

Blood Money

It's strange that something as clean and bright and beautiful as silver should be associated with something as dark and ugly and indelible as blood. Blood money. It was the priests who called it that. I'd heard the expression before, of course, but it had never struck me with the force it did then. But now it's too late. Nothing makes any sense. The world has gone mad.

Once, I thought that things did make sense. I thought I had a purpose in life. And that purpose was freedom. Freedom from the accursed Romans. They came here thinking they owned the world. And with their weapons of iron, they very nearly did. But we had a prophet who described the successive kingdoms of the world as a metal statue—head of gold for Babylon, chest of silver for Persia, belly of bronze for Greece and legs of iron for Rome (but the feet were mixed with clay)—and in the prophet's vision the feet of that statue were smashed by a rock cut from a mountain. We were waiting for that rock.

Meanwhile the Romans did as they pleased and they took what they wanted — especially silver. Cartloads of it, shiploads of it. Gathered by those filthy collaborators, those tax collectors. All shipped away to

Rome. Silver that could have been used to govern our country properly. Silver to provide for the poor and needy (and there were plenty of them due to the Romans' oppression), but also silver to reward those who worked hard and governed well.

I've always liked silver. It's so clean and pure. A silver coin is like the moon shining bright. When I was a boy I used to gaze up at the full moon and imagine it was a great silver coin. I wished I had that great coin, and I would put things right. My mother wouldn't have to work her fingers to the bone. We could all be set free from drudgery.

But then I grew up. And I learned that the moon isn't made of silver. You had to work hard to get silver. A day's wage for a labourer was one small silver coin. But why should we have to slave away all our lives, when the rich Romans and Greeks and collaborators lorded it over us in their palaces and fine houses?

So it wasn't surprising that when I reached manhood, I got involved with a group of freedom fighters. They were a secret society. You don't contact them. They contact you. They had heard my views on political matters and obviously thought I would be sympathetic to them. I was. Some of their methods I didn't wholly approve of, but sometimes the end justifies the means. And the end was to get rid of the

Romans and set up God's kingdom, so just about anything was justified.

It was on one of my missions that I first met him. I say "missions" but I don't want you to think that I was involved in the physical side of things. I was involved more on the financial side and also intelligence. Information was my thing. I had lots of contacts. Various kinds of people—unlikely people you might think—from collaborating tax collectors to the staunch religious hard-liners, the Pharisees, to the snobbish Greek-loving priests, the Sadducees. I learned at an early age that if you wanted to make money, you had to make friends with people who had it, and people who had it had power. Of course, there were always strings attached, but I didn't mind that. The end justifies the means, after all. There just seemed to be more and more strings all the time. Sometimes it felt like a web.

I had travelled to Galilee to get some information, and it was there I met him, this Miracle Worker. Everyone was talking about him. I couldn't believe some of the stuff I was hearing. But it was when I met one of my contacts that a real surprise was in store. He belonged to a group similar to ours—the Zealots they were called. Simon was his name. He said if I wanted to meet the man himself, he could take me—he had become one of his followers! I said, "What? Like

infiltrated their ranks to spy out what's going on?" He looked at me strangely when I said that, and said, "Well actually, no. I've really become a follower of his." I was gob-smacked. "So you've got religion?" "I wouldn't say that," he said, "He doesn't approve of religion. Let me explain." And then he went on to tell me about the Baptist. Of course I had heard John the Baptist preach, who hadn't? But what Simon told me was news to me. He said John had said that this Jesus was none other than the Promised One, the Messiah, the True King! He was, after all, a descendent of King David's—in direct line through all the Kings of Judah.

Now this intrigued me. Perhaps this was the Rock that would smash the feet of clay. My people would be very interested in this. I got myself an introduction. The strange thing was there was nothing remarkable about him. He was physically strong obviously. He had been a carpenter. But nothing out of the ordinary, except his hands—big joiner's hands. If he gripped you with one of those hands you felt there was no power on earth that could break that grip. And his eyes. One look from him and you thought you were naked. But it was his voice, most of all. One sentence from him could encourage the most timid, deflate the most arrogant—or chill you to the bone.

I was fascinated, and from there on I followed him too—with Simon and Thaddeus, Nathaniel and Thomas, the other Simon—the big fisherman—his brother Andrew and the other brothers, James and John, and the others—and even Levi, the tax collector, who left his business to follow Jesus. Now that impressed me. He must have thought that becoming a supporter of the new king was going to pay better than cow-towing to the Romans.

I realise now that it had all gone to my head. I got carried away with the emotion of it all. But they were heady days. I wish with all my heart it could have all been right, but I know now it wasn't. It wasn't really what I thought. Looking back, I had plenty of indications of the way the wind was blowing, but I didn't really understand at the time.

On one occasion we were up at Jerusalem for one of the big religious celebrations, and he marched right into the Great Temple and single-handedly created chaos. The Priests had a nice little racket going there, they had a monopoly on selling sheep and cattle for the sacrifices and exchanging foreign money for the Temple tax. Jesus wrapped a length of rope around his fist and drove the beasts out of there (and not all of the beasts had four legs!) He kicked over the tables and sent the money flying in all directions! At first I thought it fun—

a kind of redistribution of wealth from those fat cats in Jerusalem! But then I saw those bright silver coins trampled in the dust and the dirt. You ought to show money more respect than that.

But then he chose me as one of his special group of twelve. Not only that, but I was chosen as the treasurer. There was a lot of money coming in, for charity, giving to the poor and needy, and it needed to be administered properly. I thought they would have chosen Levi, but he wasn't all that keen, so they chose me because I had a lot of experience at handling money. That suited me fine. There was a lot of money coming in—I mean a lot of money! I didn't always approve of the way it was used—too many lame ducks and lost causes. And I didn't get paid or anything, so I just took it for granted that whenever I needed anything, I could just borrow it. There was always plenty. Things were going well really. And when the Kingdom was set up, things would be even better. I would be the favourite for the post of Treasurer for the nation.

But then things started to go wrong. It all began the time he fed the crowds. It was in Galilee. We were out in the hills near Fishtown, not far from the sea. We were supposed to have gone away by ourselves, because we were all tired. Things had been going like crazy. But then the crowds found out where we were and it was as

bad as ever. He ended up teaching all day and healing people, by evening he was exhausted. We wanted to send the crowds away, but he insisted we feed them. By this time there were about 5000 men there besides women and children! It was impossible. The only food we could find was a few fish and some bread a boy had. But Jesus told everyone to sit down on the grass, and he took the fish and bread and he prayed and then handed it out to us and then we handed it out to the crowds. Whatever happened—and I still don't rightly know—everyone there had enough to eat and there were twelve baskets of leftovers!

By this time some of Simon's ex-colleagues and some of my people were there. I had been keeping them informed. They had come up with a plan to establish the kingdom by force and make Jesus King. Everything was ready, but at the last minute, Jesus was nowhere to be found. It turned out he had gone up into the mountains by himself. It was all a bit of an anticlimax.

He had told us to get back in the boat and cross over to the other side. By then it was dark, but off we set. We were hardly making any progress. The wind was against us and the sea was rough. You won't believe this—I don't know if I believe it myself—but this apparition appeared, walking on the waves! We were scared out of our wits. But the next thing I knew,

Jesus was there in the boat. I didn't understand what was going on and I didn't want to ask.

But the thing is, once we got back to the other side, that's when he really blew it. Remember thousands of people had been following him. But he started arguing with them. Started accusing them of just wanting bread, and saying he was the Bread of Life, the living bread that came down from heaven, and people had to believe in him to live for ever. He even said they had to eat his flesh and drink his blood. I knew he had lost them then. We don't even eat the blood of animals, far less humans! If I had been able to advise him, I would have told him that was not going to be popular, but he wouldn't listen. Always thought he knew better.

Well, that's when the rot set in. People started deserting him in droves. He even asked us Twelve if we too would desert him. Simon the Fisherman said there was nowhere else we could go. And then Jesus said a strange thing. He said he had chosen us, but one of us was a devil. He was always saying weird things like that.

I always hoped that I could get him back on the right track again. And at times it seemed he was going to. He made friends with one or two influential people, but he had no discrimination—he didn't concentrate on the right people. He treated the riff-raff as if they were

just as important as the Priests or some of my friends. He even befriended a Roman centurion and other foreigners! This was not politically astute. Generally he made no reference to politics or economics at all and any time he did, he didn't really make sense. For instance, one time some of the religious leaders were trying to trap him. They asked him if it was right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Of course it was a trick question. If he said yes, he would lose all credibility with our people. If he said no, they would report him to the Romans. It was the time to declare himself, but he avoided the issue. He asked them for a coin and asked whose picture and name was on it. Of course it was Caesar's. So he said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." It silenced them, but there was a problem that no one else seemed to notice. That left Caesar with all the money and God with nothing!

Anyway I hung on in there, looking for opportunities to get things going in the right direction again, but it was no use. In the end something happened that made everything clear. Everyone knew things were heading for a big showdown. We were going up to Jerusalem for the big Passover festival. There would be hundreds of thousands of people there. We knew the authorities were planning to kill him. It hadn't helped that he had recently raised his friend

Lazarus from the dead! They said he had been in the grave four days and out he came hale and hearty! You didn't need to be a professor to know that this was going to provoke a reaction. The Priests and other leaders in Jerusalem were getting very jumpy. They were terrified that some sort of revolution was going to start, and the Romans would simply wipe us all out. You can't imagine a more dangerous man than one who people think can raise the dead. My contacts in high places told me that the High Priest Caiaphas said the problem was easily sorted: *It's better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.* It's funny, but Jesus himself had been saying similar kinds of things. It looked as if he realised the game was up.

Simon the fisherman and one of the others had swords and were prepared to defend him to the death, but I had to start thinking rationally about my position. Things were not too good on the financial front. Funds from my people had dried up. In fact they were looking for repayment of some of the funds they had "invested" in me. They had decided that Jesus was a lost cause. They were more concerned about some plan they were concocting with the Zealots. It would suit them fine if the Romans concentrated their attention elsewhere. To make financial matters worse, donations to Jesus' good works had dried up too. He simply wasn't very popular

any more. All this meant that my financial position was getting rather desperate. I had various debts. Well, when you are leading a double or even treble life, there are certain expenses.

And there was little I could do. You see there was an inner circle. There was Simon the fisherman, who had been given the name Kayphas, “the Rock” (someone more unlike a rock I couldn’t imagine) and his friends, also fishermen, the brothers James and John (they were relatives of Jesus, so of course were favourites). I had the misfortune of not being from Galilee, so more and more I was left out of things.

Things came to a head at the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany. He had put on a big banquet for us all. In the middle of it all, in came Mary, a sister of Lazarus. She had a beautiful white bottle in her hand. I knew what that bottle was, but before I could do a thing, she had knocked the head off it and was pouring the contents all over Jesus. The stupid cow! It was the most expensive perfume ever invented! I nearly exploded. I shouted, “That’s a shameful waste! It could have been sold for thousands of pounds, and the money given to the poor!”

And do you know what Jesus said? He said, “Leave her alone!” He did that thing he did, where he stared right into your eyes and you had to blink or look

away. He was angry, but I was mad too and I wasn't going to blink, but you know the way it is — the more you stare the more you have to blink. He said, "What she has done is beautiful. The poor will always be here and you can give them money any time you like. But I'll not always be here. Mary knows that and has anointed my body for burial."

Beauty! Burial! It was crystal clear he had completely lost it. If that was the kind of kingdom he wanted, it wasn't for me. That wasn't the kingdom I had schemed and worked for, lied and cheated for, all those years. You can't live on beauty. And you can't build a kingdom talking about burial. This had to stop. Somehow I had to force his hand. He was going to have to choose. Was his kingdom going to be firmly of this world, or was it going to be airy-fairy other-worldly?

I knew then what I was going to do. I still had contacts. I went straight to them and they took me to the High Priest. He was delighted. They were looking for a way to carry out an arrest quietly. They didn't want any kind of riot to start with all these people in Jerusalem. What was in it for me, I wanted to know? There would be high rewards, he said. But as a down-payment he would give me thirty silver coins. Rather appropriate, he said, the price of a slave. I knew he was sneering at me, but I watched as his purse-bearer

counted those bright silver coins into my hand. It was only a tenth of what that stupid cow had wasted, but it would keep some people off my back for a time.

The arrangement was easy. We were to celebrate the Passover at a secret location, but once I was sure of the plans, I was to get word to the authorities. But a strange thing happened at our little Passover meal. He said one of us was going to betray him! I thought someone had tipped him off, but the others were all working themselves up into a frenzy asking him if it was them. I thought I'd better play along and ask too. Thankfully by that stage there was such a noise that no one heard what he said to me. He was between John and me at the table. He said something to John and he then dipped a piece of bread in the dish and handed it to me. "Yes, it's you. Do it quickly." I was stunned. My heart turned to stone—as cold as one of the silver coins in my bag. I just managed to gather my wits and make some excuse about having to see about some money (which was true) and make a quick exit.

It was night. It was darker than it should have been. It was Passover. There should have been a full moon. I looked up. There was a full moon, but it wasn't the bright silver disc I was expecting to see. It seemed dark, tinged with blood.

It only took a few minutes to get to the High Priest's house, but it took about a couple of hours to get everything organised. Eventually they were ready, temple guards and officials. Their spies were out and confirmed when the twelve men began to move. They said twelve and I almost said, "Don't you mean thirteen?", when I realised there were only twelve now. I wanted to leave then, but they insisted I go with them to identify the man himself. If it had to be done it had to be done.

They were there all right—in the olive grove on the Hill of Olives—just as I had said. As it turned out, I wouldn't have been needed after all. He didn't hide or conceal his identity. He came out to the gate and stood there. But I hardly recognised him. He looked gaunt and haggard and there were drops of blood all over his face. But I went up and I greeted him with a kiss as if nothing was out of the ordinary. He looked right into my eyes and said, "So Judas, you're betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" I turned away.

The rest is a blur. It was obvious they were all afraid of him, even the burly temple guards. When they asked if he was Jesus of Nazareth, he said "I am". And they all stumbled back and fell over one another. It was the way he said it, as if he was God, the great I AM! I thought, "This is it!" But then he just meekly allowed

them to arrest him. He even stopped the Big Fisherman when he started waving his sword about. Perhaps he was waiting for a more dramatic moment back in Jerusalem itself, but something about him made me doubt it.

I followed to the High Priest's house and saw the trial. It was a farce. It was a total contradiction of everything justice should be. They met in the middle of the night. The witnesses couldn't agree. They struck him. I thought they had some serious charges against him. There was nothing. And he said nothing. Only right at the end: the High Priest put him on oath to testify against himself (also highly illegal). He asked him "Are you the Christ, the Son of God?"

There was absolute silence. For a moment I thought this was it. He drew himself up and his eyes caught the High Priest's and held them. I thought, "Now we're going to see his power!" He said, "I am!" The stunned silence was broken only by sharp intakes of breath, but he added, "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven!" I almost expected to see it happen right there and then! But the moment faded. Why not now, Jesus? Why not now?

The face of the High Priest turned deathly white and then bright red. In a rage he tore his richly

ornamented robe. He stuttered over his words in his indignation. “No witnesses needed! You have heard the blasphemy. What is your verdict?” They all condemned him to death, and so he was sent for trial before Pilate, the Roman Governor. He was doomed.

It was suddenly as if a curtain had been pulled from in front of my eyes. It was as if all my life had been a deception. I suddenly saw the obvious. He was innocent! He was innocent and I had betrayed him.

I went back to the High Priest and the council with the money. They were at the Temple by this stage. “I have sinned. I have betrayed innocent blood.”

They laughed. “That’s nothing to do with us. That’s your responsibility.” I took the thirty silver coins in my hand, I looked at them, and then I hurled them into the Temple. They tinkled and rattled on the stone floor.

They then had the gall to say they couldn’t keep it. It couldn’t go in the Temple Treasury because it was blood money. Instead they decided to buy a field with it. And they bought it in my name, so their hands would be clean! In my name, mind you! They bought the Potter’s Field—as a burial place for accursed foreigners!

I know that field. It has a tree in it. It was bought with my money. Blood money. Blood money! Innocent

blood money. There is nothing to live for anymore. All my dreams have come to nothing. The one thing I loved is fouled and bloodied. The bright silver is tarnished. Blood money.

There's a tree in that field. All I need now is a rope. I'm going to that field. The field bought with blood money. The Field of Blood.

Matthew 10:1-4

John 6

John 12:1-11

Matthew 26:14-16

John 13:18-30

Luke 22:47-53

Matthew 27:1-10

Acts 1:15-26