

Good Friday

St. Mark 15:37-39: "He Himself Is Our Peace."

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In Nomine Iesu

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St. Mark 15:37-39

And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed His last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing Him, saw that in this way He breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" ^(ESV)

In deep humility, we kneel at Your cross, O Savior, mindful that our sins brought You to the accursed tree. We look to You for cleansing and healing and peace. Embrace us daily with Your love, and preserve us in the saving faith, which brings us into Your presence and to glory. Amen. (*Meditations on the Gospels*, CPH 2009, p. 224)

Throughout the season of Lent, we have heard about several witnesses of Christ's Passion whose lives were dramatically altered by their interactions with Jesus, people like the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, Simon of Cyrene who carried Jesus' cross, and the thief who received grace. We could add others whose lives were changed, such as the servant Malchus who had his severed ear healed by Jesus, and the murderer Barabbas who was chosen for release instead of Jesus.

The centurion overseeing Jesus' crucifixion also belongs on this list. We expect that he started his day on that Friday like any other day. But when he reported for his military duty, he quickly became aware of a recently arrested Jewish man named Jesus. What crimes Jesus had committed were unclear to him, and perhaps he did not even care. Whatever Governor Pilate ordered, he would carry out.

Was the centurion part of the battalion at the governor's headquarters that stripped Jesus, put a scarlet robe on Him, drove a crown of thorns into His head, and mocked Him as the "King of the Jews"? Or if he did not actively take part, did the centurion laugh as they made a mockery of Jesus, spit on Him, and struck Him on the head? Did he enjoy seeing the Man suffer, particularly a Jewish man?

But the centurion would have noticed something different about Jesus. The apostle Peter describes this difference: "*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*" (1Pe. 2:23). The centurion could not help but notice that the first words out of Jesus' mouth when He was nailed to the cross were not curses. His first words were, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luk. 23:34).

Then there was the care He showed for His heartbroken mother and the promise He made to the penitent thief (Joh. 19:26-27; Luk. 23:43). Jesus did not speak or act like any other criminal he had ever known. After this, around noon, the sky became strangely dark. The intensity of Jesus' suffering was noticeable as He cried out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mar. 15:34), and soon after this, "*I thirst*" (Joh. 19:28). The darkness lingered for three hours, until Jesus said, "*It is finished*" (Joh. 19:30). Then He cried out with a loud voice, "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!*" (Luk. 23:46).

With every word, the centurion became more and more captivated by this Man. Why did He speak like this? Who was this Father He kept calling out to? How could He say nothing in response to those who mocked and ridiculed Him? When Jesus breathed His last, the evangelists report that the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Along with that, the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

The centurion, hearing Jesus' words and seeing the earthquake, was filled with awe. Something very unexpected had come over him. He could not explain what he had heard and seen. He had been trained to handle challenging situations while keeping his cool. He was a serious professional. And suddenly from his mouth came words of praise, "*Certainly this man was innocent!*" (Luk. 23:47). "*Truly this Man was the Son of God!*"

We do not know if this centurion came to understand and believe that Jesus was hanging on the cross that day for him. We don't know if he joined the early Christians in devoting himself "*to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*" (Act. 2:42). The Bible does not say. We do learn that Pilate summoned the centurion to verify that Jesus had died on the cross (Mar. 15:44-45). Did the centurion report the details of all that he had heard and seen? Did he share his conclusion with Pilate about who Jesus must have been? If he had, would Pilate have listened?

By the grace of God, we hear the centurion's words today. Through the eyewitness accounts of the evangelists, we stand in awe like the centurion of the sacrifice made by this innocent Man, the Son of God incarnate. Jesus was not on the cross paying for any sins of His own. He was on the cross paying for my sin and your sin. We shudder at the way Jesus was treated by the Roman soldiers. But it was our sins that put Him in the hands of these tormentors, our sins that got Him nailed to the cross.

Jesus endured this agony and suffering willingly for you. He was willing to suffer the eternal fires of hell and be forsaken by God for you. He was willing to die for you. What pride can there be in our hearts when we see how Jesus humbly offered Himself for us? What works can we boast about when the eternal Son of God gave up His holy life in our place?

The cross of Jesus removes all class distinctions, social status, nationality, worldly honor and glory. None of that matters in view of the Lamb of God sacrificed for the whole world's sin, for the sins of Pontius Pilate, Barabbas, the thief, the centurion, you and me. "*[N]ow in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace*" (Eph. 2:13-14).

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