



**Good Friday c.30 AD**

# **The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ**

**The Start of the Christian Era**

*'In the blood of the martyrs lies the seed of the Church'*

Tertullian (c.155-230)

The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ took place in the highly charged atmosphere of Jerusalem during the week of Passover, an annual holiday when Jews in their tens of thousands would travel to the city in order to celebrate their past deliverance from captivity in Egypt. Earlier that week Jesus, originally from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and whose name meant 'Jehovah saves', had travelled into the city on a donkey. This had been a conscious recreation of Zachariah's Old Testament prophecy that the Jews would find their king coming to them mounted on a donkey as a sign of his humility. His accompanying followers acclaimed Jesus as 'son of David' – the tenth century BC king who had, it was thought, established a unified Jewish state with its capital in Jerusalem. The word *Christos*, bestowed on Jesus by his disciples, is the Greek version of the Hebrew *Mesiah* or *Messiah*, 'the anointed one'. In c. 30 AD therefore, both in Jerusalem and more generally in Jewish Palestine, Jesus was seen as an anointed successor to David who would restore Israel.

Following the celebration of a Passover meal with his disciples at which he had blessed the bread and wine calling the bread 'my body' and the wine 'my blood of the Covenant', Jesus withdrew to the Mount of Olives to pray. The gospels describe the betrayal of Jesus by one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who guided the armed men dispatched by Caiaphas, the Jewish Chief Priest, who had been alarmed by the evidence of Jesus' threat to public order. When brought before Caiaphas and his council (the *Sanhedrin*) Jesus replied ambiguously when asked whether he considered himself 'son of God'. This was enough evidence of blasphemy for Caiaphas to send Jesus before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judaea, with a recommendation that he be crucified – the cruellest punishment known to ancient Rome. It is probable that the *Sanhedrin* and Caiaphas also thought that Jesus saw himself as 'king of the Jews'. The gospels' presentation of Pilate as being troubled about what to do next is coloured by the fact that Christianity, by the time of the gospels' composition in the late first century, was a fast growing religion and needed to be on good terms with the Roman authorities. Pilate was as rough and ready a character as any other Roman ruler of a troublesome province. He would eventually be dismissed from his job because of his unwise execution of a number of Samaritans. Ordering the crucifixion of a Jewish troublemaker between two criminals on the local hill of Gethsemane would not have been a problem for him.

Jesus was crucified with the title 'king of the Jews' mockingly posted above his head on which he wore a crown of thorns. It is also probable that right up to the moment of death Jesus believed in the imminence of a divine intervention according to that tradition of Jewish eschatology which his life's work had revived and made so dangerous a threat to the Roman political order. His last recorded words were, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'

Palestine was part of the Roman empire, and Jewish Palestine, at the time of Jesus' birth some thirty years earlier, was ruled by Rome's client king, Herod the Great. Its position between Syria and Egypt made its stability vital for the Romans in this volatile area. The emperor Augustus took away the southern Palestinian territories of Judaea, Idumaea and the (non-Jewish) area of Samaria from Herod's son and successor, Herod Archelaus, and turned them into the imperial province of Judaea which was governed by his prefect, Pontius Pilate. Herod's other son, Herod Antipas, meanwhile

ruled in Galilee, northern Palestine. Based in Caesarea, with only a small army to support him, Pilate avoided Jerusalem except when religious festivals such as the Passover turned the city into a mob of patriotic Jews. He relied on the High Priest and his council to enforce order. Jewish-Gentile relations were tense and the Romans were warily respectful of the vivid Jewish sense of their own cultural opposition to the Graeco-Roman world. Jews resisted any establishment of pagan temples in their towns as well as gymnasia and gladiatorial contests. There would be no colonies in Jewish Palestine until the First Jewish revolt of 66-74 AD made them a necessity for the Roman rulers.

Daily Jewish life in the region was governed by the observance of the *Torah* or Law as set out in the Old Testament. Internal divisions among the Jews made Judaea a turbulent place: learned and pious Pharisees advocated a precise interpretation of the laws, the radical sect of the Essenes were a vigorous fringe movement and the Sadducees were politically influential.

The Synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, so-called because of their similarity to each other, portray a figure who spoke of 'the Kingdom of God' using parables, aphorisms and similes whose language and references drew on agricultural and village life. The gospels also make it clear that Jesus, during a very brief public ministry of probably no more than a year, proclaimed the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God and anticipated that God would intervene and pass a final judgement before establishing an Israel free of foreign domination. By summoning twelve disciples to follow him Jesus also declared his belief that God would restore the twelve tribes of Israel. The 'Kingdom of God' was twofold. It existed in heaven and would be entered on death, but it was also shown in the words and deeds of the here and now. Being a member of this kingdom was a question of realizing God's will, of being filled with faith and rejecting material possessions. It was also evident that Jesus favoured the outcasts of his own time – not just the poor and lowly but also the sinners who repented. Even tax gatherers and prostitutes could therefore be in the Kingdom. By this proclamation Jesus called on people to follow his example rather than himself personally. He also anticipated the arrival of 'the Son of Man' who would come in clouds of glory. This was an authentic piece of Hebraic prophecy. After the resurrection Christ's followers interpreted the Son of Man as Christ himself.

Jesus therefore was a rabbi who worked in the tradition of the Temple but he was also ready to debate what the Law really required of Jews and to rise above mere formalism. The Law had to be followed, most of all, with the inner self. That was why hatred was as great a sin as murder. This was exceptional teaching but not a reason for the scribes and scholars who interpreted the Law, as well as the Pharisees, to threaten his life. It was Passover week's circumstances which placed Jesus in danger. He had already told his followers that the Temple would be destroyed as part of the fulfilment of God's new Kingdom; he therefore entered its precincts where the annual Temple tax of two drachmas was paid, and overturned the tables. The prediction and the assault were the two reasons for Jesus' Crucifixion. He was not a military threat – which is why his disciples were not killed – but in his own person and message he was undermining a precarious Jewish-Roman agreement on how to keep the peace.

After his death some of Jesus' followers claimed that the tomb in which he had been placed was empty. They also said they had seen the risen Christ not as a spirit but as a body. Language, whether Greek, Latin or the Aramaic spoken by Jesus and his followers, struggled to express this novel idea. Paul in his mid-first-century epistles opted for the awkward phrase 'spiritual body' to describe the risen Christ. But it was this belief which explained why Christianity spread and why people were ready to die for it. Reflection on what Jesus represented and meant had started with his first public appearance when he was baptized by John who was another believer in his own imminent end and judgement. This now continued with the development of a Christian Church – an *ecclesia* or community 'called out' of all the world. The Apostles' Creed developed by the early Church said that Jesus Christ had pre-existed his actual birth and had always existed with God the Father. He had therefore become flesh and been incarnated before finally being resurrected to life eternal. The influence of Greek philosophy would also emphasize that Christ was *logos* – the word made flesh who brought redemptive order to the world.

The idea that God was a person was a scandalous one for pious Jews and laughable to clever Greeks but it spoke to the poor and the marginal. Both the incarnation and the Crucifixion were fresh appealing ways of presenting the idea of God since they showed his vulnerability: first as an infant and then as a man nailed to the cross. Plato had said that the history of the world was the victory of persuasion over force. But in the person of Christ that philosophical insight became embodied in the life of the person who was now acclaimed by his believers as the Son of Man and as *Kyrios* (Lord). Jesus Christ moreover was, for Christians, the only such *Kyrios*. Consequently (and very dangerously), the Roman caesar or emperor was not a lord at all. The belief that the covenant God of the Old Testament had, through Jesus, established a new covenant with humanity was the 'good news' acclaimed in the New Testament.

In the dynamic theology of St Paul this idea became a universal one so that Christianity was not just a Jewish sect but spoke to all humanity, transcending the boundaries of politics, ethnicity and culture. This exhilarating perspective suddenly made Graeco-Roman culture look very parochial. Paul's emphasis on original sin was a novel introduction to Christianity and part of his personal obsession with the fight between flesh and spirit. Many found it psychologically compelling as an explanation of a flaw in humanity. After Paul, the Greek philosophical claim that acting wrongly was just the result of thinking badly, seemed naïve. For Christians the remedy for sin was the Atonement: the creation of a new humanity reconciled to God through the death and suffering of Christ who was the second Adam. It was this faith which sustained the persecuted and the martyred during the strenuous and dangerous first three Christian centuries.

Christianity became the most global of all the major religions showing an unique capacity to exist among a very wide variety of different cultures in Asia, Africa and the Americas. The process had started as an aspect of European colonization as missionaries followed in the wake of armies but the uniqueness and appeal of Christianity's doctrines, centred around the Crucifixion, contributed to its survival in local soil long after the end of empire.