8

THE BUTT OF MOCKERY

Then they spit in his face, and struck him. And some slapped him, saying, 'Prophesy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?' (*Matt.* 26:67, 68).

The Sanhedrin adjourned from its night-time session to meet formally in the morning. It had been agreed that Christ was a blasphemer who deserved to die. To sentence someone to death is an awesome responsibility. One does not expect that judges who have passed such a sentence will almost immediately turn to revelry or frivolity. They should be burdened men. A solemn silence should pervade the courtroom. There should be a profound awareness of the majesty of the law. It is with undisguised horror that one views the monstrous spectacle in the courtyard of the high priest's palace on that momentous night. It was then that Israel's judges disgraced themselves. Scarcely had proceedings ended before their eminences threw all restraint aside and indulged in an unholy orgy of vicious abuse of the prisoner. Christ became the butt of the most diabolical mockery.

THE CRUELTY OF THIS MOCKERY

These religious leaders, doubtless assisted by the officers and spearmen, gathered in fiendish glee around Christ

whom they saw as a worthless fraud, the object of scorn and hatred, the scum of the world. Now they would have some fun. They spat in his face, a symbol of defiance among the Jews (*Num.* 12:14, *Deut.* 25:9). They struck him repeatedly with their fists, among the Jews a token of utter contempt (*Matt.* 5:39). His face was soon bruised and swollen by the rain of heavy blows. 'His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind' (*Isa.* 52:14). Professor E. J. Young points out, 'This does not mean that he appears to be more disfigured than other men, but that his disfigurement was so great that he no longer appeared as a man.' Many who saw him were astonished (literally, 'shocked' or 'shattered'). Motyer pictures them stepping back in horror as they ask, 'Is this human?' That battered, bleeding countenance should speak mightily to all our hearts. Like all Christ's sufferings it has redemptive significance. Calvin puts it well: 'This insolence was turned by the providence of God to a very different purpose; for the face of Christ, dishonoured by spitting and blows, has restored to us that image which had been disfigured, and almost effaced, by sin.'

Suddenly the abuse took a new turn. Blindfolding the prisoner they danced around him striking him repeatedly and saying, 'Prophesy to us . . . who is it that struck you?' They knew that he had just prophesied of his future (verse 64). And so some clever wag had the bright idea of mocking the prophet from Nazareth. There he stands in nameless wretchedness as his tormentors in seeking to degrade him reveal their own degradation. Doubtless the

redeemer remembered his own prophecy, 'Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me; . . . like a ravening and roaring lion' (*Psa.* 22:12, 13). Now the bulls and lions and dogs mentioned in the twenty-second Psalm close in on him, snarling and snapping in uncontrolled fury. O my soul, what a sight is this! As with tear-dimmed eyes we look on this terrible scene – do we? – we behold with wordless wonder the matchless love and infinite condescension of the one who came to seek and to save the lost.

Here, however, there is an error to avoid, the danger of seeing the loving obedience of Christ as primarily and exclusively for the sake of man, when, in fact, it was primarily out of love for God that he accepted the cross (*Heb.* 10:7). Dr Geerhardus Vos stresses that our Lord's Messiahship was 'absolutely God-centred'. 'Jesus', says Vos, 'accepted the cross out of a motive of love for God even more than, and before, He accepted it because of His love for man.' And again Vos says, 'In dying, as in all else He did, He hallowed God's name.' This is a truth too often overlooked, and it in no way detracts from the wonder that Christ loves each one of his people with all of his love.

As that suffering, humiliated figure stood there, his tormentors despised him in their hearts. They thought that he was utterly helpless in their hands. How wrong they were! Christ was never in retreat, never merely passive. At this moment he was actively and voluntarily exposing himself to the fury of his enemies. Now came the fulfilment of those prophetic words, 'I gave my back to those

who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting' (*Isa.* 50:6). This was costly obedience on the Saviour's part as he deliberately gave his back to those who struck him, enduring patiently and meekly this gratuitous torture. E. J. Young says, 'There is majesty in the description, as though the servant were in full control of the situation. He sets himself forth as one who acts.'

Just as Caiaphas spoke more profoundly than he realized when he said that it was better that one should die than that they all should perish, so Christ's tormentors must have struck a chord in the Saviour's mind as they chanted, 'Who is it that struck you?' Many hands were raised against him, both human and demonic, but Christ knew that there was one hand above all others that smote him. And as he bore our sins that hand did not spare him. 'It was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief . . .' (*Isa.* 53:10).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS MOCKERY

Christ in his passion was mocked on several occasions and each time the mockery occupied a unique place in his experience. First he was mocked by Israel, next he was mocked by the pagan world, then by a descendant of Edom, a false brother, and finally by all these together. He was mocked by the Sanhedrin, by Pilate's soldiers, by Herod and then by them all as they stood before the cross. So the mockery in the presence of the Sanhedrin had its own special features. Its focal point was Christ's prophetic role, an office now openly derided. Little did

his enemies realize that every detail of his suffering was a fulfilment of prophecy, even the crowing of a rooster! As Schilder remarks, 'It had to crow because God wrenched the creature's beak wide open . . .'. Even as the members of the Sanhedrin mocked the Messiah, he stood at the very summit of the mountain of prophecy. The prophetic altitude of this mountain will only be matched on the day of judgement.

In the midst of this gruesome abuse our Lord stood unflinchingly, leaving himself at the mercy of his enemies, he who by a word could have destroyed them. But he maintained the omnipotence of his silence. 'When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly' (*1 Pet.* 2:23). Says that fine 17th-century expositor, Alexander Nisbet, 'While Christ our Lord was suffering in our room He did with much confidence and willingness deliver Himself to the will of His righteous Father to endure the utmost that was due to sinners, according to his undertaking in the covenant of redemption.' Consider the magnitude of the task in hand that required so terrible a cost. In his bearing in the midst of vile abuse, the Saviour left us an example that we should follow his steps. We cannot be faithful to Christ in this world and avoid reproach and contempt, and in this our bearing should correspond in some measure to that of the master when he was so defamed. It is well to remember the words of Samuel Rutherford, 'The worst things of Christ, His reproaches, His cross, are better than Egypt's treasures.'

THE SOURCE OF THIS MOCKERY

Sometimes mockery is justified. Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal, exposing the impotence of their god, even as the Psalmist mocked the idols with mouths that could not speak, eyes that could not see, and ears that could not hear (*Psa.* 115). The cartoonist mocks what he sees as foolish government policy or public behaviour and in doing so renders a useful service to society. Mockery *per se* is not wrong. Even God mocks (*Psa.* 2:4). But unrestrained mockery that is unrelated to God's holy law becomes undiluted brutality. It is wholly destructive, particularly of the mocker himself. Such mockery is a form of defiance and behind this defiance of the Christ one senses the presence of the demonic.

All hostility to Christ and his people is stimulated by the powers of darkness. The Apostle Paul was acutely aware of those vicious demonic forces of which the persecuting State was but the instrument. The struggle was not with flesh and blood, but with 'the authorities . . . the cosmic powers . . . the spiritual forces of evil' (*Eph.* 6:12). Therefore believers needed to be clad in 'the armour of God'. The battle was with the forces of Satan, and it was those same forces that launched this cruel assault against the Son of God in the high priest's courtyard, and the sufferer knew full well who it was that assailed him.

Throughout his earthly life Christ never suffered for himself, and for a sinless being to move in the sin-laden atmosphere of this fallen world meant intense suffering. The Christian winces when he hears the name of his beloved Saviour used in profane jest, yet in many ways

all Christians fail to be as sensitive to the presence of evil as they should be. But the sinless one was totally sensitive to the presence of evil. We must not, therefore, limit his redemptive sufferings to the last few days of his life before the crucifixion and to his actual agony on the cross. William Symington rightly affirms, 'In every case He suffered for us, never for Himself'; and he adds, 'Not one throb of pain did He feel, not one pang of sorrow did He experience, not one sigh of anguish did He heave, not one tear of grief did He shed for Himself. If not one of His sufferings was personal, it follows that they were all substitutionary . . .'. During the whole period of his [earthly] life the Saviour 'was a-slaying'.

How terrible was that mockery of Christ by the Sanhedrin! How godless! Had Christ not been thrust outside the sphere of law, such contempt and unbridled abuse would have been impossible. If his judges had been sincere in their assessment of the prisoner, and in the verdict they reached, and if they had feared God, they would have delivered the accused to Satan that he might learn not to blaspheme (1 *Tim.* 1:20). That would have been a *lawful* and a *loving* act, but the Sanhedrin had no regard for either justice or love. Lawlessness and hatred are boon companions. And so the Saviour was treated as an arch-liar, a worm to be trampled under foot, someone to be put for ever without the domain of law. For the one who had God's law in his heart and who delighted to do God's will, to be thus ejected from the sphere of justice meant intense suffering of spirit, for him an agony that far surpassed the pain inflicted by physical abuse. And so those

prophetic words were fulfilled: 'I am a worm, and not a man' (*Psa.* 22:6). 'He was despised, and we esteemed him not' (*Isa.* 53:3).

So suffered our divine Substitute. Worse was to come. As sinners we earned the punishment of hell – and there, too, God's law is established – but the Lord Jesus took our place willingly and lovingly and endured the mockery and defiance that Satan would have hurled at us in hell.

'With His stripes we are healed.'

9

THE CROWN OF THORNS

Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns (*John* 19:5, KJV).

The Sanhedrin having sat informally at night and declared Christ guilty of blasphemy and deserving of death, met formally in the early hours of the following morning to pronounce the sentence of death and then hurried the prisoner to Pilate the Roman governor who alone could confirm the sentence and order its execution.

Although in some respects Pilate was more honourable than Caiaphas, in that he clearly recognized and acknowledged the innocence of Christ, nevertheless he was weak and vacillating as the Jewish leaders clamoured for Christ's death. When Pilate tried to release Christ, the Jewish leaders cried out, 'If you release this man you are not Caesar's friend'. He was trapped by his own past, his bad administration. 'Shall I crucify your King?' he asked, and they replied, 'We have no king but Caesar.' Pilate was cornered. He knew that they could appeal to Caesar and then there would be an investigation of his administration. He recognized the veiled threat their words conveyed and he bowed to their demands. 'So he delivered him over to them to be crucified' (*John* 19:12, 15, 16).