



Sermon Notes, EASTER DAY, 4 April 2021

Term Spring 2021

Series Easter Journeys

Gatherings: the 11, the 5

Title The Centurion's Journey

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Reading – Mark 15:33-39

The Centurion was the key figure in the Roman military machine. He led from the front and had achieved his position through showing great bravery and ferocity on the battlefield.

Apart from leading in combat, centurions were responsible for training, discipline ... and for overseeing capital executions (beheading for Roman citizens, crucifixion for others).

In Mark 15:16-20, we read of the humiliation, mockery and physical abuse meted out to Jesus by the soldiers ahead of his actual crucifixion: our centurion would have overseen this.

In Mark 15:42-46, we read that when Pilate was asked for the body of Jesus, he was surprised that Jesus had died so quickly ... and suspicious enough to have this checked ... by our centurion. Who better to know whether a victim was in fact dead than a veteran of countless such executions?

So what is the Holy Spirit impressing upon us as we survey the characters around the Cross?

- The male disciples: apart from John, conspicuous by their absence. Peter had failed to speak up for Jesus and instead denied knowing him. The others had abandoned him. Have there been times when we have lost the courage to witness to Jesus, when our lives have denied our faith, when we have abandoned him? Acknowledge that reality ...
- The women: their testimony didn't count, and I just love the way God still chose them as the first witnesses of the risen Jesus. Are you someone (or part of a group) who feels your voice doesn't count? Or that you are overlooked or invisible? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you that none of that human discrimination has any impact on the way God sees you ...
- The thief on the Cross: in the law of Moses, anyone executed for a capital offence and *hung on a pole* was considered *under God's curse* (Deuteronomy 21:22,23). The thief on the Cross makes no great theological statement; doesn't "pray the Jesus prayer" ... he simply asks to be with Jesus. And Jesus promises him a place in paradise (Luke 23:43). In other words, the death of Jesus is strong enough to overturn any curse. St Paul writes:

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.' Galatians 3.

In Revelation 22, we see the fulfilment of this:

² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

Do you feel there is some reason (you may not think of it as a curse) which means you can't be forgiven or fully embraced by God? Invite the Holy Spirit to show you just what the Cross has achieved for you.

- The Centurion: a Gentile, an invader and oppressor, a killer ... and the human agent of Jesus' agony and death. If there's hope for him, there's hope for ANYONE. Including those who give the orders ... to drive in the nails; to thrust the bayonets; to roll the barrel bombs; to fire into the crowds of peaceful protestors ...

St Paul understands just how much grace he's received, as a former member of the religious elite

⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the

church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. 1 Corinthians 15:8-10

Spend some time giving thanks for the grace of God which has made you what you are ... a redeemed, cleansed saint with a passport stamped for the world to come ...

Spend some time praying for those for whose salvation you are tempted to despair or have lost the faith to pray for ...

Spend some time glorying in the truth of the old hymn:

*The vilest offender who truly believes
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives*

Spend some time with this poem, written this Easter by someone who has started connecting with our livestream over recent weeks:

Oh Lord Jesus how can you stand
The pain of the nails we drive through your hands

Oh Lord Jesus how can you bear
The thorns on the crown we press in your hair

Oh Lord Jesus how can you endure
The weight of our sins on a heart so pure

Oh Lord Jesus rejected, alone
Beaten and pierced, our sins to atone

At your death, we are lost and forlorn
But in the darkness the curtain is torn!

The gates of Heaven are open wide
Because of your death we can step inside.