there!” Even a young person can be a great witness to Jesus Christ.

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Who was the African on the way to the Cross?

MINOR CHARACTERS ABOUT CALVARY. No 4.

Scripture: Mark 14:43-52.

There is new evidence concerning the African whom Jesus met on the way to Calvary. There were many Africans who came to Jerusalem at Passover. Some came from Egypt, others from the Sudan, others Nubia, others Libya and the adjoining country of Ethiopia.

Of course, today's national boundaries do not align with those of the first century, and countries like Cush and Sheba are totally different. The evangelist Philip converted and baptized an Ethiopian who was travelling on the Gaza Road back to his own country. This covered the modern area of Ethiopia and Libya.

Ethiopia is the oldest Christian country in Africa and it has a large Jewish population. The Jewish Ark of the Covenant, stolen from Herod's Temple in Jerusalem, is claimed to have been brought to Ethiopia and is today in The Chapel of Saint Mary of Zion in Axum, Ethiopia. There are more than 20,000 churches in Ethiopia and each one has a replica of the Ark of the Covenant.

Ethiopian Jews are called Falasha Jews and since 1989, 65,000 these black Jews have migrated to Israel.

One day an African citizen of Cyrene by the name of Simon, perhaps a pilgrim to the Passover in Jerusalem, like the Ethiopian Eunuch whom Philip converted (Acts 8:26-39).

Simon from Cyrene was compelled by a Roman soldier to carry the cross of Jesus. (Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21, Luke 23:26). From such a chance meeting you would not expect to find archaeological or literary evidence 2000 years later. Cyrene was the capital of the Roman province we today call Libya. The city was founded by Greek colonists near the end of the 7th century BC. Jews from Cyrene were at Pentecost that year and it is likely they were there also for Passover when Jesus was crucified. We read of their presence in the Acts of the Apostles. (Acts 2:10 Acts 6:9).

These Jews in Jerusalem from Cyrene and nearby Alexandria were so numerous they had their own synagogue. Some of them debated Stephen after the resurrection. At least one, Lucius of Cyrene, believed and became a prominent preacher in Antioch. (Acts 13:1)

The ancient site of Cyrene has been extensively excavated by modern archaeologists. From the discoveries we know much about Greco-Roman art and architecture, civic and social life, money and writing. In Cyrene are the ruins of a Greek theatre, Roman theatre, temple, marketplace, Roman forum, baths, magnificent houses, a race-track for chariot races, and two early churches from the sixth century.

It was a black African Jew who became caught up in the events of the crucifixion. What happened is clear. Matthew writes in Matthew 27:32 "As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross." "As they were going out.." presupposes he meant "of the city." The crowd of soldiers, Jesus and the members of the public, met with Simon. Jesus, weak as He was, had managed to carry the crossbeam as far as the city gates. (John 19:17)

There the soldiers forced Simon to assume the load. Simon's act was not a deed of sympathetic magnanimity for he had no choice. The soldiers just forced him to carry the cross of Jesus. Luke says in LUKE 23:26 "As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus." Mark's Gospel includes a detail Matthew and Luke do not give. Mark adds Simon was 'the father of Alexander and Rufus'. Alexander and Rufus were apparently younger men well known among the believers.

Mark's Gospel was probably written in Rome and is based upon information supplied by Peter. Mark did not have to say who they were, as the local members knew.

Later when Paul sent greetings to the church in Rome he included in Romans 16:13 "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too". Rufus was eminent in the church. His mother is unnamed but Paul owed her a special debt. She had perceived his loneliness after the loss of his family when he became a Christian. (Philippians 3:8). Her presence in Rome made him look forward to his visit.

The incident involving his father bearing the Cross of Jesus, brought Rufus and Alexander a certain fame among believers at Rome, especially as they were outstanding Christians.

Jerusalem was a magnet for Jews from all over the world 2,000 years ago, as it is today. Pilgrims travelled long distances to attend the festivals. The book of Acts gives a list of fifteen regions whose languages could be heard in Jerusalem just after the crucifixion (Acts 2:8-11). Some pilgrims fell ill and died in Jerusalem. A few of the tombs contain their remains.

Ossuaries holding their bones are labelled with their names and places of origin. In 1962, the archaeologist, N. Avigad, discovered a burial cave of Cyrenian Jews, outside of Jerusalem, dating before 70 A.D.

One is marked explicitly in Aramaic 'Alexander of Cyrene', and twice inscribed in Greek: "Alexander son of Simon." Here is his name, his father's name, and his city of origin. Was the Alexander of Cyrene, son of Simon, whose bones lay in that ossuary, the man whose father carried the cross? It is most likely.

Another question: how do we know Simon who carried the cross for Jesus was black? There is some evidence for that. Simon is mentioned (Acts 13:1) in the same verse with Lucius of Cyrene: "There were at Antioch in the church, prophets and teachers, Barnabas and Symeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene." Symeon is the same word as Simon, and Niger means "black." And gives rise to the racist curse word, "Nigger" used of Africans in several countries. So we can read the verse: "there were at Antioch, Simon the black and Lucius (both) of Cyrene". The evidence is strong that a black African played a part in the drama of the Passion. Here are three insights for us today.

1. JESUS DIED FOR PEOPLE OF ALL RACES.

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." (John 3:16) There always was an international dimension to the plan of redemption.

The New Covenant was for all races, not just for Jews as under the Old Covenant. Jesus died for all the people of the entire world. Sharing in the bearing of His Cross was a black man from Africa. How appropriate!

2. COLOURED PEOPLE BEAR OUR BURDENS.

Why was Simon picked by the Roman centurion? Jesus was on the long road to the top of Calvary. Jesus had been up all night. He had passed through the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, had sustained hurt by His disciples' cowardice, had heard Peter's denial, had been beaten frequently during the night with the lash, and had been examined seven times in illegal trials. He had been before Annas the godfather, Caiaphas the High Priest, Herod the fox, and Pilate the Roman Governor. He had faced twisted, scheming men and lying witnesses.

He had been scourged, beaten and reviled. He heard a mob reject him with the chant "Crucify Him!" He had been subjected to the coarse brutality of Roman soldiers. The leather thongs cut His flesh. The wounds on His head still bled. Blood ran from the thorn spikes piercing His flesh. His back was lacerated where He had been whipped with a leather lash in which pieces of bone and

lead had been tied. This scourging frequently caused the death of the victim. No one who has seen Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ" would doubt it.

Then they placed on His raw and quivering shoulders two huge, rough beams of wood. Under their weight He swayed and staggered, fainting in the heat, falling, at last, in all the filth of an Eastern street. This is the Christ of God, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the only Ruler of Princes, to Whom every knee shall bow. This is the One Whose lips had spoken words of forgiveness and life, Whose hands had been stretched out in healing and blessing, Whose feet had walked on tireless errands of mercy and love and through Whose passion we have been redeemed. (L D. Weatherhead)
The officer in charge had a problem. The prisoner could go no further. No Roman could be told to carry the wood of a Cross. No ordinary Jew could be ordered into such service. To have tried to impress a Priest could cause a riot. Our phrase, "touch wood," goes back to the early days of Christianity when some possessed splinters of the Cross of Christ and wore them as charms to help people find courage. But when Jesus was carrying that wood along the streets of Jerusalem, no one would touch wood.

What was the Roman officer in charge to do? Jesus could carry His Cross no further. Simon solved the problem.

As the procession neared the gates a black Jew was coming in. Simon of Cyrene, tall, strong, obviously not a townsman, and a black. The officer saw the solution at once. He would not dare to incur the enmity of the priests by making an orthodox white Jew unclean on the eve of the Passover, but, concerning a black man, white men have rarely been particular. In more senses than one, a black man carries the white man's burden.

No one considered the feelings of Simon. He looked strong and he was a stranger. If there was trouble through ceremonial defilement, the officer could say, using this racist vernacular, "How was I to know that cussed nigger was a Jew?"

So he forced Simon to carry the Cross of Jesus. So black people and indigenous people have been pressed into the service of white races. They didn't care that Simon would make himself ceremonially unclean in carrying the heavy cross, on a hot day, for an unknown prisoner. In doing so, that Roman soldier does Simon the greatest honour possible.

3. A CHANGE CAME FROM THAT CHANCE MEETING.

Simon did not know Jesus. Yet something happened as, between the gate of Jerusalem and the hilltop Calvary, Simon of Cyrene came into contact with the transforming friendship of Jesus. Jesus would speak to one who, even under compulsion, was doing Him a service and sharing his pain. We do not know what was said. But something changed Simon that day. For we know that Simon became a Christian. His sons Alexander and Rufus became leaders in the early church. I am glad that Simon, the black man, is in the picture and that he recognized Jesus as Saviour, for Jesus belongs to all races. Jesus was a Jew, but the Christ of the Cross is race-less.

Jesus had said, John 12:32 "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." Simon was the very first to come, drawn to Him. So Jesus today from the Cross, draws people to Himself. You and the future of your family can be changed by a chance meeting with Jesus who died upon the Cross for you – and for people of all races.

If you come from Africa, if you here now have coloured skin, if you or your ancestors have been pressed into service by the white race, take pride in that one of yours was the last person ever to do an act of kindness to the Lord Jesus.

There are remarkable changes that can come from a chance meeting with Jesus. That friendship with Him can make all the difference to your life and that of your family as well. There can be forgiveness of your sin, acceptance, salvation from the guilt and burden you may bear as a result

of that chance meeting. Jesus offers to make you a new person. From the Cross He calls you to accept Him as Lord and Saviour. What a change your chance meeting can make. As we re-visit the way of the Cross, do you feel Him drawing you to Himself? If so, respond, and your whole life will be different.

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What did the Roman see upon the Cross?"

MINOR CHARACTERS ABOUT CALVARY. No 5.

Scripture: Mark 15:33-39.

An eyewitness account to another person's suffering is always of great interest for understanding the truth about what happened. When Jesus died upon the cross, there were many eyewitnesses, but one was a professional army man, who had seen many people die. He was not interested in the dispute with the Priests and Jewish leaders. His observation of the crucifixion of the death of Jesus has great insight and impartiality.

1. THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE TIME OF JESUS

In 27 B.C. Caesar Augustus became the first Emperor. Augustus was extremely efficient as an administrator. Unlike Julius Caesar, Augustus treated the Senate with respect and gained theirs in return. He appointed procurators over volatile provinces where the Roman legions were stationed. Pontius Pilate was such a procurator or governor over Judea.

Augustus inaugurated an extensive program of social, religious, and moral reform. Benefits were given to couples that had children. Adultery was made illegal entailing severe penalties. Traditional religion was stressed, and temples were renovated. Augustus was pontifex maximus in 12 B.C., establishing him as both political and religious head of state.

Augustus built another forum as the judicial, religious, and commercial center for the city. He built basilicas, temples, theatres, libraries, baths, warehouses and the first amphitheater in Rome's history. Extensive water systems were constructed that included artificial lakes, canals, aqueducts, and flood control. The sewage system was renovated. A police force of 3,000 men was created along with a fire-fighting force that numbered 7,000.

Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus (27 B.C.-A.D. 14) and conducted His ministry during the reign of Augustus's successor, Tiberius, A.D. 14-37 whose image was stamped on a silver denarius that Jesus referred to in a discussion about taxation. Luke 20:20-26

Tiberius was an able military commander and a good administrator. He followed Augustus's example of not expanding the empire thus avoiding war. The pax Romana (peace of Rome) that Augustus had inaugurated was preserved, providing easy, safe travel throughout the empire. Pontius Pilate was appointed governor of Judea, a post he held until A.D. 36, just prior to the death of Tiberius.

The success of the Roman Empire depended upon the ability of the legions, under the command of professional soldiers to keep peace throughout the world. The foot soldiers were usually prisoners of war from some other conquered land. Pax Romana was the key to prosperity and success. Greek and Latin were universal languages. The Roman Empire reached from Britain to Arabia and from Germany to Morocco.

2. THE ROMAN GOVERNOR IN THE TIME OF JESUS

Three non-Christian writers mention Pilate's role in the death of Jesus. Jesus posed no threat to Roman order and was not involved in any political activity. But this was why the Romans executed him.

Pilate was under threat from the Emperor because of earlier failures to keep the peace. Luke reported 23:12 that after Jesus' trial Pilate and Herod Antipas became friends. Only recently Herod too had executed someone very similar to Jesus, John the Baptist, whose teachings were also popular.

2. THE FACE-OFF BETWEEN PILATE AND JESUS

The judgement area of the palace of the Roman Governor Pilate has been excavated and is known as Lithostrotos, or Gabbatha, the place of judgement. This is still in existence today and can be visited.

On the raised platform or bema stood the large judgement seat from which Roman justice was dispensed. Pilate was fetched from his slumbers as the first roosters crowed at the dawn of what was to be forever known as "Good Friday".

Earlier, Jesus was dragged through a series of illegal trials by the Jewish religious system. Annas, the godfather of an ecclesiastical dynasty, examined him in his house. Jesus was then dragged next door and before the current High Priest, the crafty Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas. His burial box for his bones, with his name upon it, has been discovered.

After being abused, Jesus was roughly taken to the chamber of The Sanhedrin, where a hastily assembled group, met illegally in a pre-dawn assembly to hear the High Priest's report of his examination of Jesus. Before the Sanhedrin, Caiaphas declared that it was essential for the sake of the nation that Jesus be put to death immediately. He charged him with blasphemy, threatening to destroy the temple, threatening the peace, claiming to be king, and representing himself as the Son of God.

They did not need a fair trial. What they needed was a verdict! The Sanhedrin had no power to execute Jesus. So they sought the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate to grant execution quickly. They wanted the end before the people were aware what was happening. Jesus was dragged, still bound, past the Temple area to the Tower of Antonia in the first light before sunrise.

The Jews handed Jesus over the soldiers, then stepped back lest they defile themselves by walking on Roman territory. Little matter they were already defiling themselves by walking all over human rights in this travesty of justice! Pilate examined Jesus. He then sent Jesus back to the Jews declaring he could find nothing worthy of death in Jesus.

But the Jews sent him back. They threatened that if Pilate did not find Jesus guilty and sentence Him to death, then the Sanhedrin would report Pilate to Rome as being indifferent to the threat of Roman security in the region. Pilate tried to avoid the issue of having the visiting Herod make the decision. Herod amused himself with the well-known prisoner; but was not going to make an unpopular decision when Jesus was really in Pilate's territory.

Pilate tried to release Jesus, as part of an amnesty granting a prisoner release each Passover. But the Jews would rather have a patriot, Jesus Barabbas, arrested for offences against the Romans, released instead of Jesus. They did not know Pilate had his own inner struggle.

Pilate's wife urged him to release Jesus, as she dreamed of trouble if anything was done to Jesus. But faced with the blackmail of the scheming priests, he dismissed his wife's fears and handed Jesus over to be crucified. The Governor had shown he wanted peace at any price. There on the Lithostrotos, the viceregal Pilate, clothed in his leather, purple robe and brass, faced his prisoner, whose hands were bound, his head and face bloodied, wearing only a seamless, homespun robe. Pilate ordered Jesus scourged and then crucified.

3. THE ROMAN SOLDIERS AT THE DEATH OF JESUS

A centurion had oversight of the task. He was probably from Italy with some education. The Roman soldiers who scourged Jesus were uneducated men probably from some other conquered country pressed into armed service. They did their work with unbelievable cruelty. John 19:1 Scourging was done with the victim tied to a post. There were thirteen stokes on the chest and twenty-six on the back. Often the victim died from the beating.

The flagellum consisted of a handle with leather thongs weighted with jagged pieces of bone or metal, to make the blows lacerate the flesh. The victim had to carry the extremely heavy cross, or crossbeam, under the lash of the soldiers to the hill outside the city walls, where the victim was nailed to it through his wrists and ankles.

Mark records only one of Jesus' seven cries from the cross, a cry of agony "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This cry of Jesus reflects something of the depth of meaning of Paul's statement 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us." The ignorant and heartless bystanders mistook the first words of Jesus' cry "Eloi, Eloi" ("My God, my God") to be a cry for Elijah to rescue Him. "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

The soldiers were typical of all the ordinary people whose jobs involved them in the crucifixion of Jesus. They include the Romans who nailed Jesus to the Cross; the Temple Guards who arrested Jesus in the Garden, the carpenters, tree-fellers and workmen who had made the Cross without thinking of their part in the wider crime against humanity.

They cry with Hitler's concentration camp doctors, the comrades of Stalin, the mindless teenagers of Pol Pot's Killing Fields, the scientists behind the atomic bomb, the chemists who are making the new germ warfare – "It is not our fault! We are simply doing our job! Blame the politicians, the generals, the leaders, but don't blame us because we are just doing our job!"

"Three workmen fashioning a Cross
on which a fourth must die.
Yet not one of them the other asked,
"And why? And why? And why?"
They simply said, "This is our business,
our living we must earn,
What happens to the other bloke
is none of our concern.""

Their complacency and self-centredness crucify the Son of God afresh.

Mark does not identify the soldier who went to get the wine vinegar. The drink is posca cheap wine vinegar drunk by labourers and soldiers. But some soldier got a sponge filled with this wine vinegar and placed it on the tip of a stick of hyssop John 19:29 and held up to Jesus' lips so that he could suck the liquid from it.

Some of the bystanders wanted to prevent the soldier from giving the wine vinegar to Jesus but he insisted, "Leave Him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down." After six hours of torture, Jesus cried out and died. The loud cry of Jesus is unusual because victims of crucifixion usually had no strength left, especially when near death. But Jesus' death was no ordinary one, nor was his shout the last gasp of a dying man. It was a shout of victory that anticipated the triumph of the Resurrection.

The Roman centurion in command of the detachment of soldiers at the cross had witnessed the scourging, mocking, spitting, lashing, and the nailing. The centurion was the officer in command of one hundred soldiers. They were usually career soldiers, and they formed the real backbone of the Roman army.

Now he heard Jesus' last cry and watched him die. The centurion was deeply impressed. He had never seen anything like this before! His statement "Surely this man was the Son of God" probably did not have its full theological sense as we understand it, yet it is the word of a man deeply moved and drawn to the person of the Righteous Sufferer on the cross.

In view of Mark's opening words to his Gospel, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" 1:1 the statement of the centurion at the climax of Jesus' passion takes on added significance.

Whether or not the centurion realized the full import of his words, they were for Mark a profoundly true statement of the identity of the Man on the cross. Jesus had said, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." John 12:32 The Roman centurion became the first to look at Jesus upon the Cross, and realize, that here was a Man different from all others, and even though he did not realize the full significance of his words at that stage, said "Surely this man was the Son of God."

When we are drawn to look at Jesus on the cross, and consider the passion of the Christ was for the forgiveness of our sins, we too must say with growing faith, "Surely this man was the Son of God."

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The Madding Crowd around the Cross

MINOR CHARACTERS ABOUT CALVARY. No 6.

Scripture: Scripture: JOHN 19:17-30.

The men who used to draw the maps of the world in the time of Columbus, had the notion that the world was flat and spun round a centre post, and that central post was the Cross of Calvary. Certainly for this day, Good Friday, the whole Christian world revolves round the Cross of Christ. In every country of the world, people of different races, colours, cultures, education, and social and economic circumstances stand around the Cross.

It was so on the first Good Friday. The Gospels breathlessly take us from one scene to another as we glimpse the hurrying figures of people involved in the crucifixion. Each person going about their task with differing motive and each face lined with differing expressions. The whole gamut of human motivation can be read into their behaviour. The whole range of human emotions can be seen on their faces.

Look at the motives and the emotions in the hurrying figures as they flit across this page of history: Peter the follower who boasted he would never betray Him but who did; Herod the murderous Roman puppet King; Judas the disciple who knew best and who became a betrayer; Pilate the bored Roman Governor whose wife wanted to change his mind; Caiaphas the High Priest who felt threatened by Jesus; Annas the former High Priest who pulled the strings of power; Mary the weeping widowed mother of Jesus; Cleopas the simple minded friend who did not understand what was happening; Joseph of Arimathea the secret believer who failed to use his influence; Simon from Cyrene the black man conscripted to carry the Cross; the shouting passers by who wanted blood; the furtive disciples hiding out of fear; the leering triumphant Pharisees; the scheming Sadducees; the cursing criminals; the tearful women, and as well the thieves, priests, a traitor, a judge, a governor, a king!

Central to all the action is the quiet, suffering, powerful man who was crucified and who is the only reason any of the others are remembered today! What a kaleidoscope of human motives and human emotions! The same motivation and emotions can be found among people in our city today! Human nature has not changed excepted where the power of the crucified Christ has completely changed them.

For the rest we find their counterparts with a kilometre or so of us now! It is not that they would picture themselves crucifying Christ afresh. Not even the people of that first Good Friday realised the impact the accumulation of their actions and attitudes would have. As Paul said: "None of the rulers of this world knew this wisdom of God. If they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." 1 Corinthians 2:8

Rarely do we understand why we feel the way we do and the full consequences of what we do. If we understand the emotions and the attitudes of those responsible, then in our turn, we may know better.

Who were around the foot of the Cross responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ?

1. THE PRIESTS – the religious people.

The scriptures describe them: Mark 15:1-15, Matthew 26:57-68. Matthew 27:41-43. John 19:4-16. The Pharisees were priests born into leadership. They were good living men.

But they were hard, conservative, legalistic. Note their action: "They went out straightway to counsel together how they might destroy Jesus." They were deliberately and coldly calculating how they might rid themselves of this man who did nothing but preach truth, care for the poor, lead others to God, and in so doing, threatened their whole power structure.

Scripture says they feared “that this Jesus of Nazareth will tear down the Temple and change all the customs which have come down to us from Moses!” Acts 6:14 They were good living, moral men, but hard, legalistic, full of personal pride, and dependent upon keeping the traditions. Jesus threatened them because He revealed true religion, demonstrated concern for people and spoke with authority from the Scriptures, not of the traditions of human systems. We warn the church bureaucracy today against perpetuating these sins that brought Jesus to the Cross. Let the Church beware! Pray these sins might be cleansed from your life.

2. THE POLITICIANS – the community leaders.

The scriptures describe them: Matthew 27:11-26; Luke 23:6-12; John 18:28-40. The Sadducees were the politicians of that day. Old Annas was “the Godfather” who made sure he still held power after his time of leadership was ended. He ensured his five sons followed him into power, and that now his son-in-law Caiaphas was High Priest.

They were an aristocratic party who used their money, position and power to perpetuate their own position. They did deals with the Romans ensuring that their own people would be kept subservient to Rome provided they were kept in power.

They ran the profitable Temple trade at huge profit. Now Jesus came like a breath of fresh air. The captive Jews felt a new racial and religious respect. They wanted to be liberated and to make Jesus King. Jesus was a dreadful threat to entrenched privilege and power.

Jesus strode into the Temple and overturned the moneychangers tables declaring: “It is written in the Scriptures that God said: “My Temple will be called a house of prayer”. But you are making it a hideout for thieves!’ That challenged the power and the wealth of the politicians. There could be no other option. Jesus had to be removed.

3. THE WOMEN - the sympathisers.

The scriptures describe them: Luke 23:27-31; John 19:25-27; Mark 15:40-41; Matthew 27:55-61. No more tragic group of people stood round the cross than those tearful women. There was Mary, the widowed mother of Jesus, for whom in His own suffering He had a special word, asking His dearest friend John to take care of her. There was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, Salome, the wife of Cleopas, and the mother of John Mark in whose Upper Room the Passover had been eaten.

Other unnamed women supported the disciples with money and food. There were women who had wept on the Via Dolorosa, on the Way of Sorrows. Jesus had spoken to them quite sharply: “Women of Jerusalem! Don’t cry for me, but for yourselves and your children!” Their self-pity and empty mourning would help perpetuate such suffering and rejection. He asks not for pity but for changed lives.

4. THE SOLDIERS - the workers.

The scriptures describe them: John 18:12-14, 19-24; Matthew 27:27- 38; Luke 22:63; John 19:16-24; Matthew 27:54; John 19:31-24. The soldiers were typical of all the ordinary people whose jobs involved them in the crucifixion of Jesus.

They include the Roman soldiers who nailed Jesus to the Cross; the Temple Guards responsible for security as guards today in any public place. They had arrested Jesus in the Garden and had treated him roughly before the trials.

There were the carpenters, tree-fellers and workmen who had made the Cross without thinking of their part in the wider crime against humanity. They cry with the concentration camp doctors, the comrades of Stalin, the mindless teenagers of Pol Pot’s Killing Fields, the scientists behind the

atomic bomb, the terrorists of Saddam Hussein, Al Qaeda, and Osama Bin Laden, the chemists who are making the new germ warfare – “It is not our fault! We are simply doing our job! Blame the politicians, the generals, the leaders, but don’t blame us because we are just doing our job!” “Three workmen fashioning a Cross on which a fourth must die. Yet not one of them the other asked, “And why? And why? And why?” They simply said, “This is our business, our living we must earn, what happens to the other bloke is none of our concern.””

Their complacency and self-centredness can crucify the Son of God afresh! Pray these sins might be cleansed from your life.

5. THE DISCIPLES – the supporters.

The scriptures describe them: Matthew 26:36-46;69-75; Mark 14:50- 52; Matthew 27:3-8; read by Irene Norrish. Of all people, the intentions of the disciples were good. They had left their all to follow Jesus. They had spent three years learning from Him, but when the crunch came, they each thought they knew better.

Jesus asked three of them to watch and pray with Him in the garden, but they fell asleep at their prayers. Judas made a deliberate choice to force Jesus to make a move. Peter said he would never deny Him, but faced with exposure and imprisonment, he also denied. The others forsook Him and fled.

They had potential as seen later when Jesus came to them in resurrection power, and the Spirit of God fell upon them. But here before the cross, they crumbled. We who follow the way of Jesus are often so weak under pressure. Pray these sins might be cleansed from your life.

6. THE PASSERS-BY – the bystanders.

The scriptures describe them: Matthew 26:55-56; Matthew 27: 32;39- 40; Luke 23:35-36; Matthew 27:45-50; Luke 23:48-49. Crowds of people can change attitude as easily as they change membership. The crowds that roar approval in the sporting stadium can later boo the same player. On Palm Sunday a crowd gathered in the streets of Jerusalem to cheer the arrival of Jesus. On Good Friday they gathered in the street and roared: “Crucify him!”

Different times, different places, different reasons and probably different crowds. But as the crowds past by, they jeered and mocked and made the wounds of Christ break out in fresh agony. Bystanders are easily lead. Aging dictators manipulate the crowds in every country. They are easily led because they are indifferent to the needs of others, possess a lust for blood and get carried along with vague promises. Pray these sins might be cleansed from your life.

As Paul said: “If they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” 1 Corinthians 2:8 How rarely do we understand why we act the way we do. In the cross of Christ you can see bigotry and immaturity, the love of power and position, pride and materialism, self-centredness and indifference, self-pity and gullibility. These are the sins of all of us standing round the Cross. TIME magazine asks, “Why did Jesus die?” The answer: Religious intolerance, commercial privilege, political expediency, pleasure loving irresponsibility, unfaithfulness, the mob spirit, militarism, and public apathy. These sins crucified Jesus.

Were you around the Cross also? Confess your sins so that never again they may so dominate your life that in the sufferings of the poor, the rebel, the different, or the spirit-filled, your sins may have played a part as you were standing around the Cross.

Why the Spice Girls didn't use their spices

MINOR CHARACTERS ABOUT CALVARY. No 7.

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8.

The first people at the tomb of Jesus, were some women who had come to anoint the body of Jesus with some spices.

Who were these women? I asked my granddaughters ten years ago and they gave me their names. There was Victoria Spice, Posh Spice, Melanie Spice... but they were a different lot of Spice Girls!

But by comparing the four Gospels, you gather a great deal of information that one Gospel alone does not have. In choosing these women to be the first witnesses of the Risen Christ, God chose the lowly and despised people of the world to shame the wise and strong, as Paul put it. 1Cor 1:27-31

In those days the testimony of women was discounted, but God chose them as the first witnesses. If someone had made up the story of the resurrection they would never have included women. That they are there is a sign of authenticity.

These women came from Galilee, two of them mothers of disciples, who traveled with them to see they had proper meals. Luke 8:2-3 There was Mary the mother of Jesus, and of His younger brothers, James and Joseph. 13:55 There was Mary from Magdala, and Salome, the mother of Zebedee's sons, John and James. Salome was Jesus' mother's sister – His aunt on his mother's side. There was also Joanna, wife of Chuza, associate of King Herod Antipas.

When the Sabbath was over, Saturday evening, the women who had been at the Crucifixion and at Jesus' burial, gathered aromatic oils to anoint the body of Jesus. These were apparently in addition to the spices and perfumes that were prepared before the Sabbath began. Luke 23:56

When Joseph of Arimathea sought the body of Jesus to give it a proper burial, we read: "Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about thirty four kilos weight. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there."

The anointing of a body was not to preserve the body as in embalming, for that was not practiced by the Jews. The spices were to reduce the stench of the decomposing body. Palestine's hot climate causes corpses to decay rapidly.

The women waited till "very early" Sunday morning "just after sunrise." As the women walked to the tomb, their chief concern was with the heavy stone they knew had been rolled in front of the opening of the tomb. Mark15:46-47

Their concern with moving the stone was a real one because, no matter what kind of stone it was, it would have been difficult to move. A circular stone, though relatively easy to put in place in a sloped track, once established in place was very difficult to remove. It would have to be rolled back up the incline or lifted out of the groove.

Mark makes no attempt to explain how the stone was removed. He does, however, say that it was very large. Once inside the tomb, the women saw a young man dressed in a white robe. His dress

suggests an angel. The reaction of the women to the angel was what one would expect: "They were dumbfounded", a strong verb used only by Mark.

The women's fright was calmed by words of reassurance: "Don't be alarmed." The angel knew whom they were seeking, Jesus of Nazareth. The angel then spoke the revelatory word "He has risen!" and invited them to see the evidence of the empty tomb. The explanation is Resurrection! The confrontation with the angel proved to be too much for the women. They fled "trembling and bewildered." It was a natural and to-be-expected reaction. Only Mark tells us, "They said nothing to anyone," they were so frightened they were at first silent. After they had collected their wits, they did a lot of talking!

The women never got round to using their spices, because there was no need: He was risen from the dead! The process of preserving bodies from decay involved many spices. The spices used were aromatic, pungent substances used in the preparation of foods, sacred oils for anointing, incense, perfumes, and ointments used for personal healing and for burial of the dead. Spices were very expensive. They were brought into Palestine from India, Arabia, Persia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Sheba, present day Yemen, had an extensive commerce in spices. The queen of Sheba made a long journey of 1,200 miles because she was afraid that her caravan spice business would be hurt by Solomon's merchant fleet." (2 Chron. 9:9).

Some spices were used in food preparation such as cummin, dill, cinnamon, and mint. Frankincense was used in the incense used in worship. Exodus 30:34-35 Balsam, myrrh, cinnamon, cassia, were used in the preparation of the holy anointing oil. Myrrh and aloes were used in ointments for burial. Luke 23:56; John 19:39 Myrrh was given to Jesus at His birth as a gift Matt. 2:11 and as a drink when He was on the cross. Mark 15:23 Spikenard a very expensive fragrant oil used in the manufacture of perfumes and ointments.

The disciples were not expecting Jesus to rise. They obviously had not understood or believed Jesus' teaching about His own resurrection. Jesus' shameful death completely shattered their belief that He was the Messiah, the one who would establish God's kingdom.

The melancholy words of the disciples on the road to Emmaus expressed the mood of Jesus' first followers: 'We had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel.' We can understand why the disciples were not the ones who witnessed the burial or who went to the tomb. It was the women of Jesus' inner circle, who, in love and devotion to their dead friend, went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices.

They did not use their spices, because there was no need for them. There was no body there in the tomb! They rushed to report this sensational news to the disciples. Only John believed immediately, when he saw the empty tomb. Peter and John found the linen burial wrappings, stiff with dried spices and ointment.

The grave clothes were just as though they still enclosed a body with the head cloth separate. It was as if Jesus had passed through the shroud. The disciples were really convinced when personally they met with the risen Jesus, and found their hopelessness and despair turned into joyful belief. It was Jesus without a doubt. He was neither a ghost nor an apparition.

The disciples saw him with their own eyes, touched him, and ate with him. At the same time, Jesus' body was different after his resurrection. He went through closed doors. He could appear from nowhere and disappear. Paul called this sort of body a 'spiritual' or 'glorified' body.

The risen Jesus appeared to a number of people at different times – on one occasion to 500 people at once-but not to everybody. The Gospel accounts show signs of the disciples' complete surprise at what happened. They describe different parts of an inexplicable course of events. And so they vary from one another – over such things as the names and number of the women who came to the tomb with their spices.

These variations make the resurrection more believable, not less. If Jesus' resurrection were a concocted story, the Gospel writers would have been most anxious to provide us with identical versions. Modern psychological studies on courtroom witnesses show that eyewitnesses often give different versions of what they saw, particularly, if it was completely outside their normal experience. The accounts of the resurrection are all in agreement about the principal features. All tell us that the tomb was empty and that Jesus physically appeared.

The apostles were to witness both to the truth and the significance of Jesus' resurrection. The Resurrection is one of the cardinal facts and doctrines of the gospel. Our Lord clearly taught His resurrection. If Christ be not risen, our faith is vain. 1 Cor. 15:14. The New Testament revelation rests on this as an historical fact. On the day of Pentecost Peter argued the necessity of Christ's resurrection.

Ten different appearances of our risen Lord are recorded. He appeared to Mary Magdalene at the sepulchre. Then to the spice women, Mary, Salome, Joanna, and others, near the sepulchre. Then to Simon Peter alone. Then to two believers on the way to Emmaus. Then to the ten disciples, Thomas being absent and others "with them" at Jerusalem on the evening of the resurrection day. Then, a week later, to the disciples again, Thomas being present. Then to the disciples when fishing at the Sea of Galilee. Then to the eleven, and to more than 500 believers at once in Galilee. Then to James, then the apostles immediately before the ascension as they travelled from Jerusalem to Mount Olivet. There they saw Jesus ascend "till a cloud received him out of their sight".

On every occasion there was ample opportunity of testing the fact of His resurrection. He conversed with them face to face. They touched him. He ate with them.

In addition, Christ's appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road. Luke implies Acts 1:3 there may have been other appearances. The importance of Christ's resurrection will be seen when we consider that if He rose the gospel is true, and if He did not rise from the dead, it is false. His resurrection from the dead makes it obvious that His sacrifice was accepted. Our justification was secured by His obedience to the death. Therefore He was raised from the dead. Romans 4:25. His resurrection is a proof that Jesus made a full atonement for our sins, that His sacrifice was accepted as a satisfaction to divine justice, and His blood was a ransom for sinners. His resurrection also gives a pledge of the resurrection of all believers. As He lives, so we shall live also. For us who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, will raise us also to eternal life. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." The death of Jesus enabled our sins to be forgiven and His resurrection enabled our justification. As a boy, I was taught a chorus in religious instruction classes in state school. I did not get it fully, but it does teach the principle of the inclusiveness of the Gospel:

"Living, He loved me;
Dying, He saved me;
Buried, He carried my sins far away;
Rising, He justified, freely forever,
One day he's coming, Oh, glorious day!"