

Together – In Transformation

Matthew 27:27-54

CWZepp, BWCOB, March 2007

Centurion #1 (Plain clothes)

We were just following orders. And we treated him just like any other criminal. Well, maybe we did have a little more fun with him than we would have others – after all it's not every day that you get to crucify a king. But from the beginning this guy was different. Our mocking did not seem to have any effect on him – he seemed resigned to his fate. In fact, his acceptance of it seemed almost purposeful. He even uttered something about forgiving us. To be honest, it was a little disturbing.

But not nearly as disturbing as what happened when he died. I have never seen anything like it. Daylight turned to night, the earth itself shook to its foundations, rocks split apart, some even said that the dead were raised. But what I remember most was his voice. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." It was the most heartrending thing I have ever heard. His voice seemed to somehow carry all the pain of the world. Suddenly, all the taunts and the mockery we made of him came crashing down upon me. And I felt ashamed.

As he breathed his last breath, I knew this was no ordinary man. He was not only innocent. He was a son of God. And I had crucified him. I had beaten him, mocked him, spat upon him in callous contempt. The guilt was almost unbearable. But then I remembered his words – he prayed to his God to forgive me – to forgive all of us – even as we scorned him and hung him up to die without care. My heart broke, but...somehow in that moment I discovered a peace that I didn't even know was possible.

Now, I'm a changed man. I had to desert my position in the Roman army. If they ever find me, I will surely be put to death. But I just couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't just follow orders. I couldn't not care about other people. I certainly couldn't put innocent people to death. I no longer respected the power and the might of Rome. My allegiance lay elsewhere.

I sought out the disciples of Jesus. It wasn't easy, because they were rightfully afraid for their lives. And I was afraid that if I ever did find them, they wouldn't accept me, or may even wish to do me harm. But when I finally tracked them down and told them my story, they welcomed me with open arms. They even forgave me for what I did to their teacher. They have helped to keep me hidden from the army that I deserted.

Any doubt I had about Jesus vanished when I saw how his disciples lived and loved and extended that love to me. Now I call myself one of them. My life has been turned upside down. And to think that Jesus – a man who I put to death – would one day be the one I call Lord...

Sermon #1

The gospels give us very little information about this Roman centurion who uttered what has been called one of the earliest confessions of Christian faith. All three synoptic gospels show this Roman soldier making some exclamation beneath the cross at the moment of Jesus' death, although Luke lacks any theological confession and instead simply has the centurion proclaiming Jesus "innocent" or "righteous." And although the reference is brief and passes quickly in all the gospels, this nameless character we know in the scriptures simply as "the centurion" has nonetheless played a significant role in Christian tradition.

A variety of early Christian legends have given this centurion a name (actually a couple of names), and have supplied us with numerous stories about him and his life after the cross. One such legend tells us that the centurion who identified Jesus as a "son of God" at the crucifixion was named Longinus, and was also the soldier who pierced the side of Jesus in John 19:34. According to tradition, Longinus was immediately cured of incipient blindness when he was touched by the blood which flowed from Christ's side. This led to him being converted and baptized, leaving the army, and taking instruction from the disciples. He allegedly went on to become a monk in Caesarea, Cappadocia, and then eventually to be arrested, tortured, and martyred for his faith. He has been canonized as a saint, and in the east, the feast of St. Longinus just happens to be celebrated on my birthday.

It certainly makes a nice story – an inspiring story. And perhaps it is true. But legends are just that – legends. And I'm not willing to accept the legend as gospel truth. Perhaps the exclamation of the centurion really was a transforming moment, and led to a life of faith in Jesus Christ. But I could imagine other possibilities as well...

Centurion #2 (Soldier's garb)

We had our orders. And we treated him just like any other criminal. Well, to be honest, we probably did have a bit more fun with him than we would have others – (mockingly) after all it's not every day that you get to crucify a king. And what a king he was. All talk, no substance. He wilted like a flower under the strain of the torture – didn't give us any fight at all, took all the fun out of it. So much for the courageous leader.

He died quickly. But right before he did, he shouted out some gibberish about his God forsaking him. And just as he was taking his last breath there was a great earthquake. Darkness had already come over the land, and to be honest, most of us were scared to death. Made us wonder if that man was really who he said he was. Maybe he was a son of the gods, and now we were in for it.

But the earthquake passed as quickly as it had come. And once we got our wits about us again, we realized how foolish we had been. You know, sometimes fear attacks even the strongest of men. We agreed not to mention it to one another again. Now we are hearing reports that this man's friends and followers are claiming that he rose from the dead and is alive again. Figures...those people could make a hero out of anyone. Even a dead guy.

Sermon #2

In the heat of the moment, paralyzed with fear, I suspect that many, if not all of us might find ourselves saying or doing things that we wouldn't ever say or do in our right minds. So I don't have much trouble imagining the centurion of our gospel story saying something like "Truly this man was a son of God" purely out of fear. Because as much as I would like to believe that the legends are true, and that this man's life was transformed in a moment beneath the cross, there just isn't anything in the scriptures themselves that would lead me to that conclusion. In fact, from a strictly literal reading of this story in the Gospel of Matthew, it is quite reasonable to conclude that the centurion's confession was nothing more than the blathering of a very frightened soldier. Matthew says that when the centurion and those who were with him saw the earthquake and what was happening, they *were terrified* and said, "Truly this man was God's son!" Matthew is the only gospel which mentions the soldiers' fear, and I have to wonder why. Perhaps the writer thought fear was the only logical explanation for why a formerly callous and hardnosed Roman soldier capable of overseeing scourging and crucifixion would utter such a phrase.

But I have to admit that something inside me resists this kind of interpretation, as it clearly has Christians throughout the centuries. At the very least, the writers of the gospels who recorded the centurion's exclamation, as well as those who preserved the story orally for years before it was written down, saw significance in the centurion's words, if not because of the soldier's faith, then for their own. And I want to believe that these words were genuine – that they arose from a deep place within him that recognized the magnitude of what he had just witnessed and in which he was participating.

And yet even if I knew the centurion's words were a genuine, heartfelt confession, I would still wonder about what effect they had on his life. I could imagine the crucifixion being a turning point in his life. But I could also imagine a different outcome...

Centurion #3 (Soldier's garb)

We were just following orders. And we treated him just like any other criminal. Well, maybe we did have a little more fun with him than we would have others – after all it's not every day that you get to crucify a king. But from the beginning this guy was different. Our mocking did not seem to have any effect on him – he seemed resigned to his fate. In fact, his acceptance of it seemed almost purposeful. He even uttered something about forgiving us. To be honest, it was a little disturbing.

But not nearly as disturbing as what happened when he died. I have never seen anything like it. Daylight turned to night, the earth itself shook to its foundations, rocks split apart, some even said that the dead were raised. But what I remember most was his voice. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." It was the most heartrending thing I have ever heard. His voice seemed to somehow carry all the pain of the world. Suddenly, all the taunts and the mockery we made of him came crashing down upon me. And I felt ashamed.

As he breathed his last breath, I knew this was no ordinary man. He was not only innocent – I think he might have been a son of God. And I had crucified him. I had beaten him, mocked him, spat upon him in callous contempt. The guilt was almost unbearable.

It was hard for me to get over that. The next time we received orders to crucify someone, I cringed. But I fulfilled my duty faithfully. And I will continue to do so. Sometimes I still think about him – especially his voice. I know we killed an innocent man. Perhaps even a son of God. But there was nothing I could do. I was just following orders.

Sermon #3

One year when I was a student at Bridgewater College, I began a relationship with a local family who had a mentally handicapped son. I can't remember how I was put in touch with them, but the intention was that I would become a "buddy" for the son – taking him places and doing things with him, while giving his parents a much needed break from their caretaking responsibilities. I met once with the whole family, and then once again with the son. I think we played basketball. He had a great time. I was uncomfortable the whole time. And I never saw him again.

I still feel guilty every time I think about him. But I've never done anything about it. Had I continued in that relationship and that commitment, my life might very well look differently than it does now. But the truth is that at that time in my life, and perhaps even now, I was unable or unwilling to change, at least in the way that continuing the relationship would have required. I knew that it was wrong to neglect my commitment to that family. But that didn't translate into changing who I was.

I can think of several other times in my own life when I stood on the threshold of transformation, even making the first move toward becoming a different person, but failing to follow through – in the end being much the same person I was in the beginning, except for an occasional feeling of guilt or regret. So it is easy for me to imagine this outcome for the centurion.

But I also know that our faith is filled with stories of men and women whose lives were profoundly transformed. From the apostle Paul to Augustine, from St. Francis to Martin Luther, the Christian tradition bears witness to the possibility of dramatic events leading to personal transformation.

So what makes the difference?

Centurion #4 (Soldier's garb)

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(Remove helmet – handle thoughtfully while talking)

Now I'm not sure what is happening to me. Part of me is drawn to this man – even in death. I know he had several disciples – maybe I can find them and learn more about him. (thoughtful pause) But then again, if I were to do that, I would be betraying my people and my leaders. If my superiors found out, I might lose my job, maybe even my life. I don't know if I can risk that much. If I make a move – if I give in to that part of me that yearns to know more about this man – my life will never be the same again.

Sermon #4

What ever became of the centurion after his confession at the cross? If we accept the legends and the stories of the Christian tradition, he may have gone on to be a baptized Christian and a martyr for the faith. But if we stick to the gospel stories, we don't know the end of his story. Something has happened to him to make him exclaim that the man he just helped to put to death was, in fact, a son of God. And in that confession, his life is ripe for transformation. But whether he took the next step and became a disciple, we simply don't know. He may have gone back to his life as a Roman soldier, with nothing changed except his memories. Or his life may never have been the same again.

I believe that most of us spend our lives of faith somewhere just after the centurion's confession – teetering on the edge of transformation, with the outcome yet to be determined. We stand beneath the cross of Jesus, and we know that he was God's son. The question is where we go from there? Do we allow that belief to shatter the life we have, to change us, to remake us? Do we open ourselves each day to be transformed more and more into the image of Christ? Do we sacrifice our own will in order to follow the one we confess as Lord?

Or do we hold on to the life we have made for ourselves? Do we cling to the safety and comfort of known places? Do we follow Jesus only so far as it fits into our own plans? Do we waver at the risks and sacrifices that might accompany a full surrender of life to Christ.

The truth is that we are all the centurion – gathered around the cross of Jesus. And we know the truth...but will the truth set us free?

COMMISSIONING

From one who knew personally the reality of being transformed in Christ: the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans:

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Amen.