

The Crucifixion

A Reflection by Eric Huntsman

The Synoptics, following Mark, have Jesus crucified at the third hour (approximately 9:00 a.m.). Darkness and physical manifestations of the suffering of Jesus occurred at the sixth hour (12:00 noon), and Jesus died at the sixth hour (about 3:00 p.m.). Some scholars have suggested that Mark wrote his gospel to be read aloud, and that these precise hours reflect an early Christian practice of dramatizing the Passion narrative and perhaps praying or worshiping at these hours. John portrays the crucifixion as taking place at noon, which gives more time for the trial and the events of that morning; he agrees that our Lord died about 3:00.

While it became popular in the Middle Ages, and recently in the media (as witnessed by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*), to focus on extreme suffering of Jesus' scourging and crucifixion, the gospels themselves are sparing of such brutal details. They simply state, for instance, "there they crucified him." Instead the emphasis is on the words and symbolic acts of Jesus that fulfill prophecy. These include the "Seven Last Sayings of Jesus," his crucifixion between two bandits or criminals, the division of his garments, offering poor wine as a drink, the failure to break his legs, and his side being pierced.

Significantly, the greatest suffering that our Lord suffered on the cross does not seem to be anything that man inflicted upon him. Jesus' cry, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34–35; Matt 27:46–47), may reflect that, as in Gethsemane, carrying the weight of our sins necessarily separated him from his Father in a way that he never experienced before, leading Elder McConkie, following Elder Talmage, to write:

Then the heavens grew black. Darkness covered the land for the space of three hours, as it did among the Nephites. There was a mighty storm, as though the very God of Nature was in agony. And truly he was, for while he was hanging on the cross for another three hours, from noon to 3:00 p.m., all the infinite agonies and merciless pains of Gethsemane recurred. (McConkie, May 1985)

When the prophecies had all been fulfilled and his work for us completed, our Lord cried out and died (Mark 15:37; Matt 27:50; Luke 23:46). Luke sensitively notes that Jesus commended his spirit to his Father; John records that he authoritatively declared "It is finished" (John 19:30b), typical of the divine Johannine Jesus who "laid down his life" because no one could take it from him.

John ends his testimony of the Lord's saving death with this important event:

But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs. But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe. (John 19:33–35)

John emphasized the importance of this sign, I think, because it provides a testimony of who

Jesus really was and what he had done for us. Throughout the gospel of John blood is the symbol of life but mortal life, whereas water is a symbol of eternal or divine life. Could it be that the blood represented Jesus' mortal inheritance from his mother Mary, the power to lay his life down for sin and that water represented his divine inheritance from God his Father, the power to take it up again and be to us "a well of water springing up unto everlasting life?"

Why the Cross?

In most Christian traditions the experience on the cross has become central to the expressions of their faith in what Jesus did for us. For them it is not purely a symbol of death, particularly in the Protestant tradition, where the cross reminds them of what Christ did for them but it is empty, because he has risen and is no longer there. In the LDS community we have become somewhat chary of cross imagery, partially because of our understandable focus on a living Christ rather than a crucified Christ but also simply because the early members of the Church in the New York and Ohio periods came out of a fairly Puritan Protestant background that was largely aniconographic (avoided images). In 1975 President Hinckley addressed the issue of such symbolism in an important address that is being reprinted in the April 2005 Ensign, where he points out that the greatest symbol of Christ is found in the lives of his people. Indeed, we are charged to bear his image in our countenances and hold up his light in the examples of our lives (Alma 5:14; 3 Nephi 18:16b, 24).

Nevertheless, although we do not use the symbol of the cross, we remember weekly what happened there, as revealed by the texts of virtually all of our sacrament hymns, which focus on the final act of Calvary and not as much on Gethsemane. Jesus did not just bear our sins . . . he did not just suffer for them . . . he died for them. As President Hinckley has noted,

. . . no member of this Church must ever forget the terrible price paid by our Redeemer who gave his life that all men might live—the agony of Gethsemane, the bitter mockery of his trial, the vicious crown of thorns tearing at his flesh, the blood cry of the mob before Pilate, the lonely burden of his heavy walk along the way to Calvary, the terrifying pain as great nails pierced his hands and feet, the fevered torture of his body as he hung that tragic day . . . This was the cross, the instrument of his torture, the terrible device designed to destroy the Man of Peace, the evil recompense for his miraculous work of healing the sick, of causing the blind to see, of raising the dead. This was the cross on which he hung and died on Golgotha's lonely summit. We cannot forget that. We must never forget it, for here our Savior, our Redeemer, the Son of God, gave himself a vicarious sacrifice for each of us. (Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Symbol of Christ," *Ensign*, May 1975, 92)

The cross was not just the means of our Lord's death, it was also a symbol of what that death has and will accomplish for us. It is not the Latin or Greek cross of art, or the more realistic scaffolding or upright poles to which crossbeams of various kinds were attached for any number of criminals that is the important symbol. Instead the image of raising Jesus up, like the brazen

serpent in the wilderness, is what made this particular kind of death a matter of prophecy. No where is this stated more clearly than by the Risen Lord himself to the Nephites:

. . . my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil--And for this cause have I been lifted up; therefore, according to the power of the Father I will draw all men unto me, that they may be judged according to their works. (3 Nephi 27:14-15)

Likewise, crucifixion left lasting tokens of the Lord's saving act, marks that were used to impart a sure witness that he was the Lord and God of those whom he saved. Although the experience of Thomas after the resurrection does suggest that we should be believing before we receive such assurance (John 19:24–29), Jesus' display of the marks in his hands, feet, and side took on almost ritual significance when he appeared to the Nephites at the temple in Bountiful:

Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world. (3 Nephi 11:14)