

## CRUCIFIXION STORY EXPOSES MENTAL ANGUISH

Then there's the story about the novice clerk at a jewelry store. A woman came in and asked for a silver necklace with a cross. "Sure," he said. "You want a plain one? Or one with the little man on it?"

You suspect what that lad didn't know about the Christian scriptures would fill a data bank. The key event as far as Christian tradition is concerned is with that "little anon a cross."

Except that it wasn't a silvery, ornamental kind of event. It was one of perhaps thousands of similarly disgusting public executions.

There was nothing tidy about such affairs. Condemned criminals were hung naked on a pole-and-cross-bar apparatus, straddling a peg, with their ankles nailed a foot off the ground. After half a week of insects, exposure and dehydration most would go mad. All would be dead before the week was out.

Not the sort of entertainment would list in a Chamber of Commerce brochure. Apparently such executions were so common that virtually everybody had seen one. Everyone knew the facts of life, or in this case, the facts of death.

Perhaps that is why the four gospels in the Christian scriptures don't itemize the physical agonies Jesus must have undergone. Scourgings and a thorny headpiece are mentioned of course. Nails are implied, and Jesus' thirst is noted.

But by and large the biblical writers chose to play down the gory details. Instead, they concentrated more on what might be called his psychological harassment.

Take Mark 14-15 for example. These two chapters summarize the last 24 hours of Jesus' career. They were skillfully put together to show how Jesus was abandoned by everyone in sight.

First the religious authorities hatch a plot to eliminate him (Mark 14:1-2). Then some malcontents complain when a woman pours perfume on his head (14:3-9). One of Jesus' trusted lieutenants joins the plot against him (14:10-11). And during sharing supper Jesus predicts one of his companions will turn him in (14:12-25).

During their after-dinner stroll comes another prediction: All his men even their honcho Peter, will desert (14:26-31). Soon the predictions start to come true. Jesus organizes a four-man prayer meeting, but 75% of the attendees fall asleep (14:32-42).

Judas, the lieutenant mentioned above, leads a commando raid to abduct Jesus. The rest of his men turn tail and run (14:43-50). In fact, one fellow is so anxious to get away he drops his tunic and leaves in his birthday suit (14:51)!

From then on Jesus goes to his end alone, with nobody on his side. The religious authorities condemn him on a trumped up charge of blasphemy (14:53-65).

While their kangaroo court is in session, Jesus' main man Peter sneaks into the precincts. But when he is spotted by bystanders, he perjures himself three times: "I never even heard of this guy (1:66-72)."

Next on the itinerary is a stop in civil court. In a blatantly political move designed to win applause from the gallery, the governor releases a convict and signs Jesus' death warrant (15:1-15). After being shoved around in the police barracks he is marched to executioner's hill and strung up (15:16-27).

As the story unfolds in Mark's gospel the sense of abandonment heightens. At every turn Jesus is deserted: by his closest friends, by the religious and civil authorities, by the public. The closing scenes in chapter 15 heighten the effect.

While hanging on his gibbet Jesus is insulted first by some insensitive passers-by, then by the local clergy, and finally even by the two criminals executed next to him (15:29-32).

How lonely can you get? Even the Maytag repairman keeps his inner integrity. But Jesus, according to Mark 15:33-39, is denied even that. In the end he feels deserted by God. His only word from the cross in this gospel is a despairing, "My God, why have you abandoned me?"

And with that he dies.

Only a handful of women witness his end and his burial in a borrowed cemetery plot. For the biblical writer, the picture is complete. Jesus has been abandoned by everybody who is anybody, from God on down.

That's one of the most artfully written sequences you'll read anywhere. It would have been easy for the biblical writer to throw in a lot of blood and gore.

Instead he chose the tougher task of letting us readers taste the mental cruelty Jesus must have sustained. And that's impressive.