

“Truly this was God's Son” - a Reflection

In our Gospel reading we are given a brief glimpse of a man who was present while Jesus was nailed to the cross. This man was a Roman centurion, a commander over 100 soldiers of the Roman army. We know little about him except that he was probably a hardened soldier and commanded a detachment of what were most likely Syrian-born soldiers. He had, in all likelihood, presided over the crucifixion of hundreds or even thousands of men and must have become hardened to the agony these men endured.

It is likely that this man was present from the time Jesus was brought before Pilate right until the Lord's body was lowered from the cross and given to Joseph of Arimathea. This man would have accompanied Jesus from the time the Jewish leaders brought him to the Praetorium. He would have ordered his men to beat Him, caring little for who He was, knowing Him only to be another in a long line of people he was commanded to execute. He would have been nearby when his men dressed Jesus in a robe, pressed a crown of thorns onto His head and walked Him to Golgotha. He would have given the order to proceed with the crucifixion.

The centurion is mentioned not for his cruelty, ruthlessness or ability as a soldier. He is mentioned for something far more important, for a marvelous transformation that occurred immediately after the death of one of his prisoners.

Having seen so many crucifixions, the centurion knew what to expect from prisoners. Most of them were criminals, brigands, thieves and murderers. He had heard countless men scream in agony while being whipped and plead for their lives before Pilate. From their crosses he had heard them shout curses to men below and blasphemies to God above. The behavior of the thieves on either side of Jesus was all too common, as they mocked and ridiculed Jesus as he hung between them.

Perhaps it was during this time that the centurion began to notice that there was something different about Jesus. Where most men cursed and swore, Jesus, as His hands were nailed to the wood, cried out for God to forgive those who were causing His suffering. Or maybe He noticed the tender mercy in Jesus' voice when He spoke to the penitent thief beside Him, promising that the same day he would be with Jesus in paradise. Perhaps he was amazed that during such suffering Jesus could look down at His mother and ensure that her future was secure by telling John to take care of her. Certainly three hours of darkness that accompanied Jesus' suffering would have marked this as an execution unlike any other.

We know exactly when the centurion came to recognize who Jesus was. Just before He died, Jesus cried out “It is finished.” Immediately after that He said “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” At that very moment Jesus died. Matthew tells us:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God's Son!”

And just like that, the man who presided over Jesus' execution, the man who ordered the nails to be driven into His hands and feet, became the first person to become a believer after Jesus' death.

What an awesome, exciting testament this is to God's divine grace! God was willing and eager to save one of those primarily responsible for the murder of His Son. A man who watched Jesus be scourged, who watched his soldiers mock and abuse Him and who probably enjoyed every minute of it, suddenly cries out in terror, realizing that He has killed an innocent man. His cry of terror is also an expression of faith as he confesses his new-found knowledge that Jesus was the Son of God.

Author and Biblical commentator Tim Challies concludes:

This story would have been a great encouragement to many people in the early church. The realisation that God could save even those who held the nails, would have proven that He is a God of love and forgiveness. It would have reassured them that, like this centurion, they could gain God's favour through Jesus' sacrifice.

This centurion's miraculous conversion continues to serve as an encouragement today. Just as we share the centurion's guilt for driving the nails into Jesus, so we can share the victory He won that day. As with this soldier who lived and died almost 2000 years ago, we need only have faith to believe that "truly this was the Son of God" and we, too, can be forgiven and receive the new life Jesus offers through his life, his death and his resurrection.