

The View from the Cross

When Jesus leaves the praetorium,⁴ it is about twelve o'clock, in Jerusalem the sultriest hour of the day.

It is springtime — March 20th at the earliest, April 17th at the latest — but spring in the Holy Land has none of the charm of our April. Spring is the season of uncertain weather; one day will be beautiful, the next may bring snow or stifling heat. It is the season of the Khamsin, the hot, depressing wind that comes from the southwest.

Jesus is carrying His Cross. To His neck, probably, is attached the placard two feet square, whitened with chalk, which will be nailed to the Cross to advertise the nature of His crime. He is preceded by a mounted centurion and escorted by a band of soldiers. For company Jesus has two thieves whom they have decided to execute with Him. In front, behind, and around Him is an inquisitive or hostile mob.

⁴ The state residence of a Roman official from which he exercises his political and juridical authority.

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For some two hundred yards in a direct line, but rather more through the network of narrow streets, their way lies downhill through the town. Then the road slopes upwards, always winding, bringing the total distance to five hundred yards. The procession thus reaches the Gate of Ephraim, otherwise called the Gate of the Square because it opens upon a square esplanade, bounded by a right-angled corner in the walls. This was later to become the Roman forum.

The Gate of Ephraim is a *redan* gate. That is, it forms a salient angle [pointing outward instead of inward], so that the entrance is from north to south and the exit from east to west. It is interesting to recall that in a Greek convent nearby, an ancient step is preserved upon which Jesus may have trod as He carried His Cross.

Immediately after He crossed the threshold, Jesus stood face-to-face with His tomb.

There was nothing gloomy about the prospect, in spite of the tombs, which were a common feature of the wealthy properties of the period. The gate between that of Ephraim and that of Jaffa was called the Gate of Gardens; and in fact all the slopes of Gareb, the hill opposite, were under cultivation.

Olives formed the chief part of the vegetation, but there were also citrons, figs, nuts, and pomegranates. Many birds made their nests in the branches of these trees, swallows and martins making merry in the springtime, along with sparrows, lapwings, cuckoos, thrushes, and turtledoves. Nor was there any lack of flowers. The place was carpeted with cyclamens, the flower of rocky ground, wild daffodils, irises, fennel, poppies, and daisies, and especially the red anemone. Perhaps, too, there was the lily of the field that vies with the glory of Solomon⁵ — a flower which glitters like a

⁵ Luke 12:27.

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stained-glass window when the sun shines upon it, but in the shade has the dull hue of dried blood.

There, too, were the famous flowers of Calvary: those tiny blossoms that never seem to die, sprouting today in the same places as yesterday. Jesus, who loved them, mingled His blood with their crimson drops; and the robin redbreast of legend, the meditative dove of the Psalm,⁶ and perhaps the owl, too, attracted by the great darkness, were there to soothe Him in death.

Once on a Good Friday about three o'clock in the afternoon, I was in my favorite spot — on the terrace which I mentioned above — when I saw the air suddenly filled with a cloud of swallows flying thickly together and filling the surrounding space with their cries. The little iron cross which now stands in the place of the great gibbet was caught in the network of their lines of flight; to and fro the shrill and fleeting cries crossed and recrossed one another. It was a festival, and it was a reminder of death. Who knows but that Jesus in the depths of His agony heard and welcomed with a sad smile another such exquisite canticle.



We have spoken of Calvary, and we have not yet located this “mountain” which occupies so important a place in our thoughts. It is difficult enough to locate it by our account, and the pilgrim on the spot, unless forewarned, would find it still more difficult to place it near the medieval *parvis* that leads to it.⁷

The fact is that Calvary is not a mountain at all; it is not even a hill, unless you would dignify by that name what is little more

⁶ Ps. 67:14 (RSV = Ps. 68:13).

⁷ A *parvis* is an enclosed area or court in front of a building, especially a cathedral or church.

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than a knoll in a field. If the esplanade of sixty yards in front of the Gate of Ephraim had not yet been levelled — and had it been, in point of fact? — the ascent to Calvary would have been almost imperceptible. This chalky mound stood not more than sixteen feet above the roads which wound around its base; it rose rather abruptly from the western side, but quite gradually from the east and southeast, the way by which Jesus approached it.

However, our Lord's observation post dominates the town. When the gibbet has been erected, its highest point will be another ten feet above the level of the ground, and the gaze of the Crucified may range over the whole horizon.

In front of Him Jesus will see the Gate of Ephraim at a distance of eighty yards, the Temple at a quarter of a mile, the tower of Antonia at four hundred yards, and at seven hundred yards the great southeastern corner, or the "pinnacle" from which Satan had wanted Him to cast Himself down.⁸

Then He will see the surrounding country. North-northeast, almost due north, are the slopes of Nabi-Samouël, the "high place" of Gibeon where Solomon had his dream of wisdom⁹ and where the unhappy Rizpah protected her sons against the vultures.¹⁰ Then He will see Mizpah, where the faithful Maccabees worshipped while awaiting their entry into Jerusalem.¹¹

To the northeast exactly is Mount Scopus, where Alexander¹² once quailed before the majesty of the high priest; where Cestius

⁸ Matt. 4:5-6; Luke 4:9-10.

⁹ 3 Kings 3:4-5 (RSV = 1 Kings 3:4-5).

¹⁰ 2 Kings 21:10 (RSV = 2 Sam. 21:10).

¹¹ 1 Macc. 3:46.

¹² Alexander (356-323 B.C.), commonly known as "the Great," was the Macedonian king who conquered large portions of the Mediterranean basin, including the Holy Land, and who established Greek culture throughout the territory he conquered.

Gallus and Titus¹³ encamped when the days of Israel were accomplished; where later the soldiers of Godfrey de Bouillon made their advance¹⁴ — a solemn approach to the city, which since the days of Nebuchadnezzar,¹⁵ Sennacherib, and Tiglath-pileser¹⁶ has always been an object of delight or of desire.

To the east is the Mount of Olives, which holds a predominant place in the life of Jesus as a consequence of the memories evoked by its lower reaches, its slopes, its summit, its surroundings, its villages, and its roads. And therefore we shall dwell upon it in these pages.

To the right of the Mount of Olives, across the brook Kedron, is a strip of burnt and arid desert, behind which you can smell the Dead Sea and see the unbroken line of the mountains of Moab, with the fringe of mist at their base which rises from those heavy waters. Here are memories of the great fast, of the Baptism and the voice from the heavens; here is Mount Nebo, whence Moses saw the Promised Land from afar; here is Machaerus, with the head of John the Baptist lying in its plate as in a halo; here are the caves

¹³ Titus (A.D. 39-81) was son of the Roman emperor Vespasian (A.D. 69-79) and was emperor himself from 79 to 81. Under his father's leadership, he captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple during the revolt of A.D. 66 to 70, known as the "Jewish War." Cestius Gallus was the governor of the Roman province of Syria at the time of the Jewish War.

¹⁴ De Bouillon (c. A.D. 1060-1100) was the first Crusader king of Jerusalem.

¹⁵ Babylonian king (605-562 B.C.) who conquered Judea and Jerusalem and deported the Jewish population to Babylon in the years 597-581 B.C. These events are recounted in the historical biblical books of 4 Kings, and 1 and 2 Paralipomenon, and in Jeremiah (RSV = 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, and Jeremiah).

¹⁶ Kings of Assyria from, respectively, 705-681 B.C. and 745-725 B.C., both of whom achieved hegemony over Israel during their reigns as recounted in 4 Kings (RSV = 2 Kings).

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which gave refuge to the scapegoat, hunted for the crimes of Israel as Jesus is for ours.

Nearer, and still due east, is Mount Moriah, the pedestal of the Temple, with its southward extension bordered by the Tyropoeon Valley and the valley of Jehoshaphat, the site of the “City of David.” On the horizon of this strip of immortal land is the village of Siloam, the ancient burial place of the Jews, and behind it was the Mount of Scandal, where the ancient “abominations” were perpetrated.¹⁷

To the west, high hills close in the view, hills that lead up to what today is called Mount Zion, and bound the curving valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna.

Such is the place where Jesus went to meet His death.

At the moment the prospect was fair and pleasing; but we know that soon a dark cloud spread over the earth. During spring in the Holy Land night often falls suddenly after hours of radiant sunshine. When the dreaded wind of the desert blows, the smoky clouds gather, beaten up by the heavy wings of the demon of the Assyrian Styx, and in the heights a war is waged between the west wind, damp and cool, and the warm breath of the Negeb. And for a time darkness reigns: an image of what befell, by an intervention of Divine Providence, at the moment of the great death.



And here is the Cross. It is a square-hewn beam, with a crosspiece. It is probably ten feet high; Rome likes to make an exhibition of her condemned criminals, for the sake of example. Jesus alludes to this when He says, “If I be lifted up from the earth

¹⁷ 3 Kings 11:5-8 (RSV = 1 Kings 11:5-8).

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I will draw all things to myself.”¹⁸ What is intended for His infamy He makes an instrument of glory.

The length of the beam had to be limited because it had to be thick, and yet the criminal must carry it. Therefore there had to be a limit to the weight. Moreover, certain conditions were imposed by the demands of balance and handling. It was possible to engage the shoulder against the crosspiece; but to drag the wood on the ground behind would have been out of the question.

The gibbet was probably provided with a wooden projection at some height above its base. This structure, the *antenna*, formed a sort of saddle and was designed to prevent the hands and feet from being torn under the weight of the body. However, this detail is not certain.¹⁹

The feet of Christ are sometimes represented as resting upon a sloping footrest. This is a pious invention for which there is no authority. Jesus must have been nailed with His legs drawn up high enough for His feet to rest flat against the beam: a frightful position, but for that very reason the more probable.



What kind of tree was privileged to provide the wood upon which the world's most precious fruit should hang? It is not certain. In all probability it was a coniferous tree. A legend fixes a valley to the southwest of the city, belonging to the Greek monastery of the Holy Cross, as the place where the tree was cut; but so many childish legends flourish in that place that it is difficult to take this seriously. As a matter of fact, it is hard to see how anyone

¹⁸ John 12:32.

¹⁹ The use of this accessory gave rise to the gruesome expression “to ride on the cross” (*equitare crucem*).

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can be certain on this point. A praetorium contained a whole collection of crosses, but they bore no labels to indicate the place from which they came.

In fact, the Liturgy is better inspired when it abstracts from the material origin of a wood which is so permeated with spiritual significance:

Faithful Cross, O tree all beauteous,
Tree all peerless and divine,
Not a grove on earth can show us
Such a flower and leaf as thine.
Sweet the nails and sweet the wood
Laden with so sweet a load.²⁰

These tender mystical reflections have a greater charm than any stories of Lot planting a tree, and of the Queen of Sheba finding the tree used to make a threshold in the temple of Solomon, and similar fantasies.

When we speak of the Cross as a piece of wood, we do not think of its growth nor of its situation. Its situation is the universe; its growth dates from the "Sixth Day," unless you would rather say that it exists and grows in the heart of the Christian when he unites himself to his divine Master. The Cross is necessary for the salvation of the world: happy the land, happy the soul willing to pay the price of it!



Having established the site of Calvary and described the Cross, the question still remains, in what direction was the Sufferer

²⁰ "Crux fidelis" (traditional hymn for Good Friday).

facing? There are mystical authors who orient the Cross to the west — that is to say, they “disorient” it. Their idea is that the look which regenerates is turned toward us, Israel and the Old Law being forsaken. This theory, besides being *a priori* and not free from partiality, finds no confirmation in the situation of Calvary.

As you pass out of the Gate of Ephraim you are facing Mount Gareb, of which Calvary is a small foothill: to turn the gibbet to the west would be to make it face the hills and to hide it from the people. The idlers of the gate and the loiterers of the esplanade, the passersby who met in great numbers at the crossroads, the folk that clustered everywhere about, the dwellers in the tents set up in the open air for the feast, all these would have been foiled. The public example made of the victim would have been thwarted; furthermore, the erection of the gibbet and the management of the execution would have been made difficult. In every way, it would have been a bad arrangement.

No, Jesus faced the gate by which He had come forth, through which came His insulters and those who were greedy for a spectacle. He offered Himself to those who hated and mocked Him. He lent Himself to the convenience of His executioners.

And, if reasons of appropriateness must be added, the new Man looked toward the beginnings, toward that end of the earth from which came civilization together with the light. He faced as the apse of a church faces, having before His eyes the rampart of a world beyond which He had passed, although He had not forsaken it. His final glance saluted the Temple, His Father’s house, and the rising sun.



And so now the Cross is erected in its proper place, facing in the right direction, according to all the rules. The chalky soil offers

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a good grip; the beam holds; and now the inscription surmounts the gibbet. He who is to die has been stripped of His garments, first bound to the Cross, and then nailed to it. His crown has been left upon His head, presumably intended as a commentary upon the derisive inscription, but in truth consecrating Jesus as king of hearts and king of the universe.

The first spasms shake the body already mercilessly torn by the scourging and by a night of torment; the victim has been raised roughly upon His gibbet; the blood flows in thin streams from His hands and feet, oozes from His forehead, and stripes His breast and members along the marks of the lashes. The cruelly strained position allows no movement but the soul is unfettered, and the great shudders that rack the body leave the mind in full possession of its powers.

There is still a little more of this great life to be lived, a life which in the narrow confines of Judea embraces all the world: a cry or two more, a few more words of sovereign power, and one more lament that asks compassion of earth and Heaven: of earth, to recompense it with mercy to us, of Heaven, to grant us its blessings. And through it all is that glance which sees beyond all things, that glance which we shall follow as far as our sight can reach. But it goes infinitely beyond our vision, for it passes through the visible and invisible worlds and penetrates to their source, to the very depths of God.



After the Cross has been erected, Calvary stands still for a moment, shocked into immobility by the spectacle of supreme pain. The inevitable reaction affects even the executioners. But above all it affects the Sufferer. After the terrible jolt with which the Cross fell into the rocky hole, sending a shudder through the

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beam and through the members of the victim, the Crucified welcomes as a sort of relief the dull, continuous agony which now ensues and will only later reach its paroxysm.

The noises of the city make themselves heard fitfully through this furtive silence. The cries of donkey drivers fill the void left by the silenced blasphemers. Camels pass with majestic tread, carrying their loads back to Jaffa or Damascus. Off in the distance the wind raises arid clouds from the sandhills. Moab is shrouded in a mist of mauve. The fig trees give forth their honeyed scent. At the foot of the Cross the red blossoms slowly increase and multiply. The hand of death, for a moment hesitating, relaxes its pitiless hold on the breast of Jesus.



And then, the Master opens His eyes