

LENTEN PROGRAMME
“Holy Week Voices from the Holy Land”
Week 6, 2021 – Matthew 27. 45-54 [ESV]
Unsung Hero – Centurion
[Adapted]

GATHERING

OPENING PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, you revealed to the centurion the truth of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Inspire us to see in Jesus the one who loves beyond measure. Grant us, we pray, the courage to live a holy life, the grace to die a happy death, and the joy of eternal life to praise and thank you always. Through your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES

Luke 5. 17-26

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, ‘This man is calling Elijah.’ And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will-come to save him.’ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’

Poem: Centurion at the Cross

Just another day's work
or so it seemed
to take the three
from prison cell to Calvary
their justice to receive
we had hoped to see Barabbas
hang and die in agony
to personally escort him to his fate
but instead. it was Jesus behind the prison gate.....
From whipping post to Calvary hill

Jesus took it all
no resistance, no withdrawal
offering himself, as I've heard it said
like a lamb to the slaughter
willingly led to the sacrificial altar
the beam shredding his shoulder
his streaming blood staining the stones and soil
a pitiful, punishing path for one so royal.
I witnessed and watched it all
at first distant, professionally efficient
but then more and more enthralled
by the dignity, the inner strength
of this man embracing death
like a lover held in a moment of passion
all-giving, carried on to consummation
surrendering self to some greater union
beauty in the blood, divine in the human.

On Calvary my men, exhausted and drained
lost no time to finish the job
stripping and nailing each man to their cross
then casting lots for their blood-stained cloths
while the other two cursed, blamed and screamed
you hung silently suspended between
partners in crime, heaven and earth
then dragging air into your crushed frame
you called out "Abba" - your Father's name.

And your dying words sighed, rasped
born of life's last gasping
draw me closer, pierce
and penetrate my hardened soldier's heart.
"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"
words of mercy's triumph over hate
to the last spasm love poured out
then pitch-black darkness extinguished all light,
the earth trembled shattering rocks in this daytime night.

Such power, such force
unleashed at the very moment your breathing ceased
I fell on my knees the ground soaked by your royal blood
"Surely this man was the Son of God"
I proclaimed, raising high my arms
in praise not pity of the pierced one
faith professed, I feel his freedom in my breast
I hear the call to leave behind falsehood and fear
and in his Father's outstretched arms find rest.

Please take a few moments in silence to reflect on the passage and the poem.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE [George Sa'adeh]

When I read this poem and reflect on the Roman Centurion's experience that we find in the Gospels, I am struck by how this man of brutality is changed by what he sees in Jesus and becomes a man of faith. This gives me hope and strengthens my faith which has been deeply tested by men of brutality like this Centurion.

Let me explain more. As a Palestinian Christian living in Bethlehem under occupation, my life and the life of my family were changed forever at about 6:30pm on a rainy evening on 25 March 2003. My wife Najwa and I were driving in our car towards the grocery market here in Bethlehem. In the back seat of the car were our two daughters - Marian (who was 15 years old then) and Christine (who was 12 years). We were driving past the Shepherd's Hotel, when we saw Israeli army jeeps parked on the side of the road, but we did not see any soldiers. Then suddenly heavy gunfire erupted, shattering the windscreen and filling the car with bullets.

I felt the impact of bullets smashing into my body. Najwa got hit with many shrapnel. When we turned back towards our daughters, we saw that Marian had been shot in the leg, and that Christine was lying between the seats. She had been hit badly in the neck and the head. We were screaming, 'Stop shooting - we are civilians.'

The Israeli soldiers immediately closed off the area. We picked up Christine out from the car calling for help, until the Israeli army ambulance came 15 minutes later, and then they took us to the northern check point between Bethlehem and Jerusalem and from there to the Hadassah Medical Hospital at Jerusalem. It took surgeons seven hours to remove all the bullets from my body. Najwa and Marian survived their wounds. Christine did not, she died immediately. Three other Palestinians were also killed in the attack, which local people have come to call the 'Shepherd's Massacre'.

That night changed all our lives 180 degrees. While I and Marian remained in the hospital recovering from our wounds, my wife Najwa struggled through the days of the mourning and the funeral alone. It was the biggest funeral in the history of Bethlehem. We had lost our beloved daughter. Ever since then, our family has struggled to cope with the loss. Everything that happened made us really question our faith and our humanity, but a month after Christine's death I received a call from an Israeli Jewish group inviting us to a gathering in Beit Jala. We were wondering that they killed our daughter and now those people dared to call for a meeting with us. After a long thinking, we said we do not have any hatred in our heart. We remembered the words of our Lord Jesus 'Father, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing.' So we went to meet them. They were families from the Israeli-Palestinian Parent Circle Bereaved Family Forum - a group of 600 bereaved families, all of whom have lost their beloved ones in the conflict. It encouraged us all to tell and listen to each other's sad stories. The group is committed to peace, reconciliation and creating dialogue to end the occupation and reach peace between the two nations. The group has helped us very much.

As we see in the Roman Centurion, military life can dehumanize soldiers and make acts of violence part of just another day's work. This is a path which can never lead to peace. We want to live under freedom and make a better life for our children. Life is too short, all of us we are going to die, leaving everything (homes, money, land, clothes and power) behind us. We can have a beautiful life if only we put down our hatred, selfishness and revenge. We want justice, peace and love because life is precious.

I think this is what the Centurion saw in Jesus. He witnessed how Jesus sustained unbearable pain carrying his cross for an honourable cause to save us all from our sins. After years and years of being an instrument of violence and vengeance, the Centurion suddenly saw a totally new way - the way of love. Behind the blood and the suffering he saw in Jesus something so pure that it could not come only from this world, but was a gift from a better world, the world of the God of peace and love. It is only God's love which can really change and heal us. We cannot find this path of forgiveness and peace by ourselves.

Short Reflection on Scripture and the Poem

It is another huge irony that the first person to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God after his death was the centurion responsible for organising his execution! And this means, of course, a pagan - someone who had been brought up to believe in the Roman gods. The only explanation can be the extraordinary witness which Jesus gave between his torture in the Praetorium and his final breath on the cross. That journey marks the dawning of faith in the centurion. Jesus is the Saviour of all humanity, not just the people of Israel, and the centurion is powerful proof of this. Truth can often be found in the most unexpected of places.

Please take a few moments of silence to reflect on what you have read.

Question for Reflection

How does all of this resonate in my own life?

CLOSING PRAYER

Let us pray earnestly to Christ our Saviour, who redeemed us by his death and resurrection.

R: Lord, have mercy on us.

You went up to Jerusalem to endure the passion and enter into glory; lead your Church into the paschal feast of eternal life.

R: Lord, have mercy on us.

Your heart was pierced with a lance; heal the wounds of our human weakness.

R: Lord, have mercy on us.

You made your cross the tree of life; share your victory with all the baptised.

R: Lord, have mercy on us.

You gave salvation to the repentant thief; pardon all our sins.

R: Lord, have mercy on us.

Share with the dead your bodily glory; let us rejoice one day with them in the fellowship of the saints.

R: Lord, have mercy on us.

In the silence of our hearts let us bring to the Father our thanks [pause]

In sorrow let us ask the Father for forgiveness [pause]

With confidence let us entrust to the Father our cares and concerns [pause]

Almighty God, by the cross and resurrection of your Son you have given life to your people. We have received the sign of the cross: make us living proof of its saving power and help us to persevere in the footsteps of Christ. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Acknowledgement:
"Holy Week Voices from the Holy Land"

[You may wish to purchase a physical copy directly from Friends of the Holy Land or obtain an electronic/digital version (also priced £7.99), both of which are available from their website: www.friendsoftheholylan.org.uk

The proceeds of this book (priced at £7.99 plus postage and packaging) will go to the Friends of the Holy Land to aid their work with the neediest of our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land. As with those closer to home, our brothers and sisters there have suffered dramatically during the coronavirus pandemic, including economically with the cessation of pilgrimages and tourism and the resulting loss of income]