

A story from the cross

After the verses I try to get into the mind and thoughts of one of the criminals who was hung on a cross. For at times in writing it, it made me marvel at Gods mercy and touched my heart in doing so. I hope it may do the same for you.

Herb

“Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” There was written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us! But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

When I read these verses, I cannot help but wonder about these two men. They were both bad enough to incur the same punishment, death by crucifixion. I wonder if they knew each other before. Perhaps they were partners in whatever wrong doings they were a part of. Maybe they just had a little time to compare their crimes before they were to be hanged. In either case one thing is for sure. They were both present at the crucifixion of Jesus. They both were witnesses to the same event going on around them. They each were experiencing the agony of the cross. More than any other witnesses present they understood what the man on the middle cross was going through. One would think this might make them comrades in death. Yet this was not the case, at least not at first. In the beginning even the criminal who defended Jesus also hurled insults at him. This is recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Yet sometime during the six hours that Jesus was alive on the cross a seed was planted into the heart of one the thieves and during this time it grew.

Of course, this seed had much to overcome. A heart which had long ago, grown calloused to the needs of others. It was as if a wall of stone had been placed around his heart safeguarding it against all intruders. Yet nevertheless a seed was planted, and it started to grow. What was it watered with though, and where did the light come from? The water came from the one who told a Samaritan woman at a well "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Even while his earthly body was dying in such a cruel fashion, the man in the middle was still reaching out to save those who were alive in the flesh but dead in the spirit. So, what happened in the heart of one of the criminals? I cannot know for certain but let me share with you the wandering of my mind.

As the three of us were being led up to this place that stunk of death I looked over and saw him. I wondered what crime he had committed. He did not have the angry look that one such as myself wore with pride. In fact, contrary to looking angry, he looked completely at peace with what was coming. I looked over at the other one to be hanged and it was as if I was looking at a mirror. I saw anger, anger not so much as what was happening now, but a deep long seated anger. I also saw fear on his face, the fear was over the here and now. What was staring us in the face? The finality of our own existence.

They forced us down and pinned our arms and feet against the wood. I looked over again to the man I did not know though I heard his name was Jesus, the one who was not like us. He held my gaze, and I was surprised because even through the blood that was about his face I could see there was no fear upon his face. I could see that he had been whipped recently, and it was very severe. I thought he must have done something really wrong to incur such a whipping and then to be crucified.

I screamed in agony as the first spike was driven through my wrist. The pain shot through my arm as I cursed those who were doing this to me. Though the spike cleanly pierced my flesh and into the wood on the first hit, the pain still continued in waves as each blow was made upon the spike. I heard a scream to my side as a spike was driven through the wrist of the other criminal. To hear him scream served only a momentary distraction from the pain I was under. I looked to the one who had been whipped and saw that one spike had already been driven through him. I thought he must have passed out since he did not scream, I had not heard even a sound from him. Lucky him I thought, I would have given anything to be unconscious right now.

Yet in looking closer I could see his eyes. He was not unconscious. I screamed again as my other wrist was being pinned to the wood by a spike. I again let out a torrent of curses on them, not only on them

though, but on their families as well. I heard again another scream to my side. It was as if an echo of my own scream was returning back to me. The one in the middle though, he never made a sound. What was his secret? What was it about him that made me even give him a second thought. As I watched him, I saw and heard the soldiers mock him. They called him the King of the Jews and spit upon him. Some even struck him as they mocked him. The King of the Jews, I seriously doubted he was any kind of king? I had never heard of him any way and even if he was, why was he being hanged? As the spike was driven through my feet, the pain coursed all the way to the hairs on my head. The pain was worse than I had imagined it and worse than the spikes through the wrists. The curses again erupted from my mouth. I could not have stopped them if I had tried, not that I wanted to in this moment. All I wanted was for my tormentors to feel what I felt. Again, another scream was heard. I knew who it was, and I did not even look his way. I did not need to look in the mirror.

The crosses were now being stood upright and the agony intensified as the weight of my body pulled against the spikes. I tried not to think about the pain, as I knew I was only hours from my death. At this point I wished it would be sooner, the hours would seem like a lifetime. I looked over at this man who called himself a king. The crowd as they passed by would taunt him saying "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross if you are the Son of God! I watched as not only the crowd, but the religious leaders also came out to insult him. "He saved others, but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, I am the Son of God.

Then to my side I heard even the other one on the cross insult him. Taunting him with every kind of mockery. Then my own lips opened up and joined with the crowd hurling every kind of insult in his direction. It

felt satisfying to insult him. For a moment even the pain I was bearing seemed less as I picked on this man. I watched as they gambled for his clothes right in front of him, adding further insult to him. Through all this, he did not speak. A ruler in the crowd called out “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”

Through my anger and pain something the ruler said stirred my thoughts. He said this man on the cross saved others. The religious leaders had also said this earlier. Is that why he was being punished? Was this the terrible thing this man was guilty of? Was being compassionate a crime? I looked back at my own life, when was the last time I did something that was for the good of others and not to serve my own interests. I could not remember. Three of us were being punished, but I began to realize that only two of us belonged here. This man in the middle, they said he claimed he was the Son of God. This seemed difficult to imagine though. The Son of God would not allow himself to be put in this situation to go through what he was going through. For what purpose would it serve? Yet what if it were true? What if this man were the Son of God?

I started reviewing everything I had witnessed and none of it made sense if this were simply a man. He accepted what was happening to him like a lamb being led to the slaughter. He never cried out in pain; he never cursed those who were cursing him. In fact, the only words I had heard him speak so far was asking his father to forgive them because they did not know what they were doing. This did not seem like something a man would do. Whether it was true or not, this man clearly believed he was the Son of God. The ruler acknowledged this man had saved others. In what sense I did not know, but that he did, appeared a matter of fact. Perhaps it was the pain I was under. Maybe it was the stress of my pending death. The evidence before me though was undeniable. I started believing in this stranger. I started believing

that as crazy as this may sound, this man might even care about me. He did after all forgive those who punished him.

Suddenly my thoughts were interrupted; "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" The other one on the cross mocked. For some reason the words just tumbled out of my mouth as I shot back to him; "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered me right away with words that leapt into my heart as they cast aside the rocks that had surrounded my heart before. "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

For some reason I knew what he was speaking was the truth. I could not doubt it; this day I would be with him in paradise. For perhaps the first time in my life I had hope, not only hope though, but the full expectation that everything was going to be all right. I was in pain and could hardly breathe. I was dying a slow and cruel death, yet I never felt more alive. I never felt more worthwhile. I, yes even I, was important to God.

Suddenly darkness came over the land. It was as if night fell upon us even though it was much too early for that. The darkness was clearly a sign of the darkness of the event going on around us. The Son of God was dying on a cross, and it seemed like the earth and sky were going to mourn his passing. Yet though the land was dark, and many people were murmuring. Many others who were insulting him stopped. Others cried out in fear. This went on for about three hours. Yet as dark as the land was, I felt as if I was full of light, his light. The light of the Son.

The darkness had been upon us for about three hours when I heard Jesus call out "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" This startled me and gave cause for a moment's worry. For the words he had said were calling out

to God and asking him why he had been forsaken. Some people near him thought he was calling for the prophet Elijah. Jesus said to them "I am thirsty" One of them near him immediately ran off and got a sponge filled with what was likely wine vinegar, they held it on a stalk of a hyssop plant and reached up to him in order that he might drink from it. It was clear they were curious with the darkness surrounding them. One of them I heard say let's leave him alone and see if Elijah comes. Yet whatever reason Jesus was on that cross for he himself knew that time was over. He called out with the strength of a lion; "It is finished. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." With that he breathed his last.

I felt suddenly alone again. He was gone, the earth had lost the Son of God, his light was no longer here. Yet I knew that this day I would be with him in paradise. After he died, the light of the sun once again came out and the earth started quaking. I heard a centurion suddenly praising God and exclaiming "Surely this was a righteous man. Surely he was the Son of God!" I smiled to myself as I realized even in his death, he was still saving lives and perhaps that was the point of it all.