

He didn't come down from the cross. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 10 November 2010.

As you know, we have been looking recently at some of the things which our Lord Jesus *didn't* do when in the Garden of Gethsemane and at the cross. This is the last in our short series and the title for this week's talk is 'He didn't come down from the cross'. Our reading for this morning comes from chapter 27 of the first Gospel. Of the time when the Lord Jesus hung on the cross, Matthew wrote :

Those who passed by hurled insults at Him,¹ wagging their heads, and saying, 'You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself!² If you are the Son of God, *come down from the cross*'. Likewise *the chief priests ... with the scribes and elders*,³ said, 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save. He is the King of Israel, let Him now *come down from the cross*, and we will believe on Him'.⁴

Consistent with the Roman practice of siting crucifixions in public places as a deterrent to any would-be criminals, the place of Jesus' crucifixion was beside one of the main roads into Jerusalem. And many of the stream of pilgrims on their way into the city for the Passover feast paused to shake their heads at Jesus in a gesture of contempt, and to fling in His teeth the challenge, '... come down from the cross'.

For their part, the members of the Supreme Jewish Council – the chief priests, elders and scribes – had come simply to gloat. Unwilling to lower themselves to address our Lord directly, they spoke, as Mark tells us in his account, 'to one another',⁵ calling out sarcastically in a stage whisper meant for His ears, 'He is the King of Israel' ('King of Israel ... who are you kidding!'), 'let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him'.

From both of these (very different) groups therefore came the same challenge, 'come down from the cross'. This was, so to speak, the gauntlet they threw at His feet.

But, no ... He didn't – and wouldn't – come down. Shortly before He had refused to ease and alleviate His sufferings by drinking from the drugged wine which He had been offered. Now He refused to evade and end those same sufferings by descending from the cross where He had been nailed.

And we all know why. In one sense, the Jewish leaders hit the nail on the head when they sneered, 'He saved *others*; *Himself* He cannot save'. For that was the very choice He faced – to come down from the cross and so save Himself, or to remain there that He might save others. Little did these men know that it took more love to keep Him on the cross than it would have taken power to get Him down from it.

Before leaving the upper room for the Garden of Gethsemane the previous evening, the Lord Jesus had sung a section of the book of the psalms known as 'the Hallel'.⁶ Among the very last words He sang, with reference to the Jewish Passover festival, were 'bind the sacrifice with cords, even unto the horns of the altar'.⁷ But what, I ask and speaking metaphorically, were the '*cords*' which would bind *Him* – which would bind 'Christ our Passover'⁸ – to His cross?

Make no mistake, it neither the strength of the nails nor the power of Rome which held my Lord fast to that tree. One of the hymns we often sing here on a Lord's Day has a splendid line which reads, 'It was my sin that held Him there'.⁹ And in part at least that is right. For it was the combination of my sin and need, and of His love and compassion which prevented the Saviour from coming down from His cross.

Yesterday afternoon I read a short novel by a nineteenth century Danish author ... translated into English¹⁰ – or it would have been *Double Dutch* to me! I don't have time to fill you in on the details, but the storyline centred around a plague in the town of Bergamo in Italy. The novel climaxes with a scene in a long-abandoned Cathedral, where an unruly mob led by the local butcher came to ridicule a group of visiting worshippers who had gone there to pray. The mob 'felt', the writer said, 'satisfaction in knowing that each of their blasphemies was a sting in the hearts' of these worshippers.

'Then one from among' the worshippers, he wrote, 'a young monk, rose up and ... preached concerning' God's law, 'that every transgression of which they were guilty would be counted against them "But", our author put into the monk's mouth, "you will say, Christ died for our sins ... But I say to you, hell will not be cheated of a single one of you ... you build upon the cross of Golgotha! Come and look at it!'

Then, having briefly described the actual crucifying of Jesus, the monk continued, 'He on the cross looked down on the soldiers, who were casting lots for His unstitched garment, and on the ... turbulent mob, for whose sake He suffered that they might be saved Those below ... called out to Him', the monk added, "' ... If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross"'.¹¹

'*Then*', the monk cried, 'He, the only begotten Son of God was filled with anger, and seeing that they were not worthy of salvation He tore His feet free ... clenched His hands round the nails and tore them out ... He leaped down ... and snatched up His garment ..., flung it round His shoulders ... and ascended into heaven. The cross',

the monk declared, 'stood empty, and the great work of redemption was never completed. There is', the monk concluded, 'no mediator between God and us; there is *no Jesus who died for us on the cross*' ... As he uttered these last words', the novel continued, 'a groan of agony went through the church ... in the corners they began to weep. Then the butcher pushed forward ... pale as a corpse, and shouted: "Monk, monk, you must nail Him on the cross again!"'¹¹

But that is all fiction, you say. And of course it is. But think for a moment ... *what if* the Lord Jesus had, as our author imagined the monk claiming ... *what if* He *had* based His work of salvation on whether we were worthy or not? What if He *had* come down from the cross?

But the wonder of wonders is ... He didn't!

'Let Him ... come down cross and we will believe on Him', we heard the Jewish rulers scoff. But the miraculous sign which Jesus was to give was not His *coming down from the cross* but His *coming up from the grave*.

'I came down from heaven', He had once said, 'not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me'.¹² And we do well to praise God this morning that the One who, as many of us will ponder afresh in some six weeks time, *had*, 30 years before, *come down from His heaven did not now come down from His cross*.

Footnotes

¹ Literally, 'blasphemed Him'. Israel's leaders had charged Jesus with being *a blasphemer* because of His claim to destroy and rebuild the temple in three days, 26. 60-61. Matthew pointed out that the people passing by were really the ones '*blaspheming*' (the same Greek word).

² It was a sad twist that the Jews should accuse Him of wanting to destroy their temple at the very time that they were in the process of destroying His – the temple of His body, John 2. 21.

³ The chief priest, scribes, and elders represented all sections of the Sanhedrin.

⁴ Matt. 27. 39-42.

⁵ Mark 15. 31.

⁶ Psalms 113-118 'are more distinctively known as the "Hallel of Egypt", as distinguished from Psalm 136, the "Great Hallel"', *The Jewish Encyclopedia*.

See <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=141&letter=H>.

⁷ Psa. 118. 27.

⁸ 1 Cor. 5. 7.

⁹ In the second verse of Stuart Townend's hymn, 'How great the Father's love for us'; number 426 in Praise!

¹⁰ '*The Plague in Bergamo*', by Jens Peter Jacobsen (1847-1885). Translated from the Danish By Anna Grabow (1921). The story is paraphrased, with some embellishment, in '*Jesus our Destiny*', by Wilhem Busch, pages 160-161. The full story in English can be downloaded from ... <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/6765>.

¹¹ The story ends quickly, with the monk, who sensed his duty complete, leading the worshippers out of the cathedral, 'singing across the square' and away into a 'sun-lit plain'.

¹² John 6. 38.