

CHRIST ON GOLGOTHA

*“And they brought Him to the place called
Golgotha (which means the place of a skull)”*

(Mark 15: 22)

In the time of Lent, the church pays special attention to the scriptural account of Christ's *via dolorosa*, His road of sorrows, to the cross. We saw how Christ had to be helped by Simon of Cyrene to bear his cross to Golgotha.

In Mark 15: 22, we read how Christ arrives at Golgotha, the end-point of the road of sorrows. Here He will be crucified and die.

Now it is remarkable how little we really know about this place called Golgotha. No one can tell us exactly where it was located. The early Christian church apparently was not much involved with the place. It was not until more than 300 years later, under the emperor Constantine, that a basilica (a small church) was erected on the site where supposedly the crucifixion had taken place. It could very well be the proper location or close to it, although it is not certain. Since then, pilgrims from all over the world have been flocking to that basilica to meditate and pray. But the fact remains, we know very little of the exact place.

MANY LEGENDS

It is understandable that many legends have come into existence concerning Golgotha. To give you an idea, let me mention two of them. Some say that Golgotha is the same place where once Abraham was making preparations to offer Isaac. That is a nice touch, perhaps, but it is unlikely. Others say that the skull of Adam was buried there. But the connection between the first and the second Adam should not be made so superficial. Legends do not really help us much.

It is also rather remarkable that the name "Golgotha" does not appear anywhere in the Bible except in the accounts of the crucifixion. It is not mentioned in any of the letters of the apostles, nor do you find the name in the book of Revelation. Ought we, perhaps, to conclude from this that the Lord wanted to prevent any superstition or idolatry to be associated with the place? The event of Christ's death is mentioned throughout the New Testament, but, apart from the Gospels, not the place where this death occurred.

GOLGOTHA AND CALVARY

Perhaps this is the reason why we also do not have any direct references to Golgotha in our hymn section of the *Book of Praise*. Have you ever noticed that? There is one hymn where we find the name Calvary. In Hymn 33 is the line, "Our Surety and our Lord is He Who shed His blood on Calvary."

Where does the name "Calvary" come from? It is the Latin translation of the Hebrew "Golgotha." We find in our text that Golgotha means "the place of a skull," and the Latin word for skull is "calvaria," hence the name Calvary. Via Latin and English, the name "Calvary" has become popular in many later hymns. But that name does not appear in the Bible.

However this may be, when we follow our Lord Jesus Christ on His *via dolorosa*, His road of sorrows – we see that it ends at a place named Golgotha. And we are interested in the location of that Golgotha and in its meaning.

A WELL-KNOWN PLACE?

If in what follows we want to say something more about the location of Golgotha, then it is not because we want to go there to erect another monument. We want to pay attention to the location in order to understand better the meaning of Golgotha. For it is not without reason that this place was chosen.

In New Testament times the place seems to have been a well-known one. Notice how in our text it says: “And they brought Him to the place called Golgotha. . . .” Not “a place,” but “the place.” If in those days Golgotha was mentioned, everyone familiar with the area knew where it was. That is important, as we will see further.

Notice also how it says that they *brought* Christ to Golgotha. Some explainers feel that this word suggests that Christ had to be supported on the last leg of the journey. He had earlier been unable to carry the cross. Now as they come near to Golgotha, Christ is so weak that He can hardly walk and is in need of support. However this may be, the use of the verb “to bring” also suggests that this place was chosen ahead of time.

This leads us to the question: how far Golgotha was from the city of Jerusalem. Could it have been so far that Christ may have had to be supported during the latter part of the walk? In fact, it cannot have been very far. The apostle John tells us (John 19:20) that the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city. Indeed, we may conclude that it was just outside one of the city gates, where people were going in and out.

THE PLACE OF THE SKULL

This also helps us to understand the name “Golgotha,” the Hebrew word for skull. Many speculations have been made concerning the implications of that word. Some have suggested that the place was named “place of the skull” because it was where the skulls of executed criminals were buried. But it is more likely that it was called “skull” because Golgotha was a place that from a distance looked like a skull. It was probably a small, bare, rounded hill, located just outside the city of Jerusalem, along which ran various roads leading to and from the city.

And that is an excellent place for a public execution. For the crucifixion – any crucifixion, but especially this one – was not a quick death somewhere out of the public view, but a public affair. The Romans had the custom of executing criminals along busy road sides and at busy intersections, so that everyone would see it and take notice. The crucifixion was to be a public display and example, meant to be seen by as many people as possible. For only in this way would a crucifixion function as a deterrent for other would-be criminals. And that was precisely the purpose: a punishment which functioned as a deterrent.

PUBLIC EXECUTION

Therefore, what can we say about the location of Golgotha? First, that it was nothing really special. No high mountain. No sacred, historic spot. Just a small, bare

hill outside Jerusalem. The first convenient place, really, where a public execution could be conveniently held. The slight elevation would mean that no one could miss it. The busy intersection would ensure lots of traffic, a multitude of witnesses.

You can almost picture the scene. As the multitude comes out of the city, through the gate, the Roman captain, the centurion in charge, looks around, sees a little rise, and says, "Here, this is the place." Little hill, bare, nothing to be cleared away, no trees blocking the view, lots of traffic, what better place could be found? It was chosen because it was suited for a public execution, and for no other reason.

As a matter of fact, it is quite possible that Golgotha could be seen from the city itself. We can read about the women who followed Jesus from Galilee, and were watching from afar (see verse 40). These women may have been standing, with others, on the walls of Jerusalem, from where they had a unencumbered view of what was happening at Golgotha. For this crucifixion was to be seen by many people, from near and from afar.

That is why this location was chosen, and then not just by the Roman centurion, but by God Himself! For that is the conclusion we draw here. Ultimately, the Roman centurion was not in charge, for everything was done, as Peter says at Pentecost, by the "definite plan and foreknowledge of God." It was God Who wished to make the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus into a public display. Christ was to be crucified in such a way that all could see how the curse over sin took its full effect.

NOT IN A CORNER

Later, the apostle Paul, when speaking with King Agrippa about the suffering and death of Christ, says to the king (Acts 26:26): "For the king knows about these things. . . . I am persuaded that none of these things have escaped his notice, *for this was not done in a corner.*" These are key words: it was not done in a corner!

Christ was not led away in the dark of the night to be executed or terminated in an unknown place, without witnesses. He was not assassinated in some dark alley, where no one saw what happened. His death did not take place in some obscure little village, far away from the centre of things, but right outside the gate of the great city, Jerusalem, on a hill with an unobstructed view. That is the message of Golgotha!

That is also why the sign was nailed above Him in three languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, as we read elsewhere, so that *all the world* could see and read: Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Golgotha. The place itself is nothing special. After the corpses were buried and the crosses taken down, no one who passed by would be able to see that a crucifixion had taken place there. No memorials were erected, no markers planted. It was just a bald hill, as there were so many in Judea. As a matter of fact, if it wasn't for the Word of God, no one would understand the meaning of the place.

FURTHER MEANING?

The fact that Christ was crucified on Golgotha, just outside the gate, has a further meaning, which we must also explore. To do that, let us turn to Hebrews 13, the part of Scripture which should be read in connection with this passage from Mark 15.

The letter to the Hebrews was written to explain the greater riches which the New Testament church has over the people of the old dispensation. Christ is greater than Moses. We are richer than Israel. In chapter 13, the writer makes this clear also with respect to the *place* where Christ suffered and died.

He writes in verse 10, “We have an altar from which those who serve the tent (or tabernacle) have no right to eat.” Normally the priests were allowed to eat of the sacrifices which were brought to the tabernacle. But they were not allowed to do so on the great day of atonement! For then the remnants of the bull and the ram that had been slaughtered, as it says in Leviticus 16: 27, “shall be carried forth outside the camp; their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be burned with fire.”

OUTSIDE THE CAMP

Outside the camp, remember those words. Also on the day of atonement, a goat was chosen, named Azazel, and the high priest was to lay his hands on the head of this goat. He was to confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, all their transgressions and sins, and then the goat was to be sent away into the wilderness. It says: the goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land. The goat, indeed the *scapegoat*, laden with the sins of God’s people, was banished and sent *outside the camp*, to die in the wilderness!

The writer to the Hebrews refers to this day of atonement and says in verse 11, “For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin, are burned outside the camp.” And now notice the connection with Golgotha, verse 12, “So also Jesus suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify His people through His own blood.”

Do you notice this? Anything that was brought outside the camp of Israel to be burned there, was unclean. To be sent out of the camp meant to be *excommunicated!* Outside the camp was the place where the garbage and the dung was left, because it did not belong in the camp. It was the place of ultimate destruction and final excommunication.

DAY OF ATONEMENT

Golgotha. Day of atonement. The Lamb of God, bearing our sins, all our sins, is led outside the gate of the city of Jerusalem. This happens because Jerusalem is the city of the tabernacle, the temple, the dwelling place of God most holy. Jerusalem is where the LORD God dwells in the midst of His people. Jerusalem is the holy city, and He who bears our impurities and defilement has no place with

God in His city! As Christ goes out through the gate to nearby Golgotha, He is excommunicated, and then publicly cursed as the One who bears all the sins of His people.

Golgotha. Christ is crucified not far from the city; in fact, as we saw, probably even in view of the city, but certainly outside the city, so that He and all the people may know: this one is expelled from the presence of God, excommunicated from the people of God, and so cut off from the land of the living.

Day of atonement. Here the greatest sacrifice of the ages is made. He was made sin, for us, utterly cursed, so that we might inherit the blessing of God, live in fellowship with Him, and enter His holy presence with joy and thanksgiving. At Golgotha the law of atonement is completely fulfilled, so that we may be reconciled to God in Him!

Golgotha, the place of the skull, has become the place of atonement; the place of the greatest sacrifice ever made, by the One who did not die for His own sins, but only for ours! That is the real meaning of this place. "So Jesus suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through His own blood."

WHERE TODAY?

We do not have to go to Golgotha today, even if we could find the exact spot. Do you know what we have to do? We are told it in Hebrews 13:13: "Therefore, let us go forth to Him outside the camp and bear the abuse He endured." Let us bear the consequences of being Christians.

Let us go forth to Him. We today may benefit from His sacrifice. We may eat from the altar called Golgotha. We can have access to the Father through Christ. We *do* have access to the Father through Him. Indeed, as it says in Hymn 33: our Surety and our Lord is He. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we do not repeat Golgotha, but we partake of the blessing of Golgotha. We go forth to Jesus to share in His sacrifice.

But, it says, go forth to Him outside the camp. We know that He was despised for our sake, and bore the hate of men and the wrath of God for our sake. "Outside the camp" means for us that we may have to become outcasts for His sake. As the writer to the Hebrews states it: that we bear the abuse He endured.

You know, the Hebrews to whom this letter was first written, were being ridiculed and abused by Jews and Gentiles alike. What kind of religion do you have, people scoffed, for you do not bring sacrifices and you have no altar. Well, the author replied, we have a sacrifice: Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And we have an altar, and that is Golgotha. We seek our entire salvation outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ alone, who brought the perfect sacrifice.

DESPISED RELIGION

And this is the religion which the world and the false church despises. Who can believe in a man crucified as a criminal, a failed "king," excommunicated from

the people of God, an outcast, left to hang outside the gate? Of course, I know that today many people love to speak of Calvary. But do they accept that there was brought the one and only sacrifice, the complete and perfect sacrifice for sin? “Golgotha” is not enough for many today; it must be supplemented by our own good works and free-will gestures.

The Christian faith is, in essence, totally different from that of all other religions, for it seeks its entire salvation in one place: Golgotha, and in one Person, Jesus Christ. There the one sacrifice for sin was made, once for all.

Therefore, the writer to the Hebrews goes on: when we go forth to Jesus, outside the camp, outside the lines of conventional human religion, we leave everything behind that this world has to offer us. We do not seek our salvation here. Not even in the earthly Jerusalem. See verse 14: “For we have here no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.” We have no horizontal faith – directed to this world – but we lift up our hearts to heaven, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, from where we also await Him. We are not bound to earthly places or institutions: we may serve Him wherever we are. And we do not feel threatened at all when we are for His sake cast out from the places where the religious people of this world congregate. Let the world persecute and the false church ridicule, we will go forth to Jesus outside the gate, and bear the abuse, for His Name’s sake. “Our Surety and our Lord is He, Who shed His blood on Calvary.”

OUR SACRIFICE OF PRAISE

And if we are to bring any sacrifice, says the letter to the Hebrews, it is not a sacrifice for sin. That would undo the meaning of Golgotha. What sacrifices are we to bring? Verse 17, “Through Him, then, let us continually offer up a *sacrifice of praise* to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His Name.” We shall worship and praise Him alone, constantly, for His great love shown at Golgotha.

He brought the one sacrifice for sin. We bring the constant sacrifice of praise. And that is not just a matter of words, but also of deeds. Verse 16: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” We must bring the sacrifice of service to the neighbour, to show love and kindness, to share with those in need.

If we truly want to honour the reality of Golgotha and bring an acceptable sacrifice to God, one which really honours Christ, let it be one of praise (worship) and service (love).

What greater joy can there be for a Christian than to worship together with God’s people and to devote oneself to the upbuilding of the church and the well-being of the neighbour? Then we are in line with Golgotha. That is what God asks of us. That is the calling which comes to us from Golgotha. Psalm 50: bring God your sacrifices in His house! Which sacrifices? “Blest is the man whom sin cannot entice, who brings *thanksgiving* as his sacrifice.” God does not want any more sin offerings, but only thank offerings.

“Redeemed by grace, I’ll render as a token
Of gratitude my constant praise to Thee” (Psalm 116).

Then, because Christ was led outside the city of Jerusalem to be crucified outside the gate, we may enter the gates of the holy city, the eternal and lasting city which is to come. We may live in God’s presence and fellowship, and say:

“Jerusalem, *within your courts* I’ll praise
The Lord’s great Name, and with a spirit lowly,
Pay all my vows. O Zion, fair and holy,
Come join with me, and bless Him all your days.”

That is the meaning of Golgotha. Christ was cast out of God’s city. We may now enter the eternal city through Him.