



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

8th September, 2023

Continuing the Autumn theme of 'background' characters in the Bible.....

"...when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Mark 15:39

It was one of the hardest and most gruesome things a Roman soldier had to do, crucifying people; -a barbaric way of executing those judged to be no longer worthy of life. Our history - and indeed our religion- had equally vile ways of killing people, and sadly, instances are still to be found around the world today. It is said that the only way Roman soldiers got through this 'duty' was to get drunk.

American novelist and minister Lloyd Douglas wrote a story called 'The Robe', in which he imagined the fortunes of the soldier who won the lottery for Jesus' seamless garment (John 19:23-24). So, what might we imagine about the centurion who perceived something exceptional about the One they were crucifying?

The gospels vary: Matthew (a disciple who may have heard immediately from those who were there) and Mark (who may have been there) remember it differently from Luke's witnesses, who recall the words as, *"Surely this was a righteous man."* John was there, but doesn't mention it.

Other details also vary. Matthew speaks of the soldiers guarding Jesus being terrified and *all* exclaiming this recognition (27:54); Mark says the centurion was *"in front of Jesus"*, and that he alone spoke. Both gospels say the women were *"watching from a distance"*; could they have overheard the centurion's words? Mark adds that the centurion *"saw how he died"*, -did he cry out loudly enough to be heard *"from a distance"*? Or did he mutter it as he led his men away, sickened by the whole business (he had probably remained sober). Notice, by the way, he says *"the Son of God"*, not "a". Luke adds the detail that the centurion *"praised God"* (23:47); -we can only guess at his belief before and after this experience.

Whatever the scenario, one thing seems clear: that more than by other crucifixions he had seen, this hardened soldier was deeply affected by Jesus' death, and by the manner in which he died. We can conclude that for the benefit of millions of gospel readers over the centuries, God gave him an insight and words -no doubt beyond his usual expression- to declare a truth the depth of which he could hardly have understood.

So here is another anonymous 'walk-on part' in God's salvation story: an unnamed, probably non-believing, gentile, through whom God still proclaims a timeless truth. It would be easy, for those who wish to, to explain it away as a mis-heard add-on to the story. But the centurion was there, and so were those who heard him, and so was the God who elsewhere said *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* (Matthew 3:17). The Father, who 'turns his face away' (*How deep the Father's love...* Townend), used a man to proclaim His truth.

I like to think that the centurion reflected deeply on what had happened. I wonder whether he ever met Cornelius (Acts 10:1-2); they would have had much to talk about!