

<p>Good Friday 19th April 2019 Cathedral, Grahamstown 12 noon</p>	<p>Three Hour Devotions Characters around the cross</p>
	<p>Mark 15:33-39</p>
<p>THE CENTURION – TRULY, THIS MAN WAS GOD’S SON!</p>	

“Now, when the centurion, who stood facing Jesus, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’”
(Mark 15:39)

So here we are. Remembering that day, when we all stood at the foot of the cross of this Jesus who was crucified. And I as the centurion have the final word – which is normal, because as a centurion in the Roman army, my voice counts! People listen when I speak. But I want to tell you my story, because it is very different from the other stories you have heard today. I was not close to this Jesus; I was not one of his disciples or followers; I did not know him. But I was close to him as he died – not as a friend or doctor or a priest, but as his executioner. Carrying out the orders of the governor, Pilate. Doing my job. Upholding authority and the rule of law, such as it is.

But unlike Pilate, I saw what happened right at the end. You know, Pilate – well, he sits in his palace and I don’t doubt that he has things quite tough at times. But at the end of the day, it is me and the troops, the soldiers, who are in the field. We carry out the orders. And if things go wrong, we have to pick up the pieces. We carry out the orders. But that’s what is good about my position. I have got to the rank in the army where I can give the orders and others do as I tell them. But I have to watch and make sure that they do things correctly.

As a soldier, you get used to death. It is part of what we do. We carry out orders. We use force when needed. At times – not often – people end up getting killed. Life is like that. As a soldier and a centurion, I have been in a number of battles, and hand to hand combat. I can take most people on. I have had the upper hand. Sometimes my

opponent has surrendered. But sometimes I have had to end matters and give the death blow. That's life. I am an old soldier now, retired, after a lifetime of being in the army. I can look back on all that has happened.

Who am I? I am the unnamed centurion you read about in the gospels. But of course I do have a name. To some, I am Proclus – and in some stories I am the centurion that was ordered to kill all the new born baby boys at Bethlehem, all those years ago; the centurion who came to Jesus to ask that Jesus heal his servant; I Proclus am the one who said “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only speak the word, and my servant shall be healed...” (Matt 8:8); I, Proclus, am the centurion who stood at the foot of the cross and watched Jesus die.

I am also known and remembered by the name Longinus, Longinus the centurion. I, centurion Longinus, gave Jesus his final wound, and saw how blood and water poured out of his side – and later people spoke of how these were symbols, telling their own story: the blood a sign of his humanity, the water a sign of his divinity.

But there are other stories about centurion Longinus from that day: that I was blind, or had an eye infection; and that as I did that final spear thrust into the side of Jesus, some of Jesus' blood fell on my eyes and I was healed.

And people also tell that I, Longinus, was the centurion in charge of guarding the tomb where Jesus was buried; and I, Longinus, was a witness of the resurrection. I, Longinus, came to believe in Jesus; I was baptised as a Christian...

But my name is not important right now. Because this is not about me. It is about the one I executed, and whose death I witnessed. I watched him die, all those long hours. It was a familiar experience – in my time, I have been in charge of a number of executions. It is not a pleasant sight. We do our job as soldiers. These are criminals. Justice is being done. I go home at night to my wife and children,

but I don't really talk about it. But this time was different. We stood there, the soldiers with me, for those six long hours. The prisoner didn't speak much. But what he did say struck me. There were seven words, strange words – not words of a criminal or someone who was guilty. There was holiness in his voice. And I began to see something of God in those hours – and I tell you, we don't normally see anything of goodness or of God at an execution. Suffering can bring out the worst in most of us; but suffering can also bring out the best in us. It shows who we are, what we are made of.

But that day I did. And when Jesus finally died, there were two things I said. “Truly, this man was innocent!” (Luke 23:47) I believe he was. And some years later, my words became the song of the Christians: “He committed no sin, no guile was found on his lips; when he was reviled he did not revile in return. When he suffered he did not threaten, but trusted in him who judges justly...” (1 Peter 2:21-24)

But I said something else. As I watched him take his final breath – and heard his last words - “It is finished!” and “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” – well, for me that convinced me. I said, “Truly, this man was a son of God!” God's Son! I could not forget what I had seen!

I became not only the executioner, but also the judge on that day: and my judgement was that we had crucified the son of God. A few days later, of course, all was revealed: and you will hear all about the empty tomb on Sunday! But in the years that followed, those who believed in Jesus began to see his death in a new light. They spoke of his death as a sacrifice; as a perfect offering. One of the Christian leaders, Paul, wrote that “Christ died for our sins once and for all... that “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

And so Jesus, who I executed, died so that we might live. But I think that in the way he died, he also showed us another way of living: the way of compassion, the way of holiness, the way of peace.

And, yes, let it not be a secret, I am also one of them, who came to believe. Truly, this man was the son of God!

What about you who stand and watch today? You have heard our testimonies, our words of witness – Mary his mother, John the beloved disciple, Mary Magdalene, the sister of the penitent thief, Peter, even Pilate; and now me. Each of us has invited you into our own world of struggle and doubt and sorrow and faith and belief. But now, what do *you* say? What is *your* testimony?

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that all who believe in him should not perish, but should have everlasting life.”
(Jn 3:16)

Prayer:

Loving Lord Jesus, you died on the cross for the salvation of all. We thank you for the sacrifice you made for us. May we love you more and more until we come with you into your everlasting kingdom.
Amen

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