

A Confessing Centurion

Text:

Mark 15:15 – 39

So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. [*And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "He was numbered with the transgressors."*] And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

Introduction:

This sermon is the third in a series taken from Mark's account of the last days of Jesus' life focusing on individuals who in this dark time when most were doing wrong or doing evil did right; individuals who seem to have perceived what others did not perceive. We have looked at a sincere scribe, and two whole hearted women. Today we will look at a confession centurion.

I. Soldiers

The section of the Gospel that we have read covers the time period in which Jesus was in the hands of Roman soldiers. The text has a surprising minor hero, the Roman officer who was in charge of the soldiers, who first tortured and mocked Jesus, and then crucified him. Given the rest of the story, its conclusion is both surprising and astounding. No human kindness is to be detected, either in this officer, or in his soldiers in the entire time that Jesus is in their charge with the possible exception of the compulsion of Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross. Even this is more of a pragmatic act than an act of kindness. Jesus was so weakened from the scourging that he had received at their hands that he was simply unable to carry his cross, and the soldiers wanting to get their day's work finished seized upon Simon to speed the process along. Yet when all is finished we find this officer who had presided over acts so cruel, that we have to temper our language in describing them, the first to kneel before the cross and confess "Truly this man was the Son of God."

I think that I am safe in saying that the source of his confession is to be found in his encounter with Christ and not in his character. We know little about this Centurion. We can only deduce from the position that he held what sort of person he was. Of course, the fact that he was a Roman officer does not imply that he was a bad or a cruel man. We have at least two other cases in the New Testament of Roman Centurions who are signaled out as men of noble character, Jarius and Cornelius. On the other hand it is hard to imagine anything noble in the character of a man who was in charge of torture and executions. He certainly does nothing to rein in the sadism of his soldiers. Everything in our narrative indicates that all of the milk of human kindness had long ago been drained from this band of soldiers. They belong to that all too numerous number that traverses the entire duration of human history right up to the present that take cruel pleasure in the suffering of their fellow human beings.

These soldiers first beat Jesus with the horrible Roman *flagellum* that literally ripped the flesh from the body leaving muscles, bones and organs exposed. Having done this, they give him the purple robe and mock crown of a Judean king so they can make him the object of their sadistic

humor. They then accompany him to *Golgotha*, the place of crucifixion, where they crucify him, nailing him to his cross. While Jesus hangs there in unbearable agony they amuse themselves by casting lots for his only earthly possessions, his garments, oblivious to the cries of the three men they have just crucified. The Centurion oversees the affair, as he doubtlessly had on numerous other occasions, without the least twinge of conscience. It is his job, and in his mind it somehow serves the good of the Empire. He is just doing his duty to maintain the *Pax Romana*. He too is most likely anxious to finish his day's work and to return to his family and the pleasures of life. After all, these men are the enemies of Rome so they are only getting their just desserts. No, there is no reason to believe that the source of this officers surprising about-face is to be found in his character. He is just another soldier, no better or no worse than the others, but he is about to witness something unique. He has, no doubt, watched many men die the slow and excruciating death of the cross, but that has in no way prepared him for the intersection of time and eternity that he is about to experience.

II. Jesus Dying

Mark's account of the Death of Christ is brief but powerful. At noon the sky darkens and darkness covers the earth until three in the afternoon when Jesus cries out in his mother tongue *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Those standing nearby think that he is crying out for Elijah, who was popularly believed to come in critical times of need to protect the innocent and rescue the righteous. They offer him the common drink of working men of the time sour wine or vinegar mixed with water, hoping to revive him a bit to see if Elijah really would come and rescue him. But Jesus breathes his last and dies astounding the onlookers as victims of crucifixion normally took much longer to expire.

Jesus is not dying, however, as a crucified insurrectionist, as they had supposed. He is laying down his life willingly as the Lamb of God slain from the foundations of the world, as a sacrifice for sin. The darkness that covers the earth can only symbolize the sin of mankind for which he is suffering, and the rending of the veil of the Temple signals the end of that work, the perfect sacrifice completed once for all never again to be repeated. This Centurion has witnessed the most significant moment of human history, the moment where eternity intersects with time, the mystery of redemption. Most likely, nothing has prepared him for it. Like most of the Roman occupiers of Judea he was probably oblivious to the beliefs, the hopes, and the sacred writings of the people upon whom he imposed the will of Rome. Yet he has come face to face with the eternal, with the divine. He has stood on holy ground, and like multitudes since that moment he has been overwhelmed by the power of the cross, and he recognizes the crucified as someone special, even unique. "Surely", he says, "this one is the Son of God."

III. The Centurion's Confession

The Centurion's confession is, in some ways, the high point of Mark's Gospel, which begins with the words: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Centurion is the first to fulfill Mark's objective in writing his Gospel; to bring us to faith in the crucified and risen Christ. He wants us to look at Jesus; to listen to Jesus; to watch Jesus as he heals the sick and comforts the broken-hearted. Then he wants us to watch him die; to die a death like no other man has ever died. We die because we are under the curse of sin, but he dies willingly to take away that curse. He dies to conquer death. He dies to destroy death. He dies to die no more. He dies that we might live. That is the power of the cross of Christ. It is the power to transform death into life. It is the power to transform a centurion, hardened from years of cruelty brought on by his profession, into a worshipper of the Savior.

This is the reason that I want you to read this Gospel to meditate upon it. We all need to encounter Christ as this Centurion did. We must listen to him. We must watch him die. We must see in his death God's great saving act. It is at the cross of Christ that the light of eternity will illumine the darkness of our lives. It is at the cross that we will come to understand that all is not hopeless and futile, that God has not abandoned us. It is Christ who has suffered God's abandonment in our place so that we might eternally know the joy of the divine presence. As you stand before the cross can you see the truth as the Roman Centurion saw it. Can you confess with him: "Surely this man is the Son of God."