

A Sermon Series for Lent 2024

Sermon 4: The Significant Death of Jesus

Sunday 17 March: The Fifth Sunday in Lent

The last in a series of talks focused on Jesus, to lead us through the Season of Lent into Holy Week and to our celebration of the Resurrection at Easter.

[However, I will probably have a few extra words from Yancey's book for Palm Sunday, although we usually have minimal sermon on that day.]

- Themes and quotations are from "The Jesus I Never Knew" by Philip Yancey (first edition: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).
- The book is not currently in print in Australia, but copies (second-hand, or ordered via Amazon) are available via the Internet, and there are free down-loadable PDF formats of the book.
- The Parish Newsletter emailed on Friday 8 March has a short summary of Yancey's background plus links to Sermons 1 & 2, and an Update Newsletter will be emailed later this week with links to Sermons 3 & 4.

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### The Significant Death of Jesus

Themes for today are from **Chapter 10: The Final Week**, including quotations from **pages 187–189, and 199–202** (the story at the conclusion).

In these notes, and in the final story, are a few paragraphs that I omitted when speaking on Sunday, to avoid speaking for too long.

**Let us pray:** [Prayer used either to begin the sermon, or after Communion.]

Lord Jesus,  
 your responses to people shown to us through the gospels  
 provide us with a glimpse into the heart of God.  
 You shower people with mercy and grace.  
 Yet that is your big-hearted, open-handed manner,  
 also shown clearly to us through the gospels.  
 Open our hearts, our minds and our spirits  
 to perceive your gracious nature,  
 and to see more clearly into the heart of God. Amen.

*[Nic DD. May be freely used.]*

**Introduction:**

*Brief summary of Yancey's background (as previously provided in the Newsletter, 8 March, and at the end of sermon notes for Sermon 3), and a link from Sermons 2 and 3, to Sermon 4 today.*

Author Philip Yancey describes how the highly fundamentalist church in he was raised "...skipped past the events of Holy Week in a rush to hear the cymbal sounds of Easter. We never held a service on Good Friday." Roman Catholics did not believe in the Resurrection, I was told, which explained why Catholic girls wore crosses "with the little man on them." He was told that they celebrated their Sunday Mass with candles in a cultic ritual symbolic of their fixation with death.

"We Protestants were different. We saved our best clothes, our rousing hymns, and our few sanctuary decorations for Easter. When I began to study theology and church history I found that my church was wrong about the Catholics, who believed in Easter as strongly as we did and wrote many of the creeds best expressing that belief.

"From the Gospels I also learned that, unlike my church, the biblical record slows down rather than speeds up when it gets to Holy Week."

Most biographies, even of important people who have also died violent deaths, such as Martin Luther King Jr and Mahatma Gandhi, devote less than ten percent of their pages to the subject's death.

But the Gospels writers devote almost one third of their work to describing "the climactic last week of Jesus' life.... Only two of the Gospels mention the events of his birth, and all four offer only a few pages on his resurrection, but each chronicler gives a detailed account of the events leading to Jesus' death. Nothing remotely like it had happened before.... when the Son of God died on planet earth – how could it be that a Messiah should face defeat, a God get crucified? Nature itself convulsed at the deed: the ground shook, rocks cracked open, the sky went black."

"For several years, as Holy Week approaches, I have read all the gospel accounts together, sometimes back-to-back.... Each time I feel swept away by the sheer drama. The simple, unadorned rendering has a grinding power, and I can almost hear a bass drum beating dolefully in the background. No miracles break in, no supernatural rescue attempts. This is tragedy beyond Sophocles or Shakespeare.

The mighty Roman Empire, the most powerful of all time to date, allied with a sophisticated religious system, set itself against a solitary figure, the one whom Christians believe was the only perfect man that ever lived.

Mocked by these powerful forces, abandoned by his frightened friends, "the Gospels give the strong, ironic sense that he himself is overseeing the whole long process. He has resolutely set his face for Jerusalem, knowing the fate that awaits him. The cross has been his goal all along. Now, as death nears, he calls the shots."

Yancey notes how on one occasion he “came to the gospel narratives just after reading the entire Old Testament. Working my way through the books of history, poetry, and prophecy, I had got to know a God of muscular power. Heads rolled, empires toppled....

“... Every year the Jews paused as a nation to remember God's great feat of deliverance from Egypt, an event replete with miracles. I felt aftershocks of the Exodus all through the psalms and prophets, cues to a beleaguered tribe that the God who had answered their prayers once might do so again.

“With those accounts still ringing in my ears, I arrived at Matthew's scene-by-scene description of Jesus' final week. Once more Jews had gathered in Jerusalem to remember the Exodus and celebrate the Passover. Once more hope sprang eternal: ‘Messiah has come!’ ran one rumour. And then, like an arrow shot into the heart of hope, came Jesus' betrayal, trial, and death.

“How can we, who know the outcome in advance ever recapture the dire end-of-the-world feeling that descended upon Jesus' followers? Over the centuries the story has grown familiar, and I cannot comprehend, much less re-create, the impact of that final week on those who lived through it. I will merely record what stands out to me as I review the Passion story one more time.”

*[Yancey then writes many more pages, focused in linear format on the events as they unfolded, from the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, through his betrayal, trial and crucifixion. We pick up with a story, with which I will conclude, quoted in its entirety.]*

In a memoir of the years before World War II, Pierre Van Paassen tells of an act of humiliation by Nazi storm troopers who had seized an elderly Jewish rabbi and dragged him to headquarters. In the far end of the same room, two colleagues were beating another Jew to death, but the captors of the rabbi decided to have some fun with him.

They stripped him naked and commanded that he preach the sermon he had prepared for the coming Sabbath in the synagogue. The rabbi asked if he could wear his yarmulke (*skull cap, reminding all wearers to remain humble, that God was always above – or greater – than all humans*). ... and the Nazis, grinning, agreed. It added to the joke.

The trembling rabbi proceeded to deliver in a raspy voice his sermon on what it means to walk humbly before God, all the while being poked and prodded by the hooting Nazis, and all the while hearing the last cries of his neighbour at the end of the room.

When I read the gospel accounts of the imprisonment, torture, and execution of Jesus, I think of that naked rabbi standing humiliated in a police station. Even after watching scores of movies on the subject, and reading the Gospels over and over, I still cannot fathom the indignity, the shame endured by God's Son on earth, stripped naked, flogged, spat on, struck in the face, garlanded with thorns.

Jewish leaders as well as Romans intended the mockery to parody the crime for which the victim had been condemned.

Messiah, huh? Great, let's hear a prophecy. Wham. Who hit you, huh? Thunk. C'mon, tell us, spit it out, Mr. Prophet. For a Messiah, you don't know much, do you? You say you're a king? Hey, Captain, get a load of this. We have us a regular king here, don't we. Well, then, let's all kneel down before hizzoner. What's this? A king without a crown? Oh, that will never do. Here, Mr. King, we'll fix you a crown, we will. Crunch. How's that? A little crooked? I'll fix that. Hey, hold still! My, look how modest we are. Well, how about a robe then—something to cover that bloody mess on your back. What happened, did your majesty have a little tumble?

It went like that all day long, from the bullying game of Blind Man's Bluff in the high priest's courtyard, to the professional thuggery of Pilate's and Herod's guards, to the catcalls of spectators turned out to jeer the criminals stumbling up the long road to Calvary, and finally to the cross itself where Jesus heard a stream of taunts from the ground below and even from the cross alongside.

You call yourself a Messiah? Well, then come down from that cross. How you gonna save us if you can't even save yourself? I have marvelled at, and sometimes openly questioned, the self-restraint God has shown throughout history, allowing the Genghis Khans and the Hitlers and the Stalins to have their way. But nothing—nothing—compares to the self-restraint shown that dark Friday in Jerusalem.

With every lash of the whip, every fibrous crunch of fist against flesh, Jesus must have mentally replayed the Temptation in the wilderness and in Gethsemane. Legions of angels awaited his command. One word, and the ordeal would end.

'The idea of the cross should never come near the bodies of Roman citizens,' said Cicero; 'it should never pass through their thoughts, eyes or ears.' For the Romans, crucifixion was the cruellest form of capital punishment, reserved for murder, slave revolts, and other heinous crimes in the colonies. Roman citizens were beheaded, not crucified. Jews shared their revulsion—'anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse,' said Deuteronomy—and preferred stoning when they had authority to carry out executions.

Evangelists, archaeologists, and medical experts have described the grim details of crucifixion so thoroughly that I see no need to iterate them here. Besides, if the "seven last words of Christ" are any indication, Jesus himself had other things on his mind than the pain. The closest to a physical complaint was his cry, "I thirst!" and even then he turned down the vinegar wine offered as an anaesthetic.

(The irony of one who had made gallons of wine for a wedding party, who had spoken of living water that would quench all thirst forever, dying with a swollen tongue and the sour smell of spilled vinegar on his beard.)

As always, Jesus was thinking about others. He forgave the men who had done the deed. He arranged care for his mother. He welcomed a shrunken thief into paradise.

The Gospels record different snippets of conversation from Calvary, and only two agree on Jesus' very last words. Luke has him saying, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," a final act of trust before he died. John has the cryptic summation of his entire mission to earth, "It is finished." But Matthew and Mark have the most mysterious saying of all, the woeful quotation, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This time only, of all his prayers in the Gospels, Jesus used the formal, distant word "God" rather than "Abba" or "Father." He was quoting from a psalm, of course, but he was also expressing a grave sense of estrangement. Some inconceivable split had opened up in the Godhead. The Son felt abandoned by the Father.

"The 'hiddenness' of God perhaps presses most painfully on those who are in another way nearest to Him, and therefore God Himself, made man, will of all men be by God most forsaken," wrote C. S. Lewis. No doubt he is right. It matters little if I am rebuffed by the checkout girl at the supermarket ... but if my wife, with whom I've spent my entire adult life, suddenly cuts off all communication with me—that matters.

No theologian can adequately explain the nature of what took place within the Trinity on that day at Calvary. All we have is a cry of pain from a child who felt forsaken. Did it help that Jesus had anticipated that his mission on earth would include such a death? ... to the Son it felt like abandonment.

We are not told what God the Father cried out at that moment. We can only imagine. The Son became "a curse for us," said Paul (in his letter to the Galatians), and "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us," he wrote to the Corinthians. We know how God feels about sin; the sense of abandonment likely cut both ways.