

COMPREHENDING THE CROSS

It is fashionable these days to wear crosses, not necessarily as a sign of faith, but as a trendy accessory. An anecdote shared in Christian circles tells of an encounter at a department store jewelry counter. The customer says she is interested in buying a cross, to which the sales clerk replies: "Do you want a plain one, or one with the little man on it?"

We must comprehend that the cross is more than a fashion statement. Consider what the cross meant in Jesus' day. The Roman Empire in the time of Tiberius took it mighty seriously. There wasn't a hot debate about lethal injection or other humane methods of putting one to death. The Romans wanted executions to be excruciatingly painful and as public as possible. We often turn away from the horror of the cross. Sometimes we want to take encouragement from the fact that Christ died for us, but skip over the messy details. Those details give credence to what Jesus did. This brief account, based on the gospels of Matthew and John, provides a sense of Jesus' ordeal.



During the trial before Caiaphas, the priests "spit in his face and struck him with their fists." Then, "they bound him" and sent him to Pilate, who had him flogged; the usual procedure was to tie the criminal's hands to a pillar, strip his upper body and deliver up to 40 blows with a three-pronged whip. Then "the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head," after which "they took a staff and struck him on the head, again and again." Weakened from the beatings, Jesus was unable to carry his cross the whole distance to Calvary, as was customary, so an onlooker named Simon of Cyrene was forced into duty by the soldiers. Christ was then affixed to the cross by having large nails driven through his wrists and into the wood. In crucifixions, death came by suffocation as the weight of the victim made breathing progressively more difficult as he lost strength. It took six hours for Jesus to die.

Clearly, the solemnity of the cross is increasingly lost in today's society. As Christians, we must never lose sight of the true meaning of the crucifixion. It reminds us that the grace that we stand in didn't come cheap. Jesus Christ paid a huge price for our salvation. All it costs us is our pride and self-will. Sometimes it seems that this is too great a price, which only indicates how far removed we are from the cruel reality of Christ's sacrifice.

The extraordinary power of the cross is that no matter where we've been or how far we've wandered, we can stand in God's presence—just as we are. It serves as the bridge between a broken people and a Holy God. Have you crossed that bridge? Have you helped another venture onto that bridge?

Edited from a devotional by REMinistries, the Internet outreach of Rich Miller of Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

Picture source: www.wesleymission.org.au/.../impact/easter03.asp