

BROTHER RAMON



When
They Crucified
My Lord

BRF CENTENARY CLASSICS



When They Crucified My Lord



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When They Crucified My Lord

THROUGH
LENTEN SORROW
TO EASTER JOY

BROTHER RAMON



For Pauline Hillier and Tim Fawcett
who through their Lent entered into glory,
RIP

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Were you there?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble;

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

Were you there when the sun refused to shine?

Were you there when the sun refused to shine?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Were you there when he rose up from the tomb?

Were you there when he rose up from the tomb?

Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble;

Were you there when he rose up from the tomb?

American spiritual

Introduction

Were you there?

Many inspiring folk spirituals have come down to us from the awful days of the American slave trade, and they can evoke a trembling response when sung by black voices. One of the simplest and most direct is 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?' The question and its response set the tone of our Lent book, because constantly the question will arise: 'Were you there?' And if you enter with me right into the centre of the drama, feeling the mystery and responsibility for it all, you will have to respond in the words of the same spiritual: 'Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble...'

We shall be meeting various personalities of the passion in our Lenten journey – some of them enemies of Jesus, and some whose hearts were touched with his loving compassion and who were fired by his call. We shall be able to identify with many, if not all, of them, and we shall constantly realise our need for a daily conversion and a new experience of God's grace.

At the end of Lent we come to Easter, and at the end of our Lenten journey we shall find ourselves outside the garden tomb, trembling not with fear, nor only with godly awe, but also with hope and joy.

Using the book

There is a discipline involved. It asks for up to an hour each day of Lent and, if used with a group, seven weekly meetings. You should set aside a period at the same time every day and make it sacrosanct, for it is your trusting-time with God.

If you can, make a worship space for God in some corner or room, consisting of a low table or shelf, with a candle, an open Bible, perhaps an icon or cross and some flowers, with a cushion or prayer stool.

Spend a few minutes centring yourself in the presence and love of God, repeating a Bible or hymn verse, such as, 'Breathe on me, breath of God...' Then when you feel relaxed, take up the day's scripture, going through it slowly and prayerfully, using different translations which can aid understanding. Follow that with the day's meditation, leading into the prayer and reflection. Then spend the rest of the time, up to the hour, if possible, in prayer and openness before God. End the session with the 'Glory be to the Father...' * and carry the theme into your day's work.

* Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever. Amen.

Sharing in a group

Groups may meet on seven occasions, and there is appropriate material in the Appendix. This material may be used freely, but it simply offers suggestions and is not meant to inhibit spontaneity. Groups are at their best between seven and twelve in number, and a wise group leader will encourage all to take part and not let anyone monopolise the rest!

The simplest, humblest experience shared is often the one used by the Lord to benefit others most, and remember that the theme is trembling, so don't be too nervous to speak. If there is a prepared presentation by a group member, make sure it is not too long and does not inhibit either open discussion or spontaneous contributions.

As you take up this Lenten pilgrimage on a personal or group level, let it enrich your wider experience in the church fellowship. This is a book for any Christian believer who desires to deepen joyful discipleship, and this lesser pilgrimage will minister to your greater journey of faith.

So let's begin!

Brother Ramon SSF

Ash Wednesday

Caiaphas: religious duplicity

Matthew 26:57–66

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered... Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward... The high priest stood up and said, 'Have you no answer?...' But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.' Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves death.'

It is a strange thing, but we begin our observation of Lent with the abomination of religion! When religion turns bad it carries with it the stench of corruption, and there is nothing that alienates a person or a people from God like pseudo-religion and hypocrisy (see Isaiah 1:11–17). And here we are right in

the middle of it. The religious authorities, the church of the day, will overturn every rule of justice, every movement of pity and every claim of truth to hound one man to his death – and that because they cannot bear the fiery gaze of truth and love.

Lest we seem to be exaggerating, let us look at what was happening here. Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane and brought to the house of the high priest, Caiaphas. Matthew sees this as an official meeting of the Sanhedrin (v. 59), composed of Pharisees, Sadducees and elders, and presided over by the high priest.

Now notice, in this case, the violation of the laws that safeguard justice. First, criminal cases could not be tried during the Passover. If the verdict was ‘guilty’, a night must elapse before the pronouncement was made, so that a recourse to mercy might be made possible. Criminal cases must be tried in the daytime; the meeting should be held in the Sanhedrin Hall of Hewn Stone in the temple precincts; all evidence had to be validated by two witnesses separately examined and false witness punished by death. On top of all this, evidence for innocence should be presented before evidence for guilt. All these rules were violated. In the midst of witnesses disagreeing, false charges being laid and for the sake of religious expediency (John 11:49–50), Caiaphas pressed both church and state for the execution of Jesus. And he succeeded!

But here we come to a very strange thing. Behind and through all the malice, hatred and power struggles, Jesus is seen to be mostly silent, save when the word is needed that will condemn

him utterly (v. 64). It is as though he is the one who is in control, and that out of the darkest actions of the human heart he can bring good – but only through redemptive suffering.

The gospel of John sees it clearly, and John's comment may be written over the whole ghastly episode before us. He calls to mind words spoken by Caiaphas to the members of the Sanhedrin when Jesus was engaged in the work of healing, and he was moved to interior jealousy and malice: 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people, than to have the whole nation destroyed.' And the evangelist shows that even the dark deeds of the human heart at their worst can be turned to ultimate mercy and redemption when he adds: 'He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death' (John 11:49–52).

John is not saying that Caiaphas is predestined to do evil, but that God will bring good out of evil, and will even use the duplicity of evil men to serve the ultimate good. We shall see this again in the case of Judas Iscariot.

Caiaphas was a Sadducee – wealthy, aristocratic and collaborationist. Sadducees collaborated with Rome as the occupying power, in exchange for money, comfort and power – and all the priests were Sadducees! Caiaphas, in John's gospel, is acting in character. He speaks with contempt and arrogance,

and his domineering attitude is in contrast to the behaviour of Jesus, both here and before Pilate.

The great fear of the Sadducees was that if Jesus gained a following, they would be overthrown, and in the civil disturbance, Rome would act against them. They could not think of revolution in terms of love, but only of power – and power is what they had and wanted to retain. Therefore, they had to appease the greater power and authority of the occupying forces – Rome.

There is a peculiar irony here. Jesus was a revolutionary – not a political and violent messiah (like Judas Maccabeus had appeared to be two centuries previously), but a messiah of mercy, whose power was the power of love. They thought that if Jesus could be eliminated, the threat would disappear. What they did not know was that because they were eventually successful, judgement fell from a greater authority. In AD70 the Roman military might razed Jerusalem to the ground and a plough was drawn across the ruined stones of the temple. John's gospel was written afterwards, and he could perceive the irony of the situation. Yet out of that very situation John could see that not only would Israel be saved, but the gospel would be proclaimed to the whole world, and the scattered children of God would be brought home to the heavenly Father who longed for their redemption.

When Caiaphas asked Jesus the leading question, 'Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God', Jesus need only have made a simple denial, or even kept his silence. But an affirmation

was the one thing which would set in motion the whole movement which would make the cross inevitable. Jesus made that affirmation, and so the process was begun.

The church corroborated with the state, as we shall see tomorrow, and the frenzy of venom, hostility and hatred which is recorded in verses 65–68 began Jesus' *via dolorosa*, the way of sorrows, which took him to the cross.

Prayer

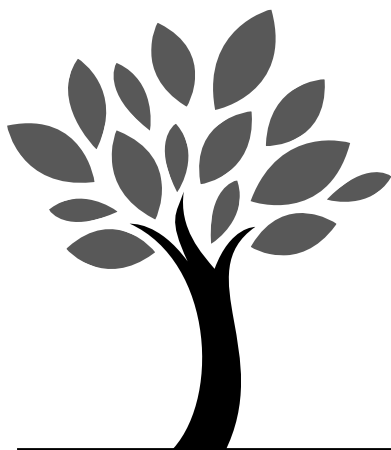
Jesus, condemned and abused: help me to realise how the abuse of religion can lead to hatred, malice, division and bloodshed – and let me learn more of the religion of redemptive compassion and love. When church and state stand together against the Messiah of love, help me to take my stand – wherever it may lead.

Reflection

It is not inevitable that church and state should be corrupted and abused, but they often are. Examine your religion and your political stance at a personal and corporate level, and let God's love purify both, in your thinking and your acting.



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**‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’**

On this journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day, you are invited to become a pilgrim with Brother Ramon. Each day there is the opportunity to stop and reflect on the gospel story, drawing insight from the experiences of those who were there during the events of the first Easter, finding inspiration and strength for the greater journey of our lives. Suffering and glory are intermingled in real human experience in this book, which is designed for personal and group use, for Christians of all traditions.

Brother Ramon SSF was an Anglican Franciscan friar and a writer on everyday spirituality. His numerous books include *Franciscan Spirituality*, *The Heart of Prayer*, *My Questions – God’s Questions* and *The Flame of Sacred Love*. Brother Ramon died in June 2000.

