**The Passion by the Centurion**

I have always, and I guess others must have felt the same, really wanted to know what it must have been like to be someone in Jerusalem on the day of the crucifixion of Jesus. I cannot know, of course, but I thought I would try to think about, and present, a view of that last day from the eyes of someone we know from the Bible was there. I have chosen the Centurion whose voice is heard in verse 39 of Mark’s gospel. I have tried really hard ensure that I do not simply “invent” elements of the story that are inconsistent with the Biblical accounts, but I have done a little research as to the life of Roman Soldiers at the time, the numbers of soldiers who might have been involved in some way and the practices surrounding crucifixions. It is inevitable too that I will have to put thoughts into the mind of the Centurion.

This is, for me, an opportunity to seek to be near to Christ in his Passion and, perhaps experience better the chaos, terror and violence wrought that day. The centurion is not given a name in the Bible, and I have not made one up, because it is in his anonymity in the Bible that there is so much strength in his witness. However, I have chosen to assume that, following his experience that day, the Roman soldier, in his profession of Jesus as the Son of God, he found faith. I imagine that many of you will feel the same.

So here is my offering of his recollection of the day.

“The day began much like any other day, even though I knew it would be so much busier than usual because of the number of Jews in the city for their religious holiday. ‘Passover’, they call it, though I had no idea why. Someone told me once that over two hundred thousand people could be in Jerusalem at this time and, judging by the crowds and the noise on the evening before, I could easily believe that.

We Roman soldiers are creatures of routine and habit, especially when it comes to eating. Having the right food, and plenty of it, ensures that we are fit for our work. Our first meal, ‘jentaculum’ was always taken at the first hour, although most of us were up at least an hour earlier; and today our meal consisted of a wheat pancake biscuit; some porridge made from emmer, water, salt and fat, no olive oil for us), dried fruits and my favourite, pork sausage.

It was my turn to be in charge of the crucifixion party, something I had done many times before, but I could not see why they could not wait until after this wretched Jewish festival was over. It would be just as easy to crucify half a dozen next week as two a day until then; probably easier. Still, we drew in some reinforcements at this time anyway, because of the risk of activity from the Jewish Zealots, who were always looking for a chance to have a go at us Roman soldiers. That meant I had five ‘contubernia’ or 40 men available for the task; half a ‘centuria’. More than enough.

I walked quickly through the already busy streets of Jerusalem on my way to the Praetorium’s ‘carcerum’ where prisoners were held, to pick up the two thieves, poor wretches, who were due to be crucified that day. I had heard a rumour from the night guard, that there might be a third crucifixion today because of an overnight arrest; maybe four since that ugly fellow Barabbas had been around in jail for a while and he had been, rightly in my mind, sentenced to crucifixion after leading a violent uprising and murdering a Roman soldier. Some people say that crucifixion is barbaric, which, of course, it is. But I tell you something; it can be quite effective as a deterrent.

I am not sure I can think of a worse way to die; a dreadfully slow and excruciatingly painful death without any dignity or honour; in fact, the absence of dignity is a part of the punishment. Give me a quick death by the sword in battle; something that comes from a show of courage and bravery.

As I got closer to the Praetorium, I sensed that emotions were running much higher than normal, even for this time of year, and I could hear a crowd shouting in the square. Our Prefect, Pontius Pilatus, the fifth Prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, had been in charge here for the last four or five years I think, and, as I walked into the square, I could see him up on the balcony addressing the crowd in his posh voice. He had a rather bedraggled and tired looking Jew with him and, as he arrived for duty, one of my soldiers told me it was a fellow called Jesus from Nazareth who had been arrested the night before. I had heard of him. Who hadn’t?

It turned out that the chief priests, led by Joseph Ben Caiaphas, wanted him to be executed for treason and had brought him to Pilatus for him to make the decision. It was against Roman Law for the Jews to have someone put to death on their own orders you see; and a good thing too as far as I was concerned. There would be anarchy if the Sanhedrin, that’s the Jewish ruling Council, were allowed to execute everyone who threatened them or their position. They were no friends of Rome, despite sucking up to Pilate whenever they wanted something.

For some reason that I could not understand, Pilatus did not seem to want to give in to their demands. It’s not as if the man had any qualms about slaughtering Jews. I remember the time the Jews rioted because Pilatus used their temple money for a new aqueduct. Pilatus got us to mingle with the noisy crowd of Jews, and then gave us the signal to start stabbing and beat them. A few dozen of them died that day.

But the Chief Priests had made it clear they were not satisfied and had continued to demand that Jesus be crucified. I could see some of their people moving amongst the crowd stirring them up. The crowd responded by shouting ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’

Either way, Jesus did not seem to be helping him much. After some time questioning him, Pilatus, who is a clever but devious fellow, tried to use the Prefect’s custom at the festival of releasing a prisoner chosen by the crowd as a way of solving the problem. He offered them a choice of Jesus or Barabbas to be freed. He obviously expected them to pick Barabbas. I remember thinking how clever an idea it was, and that Jesus was a lucky man.

How wrong can you be?

We had heard all about Jesus of course. Everybody in the city must have heard about him since he rode into Jerusalem last week and was greeted with cheers and praise with people waving palm branches. People said he performed miraculous healings, and many were calling him King. Our investigations revealed that they expected Jesus to lead them to a victory over the Romans. We had fallen about laughing at the idea, especially when we heard that Jesus told his followers to love their enemies. When I was told this, I just said, ‘Insanus’!

Everything we found out about him proved that Jesus, while a bit weird, preached only peace. Apparently, he had even healed a much loved and mortally ill servant of a Centurion in Capernaum. But he had claimed to be the Son of God and that, if truth be told, was what really upset Caiaphas and his cronies. There was no love lost between Caiaphas and Pilatus. Caiaphas had been appointed by Pilatus’s predecessor Valerius Gratus more than a dozen years ago and Pilatus could not get rid of him without a fuss.

So, this Jesus was not much of a threat, we thought. I’m sure Pilatus felt the same. To be fair though, we were not exactly quaking in our sandals at the idea of Barabbas trying it on either, but he would certainly cause more damage.

I was as shocked as I was disappointed by the crowd’s decision that Barabbas should be released. I was certain we would see a few more good Romans dead at his hands before we caught him again. For a moment I was set to shout out something to encourage the crowd to change their minds. I didn’t. With hindsight, I should have done; I should have tried. But the Prefect can get pretty angry with us soldiers interfering in the politics of the Jews. Typical of the Jews; Jesus did not live up to their expectations so he was abandoned in favour of a real criminal; a vain and stupid hope that Rome could be defeated by insurrection. Not a chance.

Pilatus gave in finally, commanding that Jesus be flogged in public and I wished that that could be the end of it. The soldier I charged with administering the flogging did a thoroughly good job. I made a mental note to reward the soldier that evening. Jesus was covered in blood and evidently weak, but I had to admire his courage for he remained calm and faced his accusers. Some of these Jews would be begging for mercy at the first stroke. Come to think of it, some of them would start begging before the whip was raised.

Looking back now, the ridiculous decision to release Barabbas was the point at which my own future was set to change in a way I did not ever expect. Pilatus, having given in, watched the soldiers take Jesus into the Praetorium and walked back inside with his wife, who was not looking very happy about it. I bet they were both longing to get back to his palace in Caesarea. They only come down here on special occasions, or for inspections.

The soldiers gathered around Jesus, stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him, pretending to honour him as king. They spat on him and then took the staff and struck him on the head repeatedly, driving the thorns home and causing even more pain.

Mind you, it is exactly the kind of thing that many Roman soldiers do with prisoners. It helps to keep the population fearful and it eases the stress of an execution. Don’t get me wrong. I am not in the least bit squeamish about driving nails through someone’s wrists and feet, but it is just not the same as killing someone in battle; that’s much more heroic. I had a sense of unease about this though, but could not interfere without losing respect.

So, I made them take off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then we led him away to be crucified. It was to be three executions then, but not the three I expected and, as I said, I was feeling more and more uneasy about it. I do not mind carrying out executions but there was something that felt less than honourable in killing an innocent man who had already been punished enough; just to appease the Chief Priests’ lust for blood.

It was a little before the third hour when we collected the other two prisoners and three crosses and set off to Calvaria, which is Latin for skull, an appropriate name. The Jews call the place Golgotha, an ugly name for an ugly place. Each prisoner was carrying his own cross, but it was obvious from the moment we set off, that Jesus, who had been badly scourged and been given his crown of thorns, would not be able to manage it himself. It was less than a mile, so I ordered a strong looking dark skinned man from the crowd, as we are entitled to do under Roman Law, to carry the cross for him.

While it was perfectly normal for prisoners who were about to die to abuse their captors verbally, Jesus did nothing of the sort. I realised, as we walked along, that I had not seen him, even once that day, offer any sign of hatred or condemnation to us and this greatly impressed me about his character. It puzzled me too.

At Calvaria at the third hour, we crucified the three men and, on Pilatus’s orders we put a sign upon the cross of Jesus, written in three languages. The Latin sign said, IESVS NAZARENVS REX IVDÆORVM, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. I must confess to being truly delighted at the anger of the Chief priests when they saw the sign because they begged us to change it to read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, who claimed to be King of the Jews’. Pilate refused. I’m sure he intended it to upset Caiaphas.

There were four of my men who I had designated to carry out the crucifixion and they shared Jesus’s clothes among them. There appeared to be a brief argument over who would take his tunic or whether they should cut it up and share it, but the matter was settled by casting lots.

The rules for crucifixions were clear. We had to keep the crosses guarded until the execution was complete; that is the victim was definitely dead, because a rescue might be attempted, or, as I had seen on more than one occasion, a friend or family member would try to put a person out of their torment by killing them quickly; so I stayed on with a small party of soldiers. I really felt that I had to see this through for I had, by then, been quite captivated by Jesus.

He had just a few of his followers with him at the foot of the cross, one of whom, it seems, was his mother. I am not renowned for sympathy in these circumstances, but I felt genuine sorrow for her. Jesus could not have been much more than thirty years old.

It was to be six hours after he was hung on the cross, before Jesus died; six hours during which the things I saw and heard changed me; six hours that changed my heart and, I now believe, changed the world.

It wasn’t just the way in which he faced that painful death and in the end succumbed; it was the things he said, and the love he showed at a time when most criminals wailed with pain and hurled insults at their executioners; usually us Roman soldiers. Instead, as he was mocked by passers-by he said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” He had claimed to be the Son of God and now he was asking his father to forgive us; to forgive me. It made me feel, on the one hand guilty, but on the other as if I might actually be able to be absolved of the killing of someone who, as I have said, I thought was innocent.

I wondered if I should take these words that Jesus spoke from the cross to Pilatus; but then, on second thoughts, he would almost certainly never have agreed to see me.

Jesus spoke gently to his mother as he arranged with one of his followers that they should care for each other. One of the thieves crucified with him called out abuse while the other quieted him and seemed to agree with me that Jesus was innocent. Jesus even found words to comfort this man as he died suggesting he would be, that very night, in paradise with him.

At the sixth hour, the middle of the day when the sun was at its hottest, the sky just went dark; the sun just seemed to stop shining, and it stayed that way until Jesus died three hours later. I might have been afraid but by now I was focussed entirely on Jesus on the cross.

I have seen enough crucifixions in my lifetime to know how much agony he must have suffered there. Hung on a cross, stripped of his clothing and his dignity, exposed to the elements and the insects, and yet he was calm and peaceful. I had never experienced anything like it.

As his life ebbed away, he showed compassion and kindness; he gained my respect and I wished I might face my own end with such courage. You know, in all the time he hung there and on the many occasions in which we caught each other’s eye, I felt loved and not hated. On the cross, he practiced what he preached; ‘love your enemies’!

Near the end, as he weakened, he called out that he was thirsty; something that happens to all those who have lost so much blood and are exposed to the midday sun. We keep a jar of wine vinegar nearby at crucifixions and one of my men gave some to Jesus on a sponge held up on a branch of hyssop.

Then Jesus cried out in a loud voice, something in Aramaic “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which I did not understand. Someone told me afterwards that it meant ‘my God, why have you forsaken me’. I am beginning now, at last, to really understand.

Finally, at the ninth hour, having commended his spirit into the hands of his father, he said, “It is finished” and he died. It was such an odd thing to say. What was finished? Then it was clear. This is what he meant to happen; this was his mission; this was planned. I stood, bowing my head and said, to nobody in particular, what I now knew, “Surely this man **was** the Son of God!”