

Dreadful end to joyful start

By Pastor Larry Booth

Congregational Church, Grant

Holy Week is upon us. Our next Sunday is Palm Sunday, a joyful beginning to a dreadful weekending. It is the last week in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Friday morning he will be crucified (nailed to a wooden cross); Friday afternoon he will die on that cross, abandoned by those whom he chose, buried hurriedly by those he hardly knew.

Why did he die?

If we knew why anyone, in those days, was crucified, and who did the crucifying, we might know some of why.

As a child, when I heard of the crucifixion of Jesus, and was taught of his resurrection, and that he was the Savior of the World, I assumed that he was the only one ever crucified. That it was something special and extreme just done to him, except for those two awful 'thieves' he was crucified between and I didn't know why.

As I grew older in the teachings, I learned that crucifixion was a particularly horrible method of execution practiced by the Roman Empire.

When the Romans, 700 years before the time of Christ, invaded and occupied Israel and Syria and other nations surrounding the eastern Mediterranean Sea, control of those distant nations was a great issue. And the deterrence of crime was of greatest concern—how to punish criminals in such a way as to discourage others from such acts.

From Syria, they learned 'crucifixion' – tying or fastening someone to a tree and leaving them hang there 'til they died. They perfected it, and used it generally throughout the Empire.

The shame of crucifixion was made very public. Crosses were placed in very public places, along well-traveled streets and roads.

Just over six feet high, the naked criminal was hung there at nearly eye-level to those who came to watch. And the death was not quick and painless. Roman executioners found that rope-tying criminals to the cross allowed them to live hanging there several days, maybe a week, before dying. The crowds grew bored.

Nails, though, driven through the wrists, added a pain that shortened their time. But letting them hang just by these nails caused them to die too soon. The body hanging by the arms caused paralysis and they died of suffocation—not an easy dying, but too quickly.

The addition of nails driven also through the ankles or feet gave a painful platform, when breathing became too difficult, to push-up against, gulp some breaths until the pain became unbearable, then to hang until the paralysis forced them to struggle up again. And this over and over, until the torture made it no longer possible, and death by suffocation occurred before the sun went down—just one good full day of it.

If by chance one was taking too long to die, and the day was closing, their legs would be

broken, so they could no longer raise themselves—then it was over.

But it was not over, for the one dying knew that part of the shame of crucifixion was that his body would not be removed, but would hang there until rotted and scavenging vermin had finished with it. The final insult. That, to Rome, was the near perfect execution, the fate of those determined to be enemies of the Empire. (On very rare occasions, a special person might be given permission to take a body down.)

This was the Good Friday death performed on Jesus of Nazareth—the end of what started out to be a joyous week.