

Life of Christ, Part 12: Christ's sacrificial, redemptive act

This is the final installment in a [12-part series](#) looking at the life of Christ.

A crowd of sullen onlookers is watching Jesus die. From the cross where he hangs in agony, he hears their scorn-filled voices – scorn touched with fear that their taunting might yet become reality: “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself,” “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross,” “Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him” (cf. Mt 27:39-44).

Nothing new here. Jesus heard much the same at the very start of his ministry, only then it was Satan speaking for himself: “If you are the Son of God”... change stones into bread, hurl yourself down from the Temple’s pinnacle without suffering harm, worship me and then call the whole world your own. Here is the real last temptation of Christ – to save himself by betraying his God-given vocation as Messiah and so winning acceptance by his persecutors.

The Gospels set Jesus’ death against the background of the Passover – the greatest feast of the year, celebrating the Jews’ deliverance from bondage in Egypt and marked by shedding the blood of lambs. The narrative moves incident by incident toward Christ’s sacrificial, redemptive act.

He teaches in the temple, unmoved by the growing wrath of the Jewish leaders. Judas negotiates with the chief priests and takes the infamous 30 pieces of silver as the price for his betrayal. The disciples prepare for Jesus’ Passover meal with the Twelve, and as it begins he tells them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Lk

22:15).

Last Supper discourse

The three synoptic Gospels all give relatively brief accounts of the institution of the Eucharist. John, having already quoted Jesus' discourse on the Eucharist at length in the sixth chapter of his Gospel, instead devotes the better part of five chapters to Jesus' Last Supper discourse (Jn 13–17).

Much of it is addressed to the apostles in almost tender terms and focuses on unity – “You are my friends if you do what I command you” (Jn 15:14). Accompanying this is the warning that his followers can expect to be hated by “the world,” which leads to further prayer directed to his heavenly Father: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one” (Jn 17:15).

At the end of the discourse, Peter pledges to stand by Jesus, come what may. Christ answers with painful realism: “This very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” But [Peter](#) insists. “Even though I should have to die with you” he promises, “I will not deny you” (Mk 14:30-31).

Seizure and trial

After the meal, Jesus leads the little group to a secluded spot called [Gethsemane](#) on the edge of the city, and there he prays that, if he so wills, the Father will deliver him from what lies ahead. Then Judas arrives, accompanied by temple police. They seize and bind Jesus, and, after a brief flurry of resistance by Peter, he and the rest flee.

Jesus' trial by the Jewish tribunal, the Sanhedrin, and his hearing by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate are shabby affairs in which the religious and civil authorities violate their own rules of procedure in their eagerness to be rid of Jesus. In the Jews' case, the motive is deep-seated religious

animosity. In Pilate's, it is a colonial administrator's eagerness to keep the locals quiet – even at the cost of an innocent life.

Meanwhile, Peter, who has followed at a distance, continues to fulfill Jesus' prediction and three times denies having any connection with Christ. A cock crows; years later Mark, Peter's disciple, records simply, "He broke down and wept" (Mk 14:72).

Death and Resurrection

While it's true in a sense that hatred brought Christ to Calvary, taken by itself, that concedes too much to Satan. As Jesus' words in Gethsemane and his behavior throughout what follows make clear, he freely accepted crucifixion and death. The greater truth that implies is expressed by St. Josemaria Escriva: "It is love which brought Jesus to Calvary" – love for the Father and love for us.

Crucifixion was an extremely brutal form of execution, originally intended for unruly slaves and, at this time, in use throughout the Roman empire. Although varying slightly in details, all four Gospels give essentially the same picture of the death of Jesus. As part of the grim ritual, Pilate has had Jesus scourged – a form of a physical beating from which men sometimes died – before being crucified. Two convicted criminals hang on either side of him. Most of those who go out to see him die are his enemies. But "standing by the cross of Jesus," John recalls in old age, are "his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala" along with the youthful John himself (Jn 19:25-26).

Jesus' dying took about three hours, from noon to mid-afternoon. To the very end, John emphasizes that Jesus is acting freely: "he handed over the spirit (Jn 19:30). The Roman centurion in charge of the detachment of soldiers who carried out the execution may have surprised even himself by

blurting out, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mk 15:39).

Humanity’s test

Romano Guardini speaks of the events surrounding Jesus’ death as “humanity’s second great test and failure.” The first was original sin – that “terrible aboriginal calamity,” St. John Henry Newman calls it, that joins us all in a state of alienation from God that requires redemption.

Christ’s death marked his definitive act of obedience to the Father, and in this way, he gave, as it were, the finishing touches to the redemption that we need. Father Thomas Weinandy calls this the “causal act” that brings the kingdom of God into the world. Father Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) offers this compact assessment: “His crucifixion is his coronation.” And Cardinal John Henry Newman declares: “The sacred doctrine of Christ’s atoning Sacrifice is the vital principle on which the Christian lives, and without which Christianity is not.” Jesus’ last recorded words are his own summing-up: “*Consummatum est*” – it is accomplished.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, members of the Sanhedrin, who, up to then, had hung back from openly declaring themselves to be followers of Jesus, come forward to see to his burial. Having watched the events on Calvary unfold, Jesus’ mother and the Apostle John along with a group of women accompany his body to the tomb, a cave, and watch as a heavy stone is placed at its entrance. Then, with the sabbath fast approaching, they leave.

Jesus’ work is done. The Gospels give relatively brief accounts of the Resurrection, the event that confirms the Father’s acceptance of his Son’s redemptive life and death, and a few striking incidents from the 40 days before the Ascension are recorded. But perhaps it is best to end this Gospel-based overview of Jesus’ public life here with the words of St. John: “There are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose

that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25).

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