Centurion

I am a centurion – the commander of part of the finest army the world has ever known – the Romans. They call me a centurion because I command a century of men – usually that’s a hundred men but it can be many more. It’s a great responsibility and I’m honoured to do it.

But it is not always straight forward and today we were draughted in for some crowd control in Jerusalem. There were some more senior centurions there that day, they were overseeing the crucifixion of this man Jesus – but I’m of lower rank. It might sound like my job today was an easy one – but it wasn’t.

You just imagine trying to keep law an order when the streets are full of people. Add to that the political tensions – Romans, gentiles, people like me who worked for the emperor and others who loathe him. Add to that the religious tensions – this was Jerusalem after all. The city on a hill. The most important religious city in the whole world. And Add to that it was Passover weekend so things were more excitable and agitated than normal.

In the crowd were a load of supporters of this man, but they mostly stayed quiet, the real noise and disturbance came from those who wanted him dead. Some in the crowd had armed themselves and keeping the peace became no small task.

At one point on the journey to Golgotha an African man had been pulled from the crowd to carry Jesus’ cross, it was a nightmare trying to keep everything contained as the procession stopped. But eventually we got there.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about the whole thing – I had seen crucifixions before and they are never easy to watch – seeing a man strung up like that, birds pecking at their open wounds – a grisly way to die. But I had been told from very early on that it was necessary to continue to strengthen the might of Rome. And besides I have colleagues who have dared to question the status quo and have lived or rather died to regret it.

So today I was just doing my job – I have learned the skill of being dispassionate – don’t get emotionally involved I kept telling myself – just do what you’ve been told to do and soon this will be over.

And usually I’m pretty good at that – I have seen some gruesome things in my time in the army but have always managed to keep my cool, to maintain calm under pressure and to never show any signs of weakness. Can you imagine how long I would be kept on as an officer if I cried every time someone was killed? Not long.

But there was something about today…from the first moment I laid eyes on Jesus the one who’s been claiming to be the messiah, I could tell there was something different about him. In he army we’ve always been taught that if our enemy strikes us we strike back with ten times the force, that’s how we’ve built our empire. Yet, when Jesus enemies struck him he didn’t lift a finger in retaliation, when they hurled the most obscene abuse at him and spat in his face he simply continued with his slow gruelling walk to Golgotha. I’ve never seen anything like it.

Yes, slaves I’ve seen treated that way – but never a free man.

Even as he was laid down on the timber frame and nails were driven through his hands and feet still he did not get angry, he did not resist – I saw it when I was growing up out in the hill country – when the animals would come in for shearing they would just stand their silently as if nothing was happening. Jesus did the same.

Shortly afterwards he was hoisted up in the air – usually I look away when that happens, when the weight of the body pulls at the nails and large wounds appear. Besides it’s not my job to watch or care about what happens to the prisoner. But today I couldn’t look away.

I watched him as the breath left his lungs, I kept my gaze on him, the sound of the crowd, what my soldiers were doing, all of it faded away – it was as if nothing else was happening on earth at that very moment other than the death of this man.

Instead of my usual disconnect from death the most incredible thing happened, something inside of me was drawn to this man. It was something about the way he suffered, something about the way he died that was different from anyone else. And when I say different I don’t mean just slightly different I mean this was like something I have never seen nor will ever see again.

And should I be surprised? This man had said he was the messiah, he had declared himself to be different, to be set apart – the religious people call it “being holy” – and there was something in the way he died which confirmed it to be true. I’ve seen many men die but never like him.

As something stirred inside me, perhaps my soul, perhaps my spirit – I’m not sure what to call it – I couldn’t help but cry out what I now knew in my very being – that “truly this man was the son of God”.

What do you think happened to the centurion after the crucifixion?

How do or should we respond to the crucifixion?

When was the last time you declared to those around you, either by word or deed that truly Jesus is the son of God?