

Good Friday 2019 **Priscilla** Claire Nye Hunter

Luke 23:32-43 New International Version (NIV)

³²Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”^[a] And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”

³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”^[b]

⁴³Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

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You probably are wondering who I am. My story didn't make it into your Canon of Scripture. My name is Priscilla. I am just a poor Jewish peasant girl. Let me tell you about that Friday which is permanently etched on my mind –that day when my eldest brother was killed; that day when my life changed for ever.

My brother Joshua was about 10 years older than me – the eldest son in our family. We grew up in a small town on the outskirts of Jerusalem. We were never particularly religious, and wanted nothing to do with either politics or Romans. That is until my father was brutally killed by Roman soldiers for refusing to carry out their outrageous commands.

We were utterly devastated, but my brother Joshua in particular never got over it. As time went on, he became consumed by resentment and bitterness; anger and rage, which took over his life and poisoned his mind. He made a vow and swore that he would pay the Romans back for what they had done to my father and the incredible pain they had inflicted on our family – so became driven by a burning desire for revenge, pure revenge.

A few months after my father's death, Joshua linked up with a group of like minded embittered revolutionaries whose aim it was to murder as many Romans as they could, and give them their just rewards for the ongoing humiliation and brutality inflicted on our people. He believed that violence was his only option to ensure he could somehow avenge our father's death.

Every time he left the house at night, my mother and I lay awake anxiously, gripped in fear. Much as my mother and I begged and pleaded with him not to make things worse; there was nothing we could do to stop him - he was on a mission, he was out to get their blood.

It was inevitable that one day he would be caught. It was not a case of if, but when. Then one morning he did not return. We felt sick with worry. Later word reached us that he had been arrested, tried and found guilty of murder. He was sentenced to death by crucifixion – the worst possible way to end a life.

Nothing can describe the pain we felt. My mother was grief stricken and sobbed uncontrollably for days. We were utterly devastated – first our father and now the eldest son in our family...both to die at the hands of the Roman oppressors. What would become of us mere women, with no man to protect and look after us?

Finally the day of crucifixion dawned – it was at the time of Passover, the day before the Sabbath. We should have been making our preparations, but that was the last thing we could bring ourselves to do.

My mother said she simply could not face watching her son suffer and die in this barbaric matter, so I reluctantly took it upon myself to go there – I knew there was nothing I could do to make his suffering easier but I wanted him to know that we had not abandoned him in his hour of need.

With a certain measure of stunned disbelief, I stood there with other onlookers and watched in silence as the Roman soldiers nailed my brother with two others, to their crosses.

Have you ever had to stand by and watch someone you love die, and feel so helpless knowing that there is absolutely nothing you can do or say that will make it better? That nothing you can do will change the circumstances or relieve their suffering?

So many conflicting emotions went through my mind as I fought back the tears....
Feelings of anger and compassion all mixed up together

Yes, anger. After all, he brought this on himself, didn't he? We warned him how many times, and he stubbornly refused to listen. He had only himself to blame. If only he had listened, he wouldn't have got into this mess and we would have been spared this heartache. Hell I was angry!

Yet he was my own flesh and blood. My brother. How my heart broke to see him writhing in agony. Such a cruel, brutal way to die. I ached with compassion and love for him.

As the Roman soldiers raised the three crosses up, I saw the one in the middle had a sign above his head which read: "This is the King of the Jews."

Who was this other man? Some muttered that he was Jesus – a good man who had healed so many people, cast out demons, performed miracles and taught people about God . But why then would the Romans need to crucify him as well? Surely he hadn't done anything to deserve death?

As I stood in the crowd, some people were wailing, others mocked him, the rulers even jeered sarcastically *“He saved others, let him save himself – if he is the Christ of God, the chosen one”*.

My eyes kept moving between Joshua and this Jesus. At one point, Jesus seemed to cast his eyes over the jeering crowd, the hardened Roman soldiers, the mocking rulers and call out *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”*. How on earth could he want those evil people to be forgiven ? It was unthinkable! Moreover, he seemed to be addressing God as his Father?!

As the pain grew increasingly unbearable, Joshua and the other criminal started really struggling and writhing in agony. The other criminal began hurling abuse and insults at Jesus and tormenting him *“Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”*

Then Joshua rebuked the other guy and said *“ Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”*

I walked to the foot of Joshua’s cross – I sort of felt I needed to calm him down and reassure him that I was there with him. Then Joshua slowly turned his head to look not at me, but at Jesus. He was growing very weak, and in just more than a faint whisper I heard him say *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”*.

I watched as Jesus looked straight into Joshua’s eyes, and in words that seemed so filled with love and compassion, he replied *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

Then the most extraordinary thing happened. It was as if a deep kind of peace descended on Joshua. Those hard lines showing a permanent scowl from years of bitterness seemed to relax. That contorted look of terror and anguish eased, and his whole face softened. He turned to look straight at me, and too weak to say anything, he managed a smile. I felt a strange warmth and deep peace come over me.

Around noon the land was covered in darkness as if the sun had stopped shining. Jesus called out in a loud voice *“Father into your hands I commit my spirit”* and then he breathed his last....It didn’t sound like a cry of someone who was giving up, but more like one of quiet surrender and letting go into the hands of his Father..

Who was this Jesus?

Was God really his Father?

The Roman soldiers were getting anxious because the sabbath was drawing near and they needed to finish their work as soon as possible – so they decided to break the legs of Joshua and the other criminal to ensure they hurried up and died.

It was heart breaking seeing my brother die like that, yet strange as this may sound, I really believe he had finally found a measure of peace.

That day, I mourned the death of my big brother, yet a seed of hope and peace was planted in my heart. I knew that Jesus would keep his promise, and that Joshua would be with him in paradise.

Joshua had spent his last years since the death of our father so consumed with rage, bitterness, hatred...yet his encounter with Jesus seemed to set him free from all these destructive things that had poisoned his life. Jesus showed him such love, mercy, compassion – and instead of condemning him, promised him a place with him in paradise.

Why should Jesus have looked with favour on Joshua? He was an evil serial killer; he had done absolutely nothing to deserve it. Yet there on the cross, in his dying moments , Jesus offered him peace, forgiveness and salvation.

Once the bodies were taken away, I went home and told my mother all I had seen and heard. We asked those who had known Jesus to tell us more about him. We discovered that as we learnt to put our faith and trust in this Jesus, the Son of God – the one who died on the cross next to Joshua – we too received his peace, his grace and his mercy.

I learnt that Friday that if my evil brother could be forgiven for all he had done in his life, even moments before his death, then surely it is never too late to turn to Jesus. No-one, no matter how bad they have been can ever be outside the reach of God's amazing love, forgiveness and salvation.

Yes, and I realized that Jesus had died for you and me as well. If we turn to him in humility, acknowledging our need of his grace and mercy, I dare to believe that one day, like Joshua, you and I too could be with him in paradise.

With acknowledgements to Story 42 in "On the road to the cross" by Carolyn Butler and Isobel de Gruchy, and Mike McCoy "The Penitent Thief" in "Eye-witnesses: Stories of Change and Challenge". A series of narrative sermons given during Lent and Easter 2011 at St Hugh's Parish in PE (pgs 68-72)