

“THE ROMAN CENTURION”

Mark 15:33-41

In George Stevens’ epic film *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, John Wayne plays the part of the Roman centurion at the cross. The story goes that when they were filming the scene we’ve just heard read, John shouted out in a pretty flat voice, “*Truly, this man was the Son of God*”. The director stopped the filming and, thinking of Matthew’s version of the story where it says they were all terrified, yelled out, “*Say it with awe, John. Say it with awe.*” The cameras started to roll again and John Wayne cried out, “*Aw, truly this man was the Son of God.*” If you’ve seen the film, you’ll realise they must have kept the first version – John Wayne actually delivers the words as if he is very unimpressed with what’s going on.

A couple of weeks ago we looked at the response of Mary, Jesus’ mother, to what was going on in Jesus’ life and noted that she was with Jesus’ followers at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. As we move into Holy Week today, we’re just going to focus on the Roman centurion who was so moved by what he saw and heard on that first Good Friday.

Although we usually refer to this character as the **Roman** centurion, the fact that he was in the Roman army didn’t mean that he was actually a Roman. In fact, historians tell us that it’s more likely that he was from another province of the mighty Empire and had become a centurion – an officer in charge of a hundred men – either by moving up through the ranks or, more probably if he was a relatively wealthy man, by buying a commission.

At any rate, this soldier was not a Jewish person and here he was, helping the authorities to keep order in the province of Judea by supervising a crucifixion. He would almost certainly have been present at a number of previous crucifixions and would have been quite used to watching the dying agonies of condemned men as they breathed their last on the high wooden gibbets. But this particular Friday, the sight which he witnessed moved him considerably. Matthew’s account links it in with the earthquake which happened at the moment of Jesus’ death, but Mark tells us that it was the dying cry of Jesus and the way in which he died which caused this hardened soldier to shout out, “*Surely this man was the Son of God.*”.

As we look at this short episode and at the response of the centurion to Jesus’ death – his recognition that this was the Son of God – as it’s recorded in these Gospel accounts, there are three contrasts to draw between his situation and what was going on around him at the time.

1. **JEW vs GENTILE**

In Mark's Gospel, this observation about the soldier is put immediately after the mention of the curtain in the Temple being ripped from top to bottom. For most people, the tearing of the curtain, which kept everyone except the High Priest out of the Holy of Holies, symbolises the way in which Jesus' death made direct access to God available to all men and women. Until then, the place where it was believed God's presence actually resided was off limits to almost everyone. Even the area around the Holy of Holies was restricted to Jewish men who were ritually clean, and Gentiles were kept well away from this centrepiece of Jewish worship.

As the Temple curtain split, so God was saying, in effect, "*I am now open to everyone!*" His plan to bless all peoples through what he had done amongst the Jews was coming to fulfilment. Men and women, Jew and Gentile were to be able to come to God in prayer and to receive his blessing, his healing, his salvation. It's wonderful to read, then, that the very first person to declare his faith after the death of Jesus was a Gentile: a man who until then had been beyond the pale as far as salvation, inclusion in God's people, was concerned.

Now, of course, we need to realise that not all the Jews were opposed to Jesus. His disciples and the group of other followers who accompanied them were obviously not scoffing at Jesus' death. And there were Gentiles who mocked Christ as well – just look at the soldiers' behaviour in *Mark 15:16-20*. So this doesn't indicate a reversal of what appeared to be God's priorities previously – the Gentiles are now the chosen people and the Jews have fallen out of favour. This is all about how God wants to include everyone in his plan for salvation, whatever their background. We often talk of Cornelius as the first Gentile convert to Christianity, but I believe that here we have a man who was prepared to acknowledge who Jesus was and the particularly special nature of his death some weeks, or even months, before Peter came to speak to Cornelius. Here, right at the moment of Jesus' death, is the declaration that he is dying for everyone.

2. **JESUS' HUMILIATING DEATH vs HIS MIRACULOUS LIFE**

Many people had seen Jesus' life, had heard his teaching, had even witnessed his miracles, but had remained unmoved. They were still able to write him off as a charlatan, a blasphemer, a peddler of false hopes. There's no evidence that this centurion had or hadn't seen anything of Jesus before this day, but it seems safe to assume that even if he had, it had had no effect on him.

But here we have it made quite clear that it was Jesus' death that affected him so deeply. His apparent change of heart, his simple confession of faith came as a result of Jesus' death. There can be no doubt at all that Jesus' death is the central event of God's plan for salvation, for the ushering in of his Kingdom. As the title of Tom Wright's latest book has it, this is *The Day The Revolution Began*.

As we've said before, there were plenty of others who claimed to be the Messiah; there were others who set themselves up as gods, not least the very emperors who presided over this inhuman form of execution; there were others who managed to work miracles; there were there who taught high moral values. But there were no others who faced their death in this way and who, in dying, took on themselves the pain, the suffering, the consequences of all the sin in the world.

Jesus was identifying with sinful humanity in everything but our sin. He became the lightning rod for all that the forces of evil could hurl at humanity. He was fighting with those dark forces of evil and winning. He was reconciling fallen humanity with their Creator. He was opening the gates to God's Kingdom for anyone and everyone who was prepared to take it seriously and acknowledge his lordship. No wonder the man who stood physically closest to him in his final moments of human life was able to see that this was surely the Son of God. In some incomprehensible way, this rough and ready soldier was granted the insight that this all included him. It wasn't the miracles, the integrity of life, the faultless teaching that won him round. It was the awesomeness of this man's death up there on the cross.

3. SAVING OTHERS vs SAVING HIMSELF

In Matthew's account of the crucifixion, he mentions a group of mockers who shout out that if Jesus really is the Son of God as he claimed to be, then he should be able to save himself (*Matthew 27:40*). They expected him to get down off the cross and show his true divinity in a display of power.

The centurion recognises Jesus as the Son of God for precisely the opposite reason: it is as he dies that the shout goes up. The true test of the Son of God was not that he should save himself, but that, in the agony and humiliation which he could have avoided, he was saving others. His true task was to come into our world and bring men and women back to their God, a task that could only be accomplished in God's eternal scheme of things, by his death on the cross.

Central to the work of salvation is the paradox that we sing about in such songs as *Meekness and majesty*, the way in which, as we also sing, Jesus voluntarily "*laid aside his majesty, gave up everything for me.*"

Somehow or other, the centurion caught a glimpse of that as he heard Jesus' desperate last cry and saw his body slump on the cross with the last breaths of human life finally leaving it. Jesus went through that to save others. Only if he accomplished his mission to die for you and me could he possibly have retained his claim to the title Son of God.

So we ask the same question as we did when we thought about Mary last time – what is your response to Jesus and his death? As you look up at him hanging there on the cross, stripped naked, bleeding and bruised, great nails through his hands and feet; as you hear him crying out in pain and utter, utter loneliness, his breath crackling and spluttering; as you hear that final eerie cry and the great sigh of death, you need to acknowledge that he's doing that for you. He doing that for you, whatever your response.

Are you, like the scoffers, the criminal who hung there with him, the priests, the cynical and battle-hardened soldiers, just going to walk away and say, "Well, it doesn't really affect me"? Are you, perhaps after years and years of attending church and hearing this story over and over again, going to say, "So what? I've done pretty well without taking it too seriously so far"?

Or are you, with the penitent criminal, with Mary the mother of Jesus, with the centurion, prepared to say, "Surely this is the Son of God – and his love and sacrifice demand a real response from me"? The love of Jesus isn't limited to any one group of people, to those from any one particular background. Jesus died for you, whoever you are. You may not be convinced by his miracles, even by his teaching: but can you really ignore the fact that he died in your place? Don't walk out of that door this morning without sorting out your response to Jesus on the cross.

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The centurion, whom we often refer to as a Roman, wasn't necessarily a Roman by birth, but there is little doubt that he was not a Jew. He would have been the officer supervising the crucifixion, as he would have done on many other occasions. However, this particular crucifixion seems to have affected him more than the others he had seen, perhaps because of the earthquake that accompanied Jesus' death, but also because of the way in which Jesus died.

His response to the death of Jesus provides us with three contrasts:

1. Jew vs Gentile

In Mark's account of this episode, the centurion's affirmation follows immediately after the mention of the tearing of the Temple curtain. We usually take the tearing of the curtain to symbolise the new freedom extended to all men and women to have a first-hand experience of God. The first person, according to Mark, to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God was a Gentile. Everyone is included in God's plan of salvation.

2. Jesus' humiliating death vs his miraculous life

Many people had seen Jesus' miracles and heard his teaching during his life, but had been left unmoved. The centurion's confession of faith came as a result of Jesus' death, which is at the heart of the Christian message. The death of Jesus is the focus of our Christian faith.

3. Saving others vs saving himself

In Matthew's account (*Matthew 27:40*), the mockers suggest that the way Jesus can prove he is the Son of God is to save himself. The centurion points us to the fact that Jesus proved he was the Son of God by dying and saving others. This is part of the paradox of the Christian Gospel.

Questions for discussion

- 1) The tearing of the Temple curtain symbolised that access to God is now possible for everyone. In what ways do we re-impose a kind of exclusivity to our faith? How can we prevent that happening?
- 2) Do we focus enough on the death of Jesus? If not, why not? What difference might it make to our message if we did?
- 3) How can we cope with the paradoxes of Christianity, the tensions inherent in our faith? And how can we convey the Gospel message faithfully to those who seem unable to grasp the tension between "*meekness and majesty*"? (You might like to look at the words of the song below.)
- 4) Share among yourselves what Good Friday and Easter mean to you personally. How will you celebrate Easter this year – and why?

MEEKNESS AND MAJESTY,

Manhood and Deity,
In perfect harmony,
The Man who is God.
Lord of eternity
Dwells in humanity,
Kneels in humility
And washes our feet.

Perfect in innocence,
Yet learns obedience
To death on a cross.
Suffering to give us life,
Conquering through sacrifice,
And as they crucify
Prays: 'Father forgive.'

God the invisible,
Love indestructible
In frailty appears.
Lord of infinity,
Stooping so tenderly,
Lifts our humanity
To the heights of His throne.

Father's pure radiance,

Wisdom unsearchable,