

He died my death

Two days ago, at dawn on the sixth day, I was in a black hole in the prison of the governor's palace. I say 'dawn', only because I realised afterwards it must have been about sunrise, for no light penetrated to that stone prison. I also say 'the sixth day' for the same reason, because in there I had lost all track of time. The stench was unbearable. My wrists and ankles were chafed raw by the iron fetters and my back was a mass of bruised and bleeding flesh from the Roman flogging I had received. I was awaiting the end—I, Joshua Barabbas, patriot, freedom fighter, whom they called a bandit, a terrorist, a rebel. But before the end, weak though I was, I would take another Roman with me, if I got half a chance. But I never did get the chance, or rather when I did get the chance I had other things on my mind.

In that black hole I had enough on my mind anyway—too much time to think—you couldn't sleep for the noise and the stench and the pain. Faces rose up before me. One was the face of Judas from Gamala—known as Judas the Galilean—who revived the patriotic hopes of our people. I was much too young to have taken part in his rebellion, but my father and his brothers did. They are all dead—killed by the Romans or the Herodians. On one occasion in my youth the

Roman commander, Varus, crucified 2000 rebels. Crucifixion is not a good way to die. Nailed to a wooden pole, naked, you are left to die in agony, gasping for your every breath until you can breathe no more. Sometimes when they are in a hurry, they smash your legs with hammers, so, no longer able to support yourself, you hang by the hands until you can no longer breathe. They wonder why we hate them. And in that filthy prison cell, that was the fate that awaited me.

How I hated the Romans! One of their little regulations with which they oppressed us was that if a Roman soldier required you to carry something, you had to do it. It was supposed to be for the distance of one mile, but Roman miles could be as long as they wished. I remember one time when I was a boy being forced to carry two heavy bags and being laughed at and mocked by the soldiers as I staggered under the weight for well over a mile. I vowed then that when I became a man I would never again carry anything for the Romans. And I never did. But that morning I would have to carry something for them—my own cross. A clever little extra cruel Roman jest that—to make a man carry his own gallows. If I had a place to stand and could muster my last strength, I would wield that cross as a weapon and bring down every Roman within

reach. Perhaps they would have to kill me with a spear—a better way to die.

Another face I saw was that of my friend Manahem, the surviving son of Judas the Galilean. He became a leader like his father and grandfather Ezekias before him. We talked of the old days, not only the days of our fathers, but the days of our forefathers, the days of an even greater Judas—Judas Maccabaeus (the Hammer)—who lived 200 years ago. It was not the Romans who oppressed us then, but the Syrians under their Greek king, Antiochus the Illustrious (so called), a descendent of one of Alexander the Great’s generals. He set about the systematic destruction of our whole religion and way of life. The Temple was desecrated and pagan sacrifices and prostitution introduced instead.

But in the village of Modin there lived an old man called Mattathias, Judas the Hammer’s father. One day a priest came with a Syrian officer to call the people to make a sacrifice to the king. The officer called Mattathias to take the lead in making the sacrifice and said he would be richly rewarded. Mattathias said, “Though all the nations within the king’s dominions obey him and forsake their religion, yet I and my sons and my brothers will follow the covenant of our fathers. We will not deviate one step from our faith.” But a

traitor stepped forward to make the sacrifice, and Mattathias was so enraged, he drew his great sword and cut down both the traitor and the officer. From that time he and his sons and all who followed them went out into the wild as outlaws. But under Judas the Hammer and his brothers our nation once again gained our freedom—for a time.

Manahem and I longed for those days to come again—or even better, the days of the great King David who defeated all the oppressors of the nation. He too had to live out in the wilds, just like Judas the Hammer and just like us, until he won every battle and became king. There are some who say that a great king like David, a descendent of David, will come to free his people—they called him The Anointed, the Messiah. If ever we needed him, we need him now. It isn't just the Romans who occupy and oppress us, there are the Herodians—the descendents of King Herod who had reigned over us as a tyrant, and all the toadies and time-servers who support them. But worse still, we are a divided nation. There are the Sadducees who cooperate with the Romans and ape the foreigners with their cursed Greek culture—the High Priests and all their crew—not one of them descended from Aaron as they should be by rights. They have a monopoly on the worship of the Temple and line their own nests with the

proceeds—curse them! Then there are the Essenes, who are useless. They think the world is evil all right, but their answer is to withdraw from it into the wilds near the Dead Sea. And there are the Pharisees, who are all right in their own way. They hold faithful to the laws of our fathers. They spend their time praying and preaching. But they have no stomach for a fight. Prayers and sermons are never going to destroy the Romans. You need cold iron to do that.

And that's where we came in—the Fourth Philosophy. Some called us the Zealots. Judas the Galilean had taught us to resist by force—to meet fire with fire. And we did. But on the whole it was small beer. A night attack here, an ambush there, a riot in Jerusalem. Manahem and I longed for something bigger, something glorious. He talked about the need to capture one of the fortresses of Antipas, one of Herod's sons. He became obsessed with Masada, a great stronghold that stood high above the western shores of the Dead Sea. He said one day he would capture it. I had a bad feeling about it. I said it would be the death of him and all who followed him. It was a grim forbidding place. I wouldn't want to be trapped in there. I hated narrow enclosed places. Give me the open hills and rivers and woods. But now, here I was in a place that could hardly be more narrow or enclosed.

For it was I and not Manahem that they had captured. I had wanted to start a rebellion in Jerusalem at the time of the great festival of Pesach, which commemorated the time when the Lord set our nation free from slavery in Egypt. Hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world crammed into Jerusalem at that time, and the idea was that we would infiltrate the crowds and target some of the traitors and collaborators, and when the soldiers came to defend them we would raise the crowds against them. But I wanted to strike a blow against the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, himself. He had slaughtered some of my own people from Galilee as they were worshipping God. And only recently he had used the sacred money donated for the Temple and the worship of God to build an aqueduct, and when the people protested, he had his soldiers disguised in the crowd and, on a signal from him, they slaughtered them—completely unarmed people. But at the Festival, Jerusalem was crammed with soldiers. Pilate was obviously expecting trouble. And I knew who to blame for that.

That's when *his* face rose up before me, unwanted and uncalled for. A namesake of mine he was, also from Galilee, Joshua Barjoseph—only many people used his Greek name, Jesus. He had been a carpenter like his father before him, but three years ago he had started

out on a mission. He preached and he healed people. It is even rumoured that he raised the dead. Very soon people were saying he was the Messiah and they tried to make him king. Seemingly he would have none of it. But in those early days he drew off a lot of support from us. I went to hear him myself, to see if we could perhaps join forces. I was greatly disillusioned. The day I went to hear him a great crowd had gathered out in the hills.

Much of what he said I could agree with. He quoted the teaching of Moses, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". I agreed with that! But then he went on, "But I say to you, do not resist an evil man. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek to him; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go two miles with him." This wasn't going to get rid of the Romans! More likely to help them on their way! And then he quoted the saying, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy,' which I was fond of quoting myself, but he disagreed with that: "Love your enemies," he said, "and pray for those who persecute you, so you will be sons of your Father in Heaven, for He makes His sun to rise on the evil as well as the good, and sends His rain on the just and unjust alike." That I couldn't accept! God punished evildoers and so should

we. We were to hate those who were oppressing the poor and the downtrodden.

After he refused to be king, many deserted him and we gained more supporters as a result. But one of our own Zealots, Simon, got religion and followed him. I occasionally heard pieces of news through him. Seemingly there was another of Jesus' followers who had belonged to a similar group to ours—another Judas—known as Judas the Assassin (although he later maintained that was a mispronunciation of his nickname “Iscariot” which he said meant “man from Kerioth”, his home town).

Anyway, I heard that the authorities wanted rid of Jesus because he was claiming divine powers, and that things had really come to a head when the news went round like wildfire he had actually raised a man from the dead. All the talk in the city was whether he would come to the Festival or not. It would have been better if he had stayed away. As it turned out, he chose the worst possible time to come up to the city, just as we were about to launch our attack. The success of my plan depended on us quickly getting mass support from the crowds. We had a hundred armed men infiltrating the crowds of pilgrims, but what good were they against a thousand Roman soldiers, unless the crowds came to our aid? The plan was this: we would take out known

collaborators—I and my two men were to deal with a cursed tax collector who bankrolled the Romans. His tax booth was on the main street leading up to the Temple. All this would quickly cause a commotion and draw the soldiers down from the Temple and the Fortress of Antonia. Then we would fall on them.

Things went wrong from the start. We stopped directly in front of the tax collector, and I started to mock him to gather a crowd. Hundreds of people were passing on the busy street, but I didn't notice that they seemed to be in a hurry, mainly heading to the city gates. The tax collector threatened to send for the soldiers. Suddenly I threw off my cloak, swept out my sword and shouted, "You have robbed us for long enough, you Roman slave. Death to the traitors!" My two men cut down the tax collector's servants who sprang to defend him and I went straight for the traitor himself. I caught him by the throat and swept back my arm to plunge my sword into him. Just at that moment a girl appeared from nowhere and sprang between us, throwing her arms round his neck and screaming, "Don't hurt my father!" I thrust my sword forward with all my strength and it went right through them both. In the heat of the moment I couldn't stop, could I? (Or so I have said to myself in the darkness.) As they fell to the ground, her face turned towards me. It was a

face of indescribable shock and pain and sadness. But I turned away. I had no time to think about what I had done. There would be time enough for that.

As I turned I realised things were going badly wrong. The crowd had thinned (I didn't realise it then, but they had headed to the city gates to greet Jesus who was riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, as a king of peace, while another Joshua, a king of war, was fighting his last desperate battle.) Those who were left shrank back from me staring at my sword dripping blood, while down the street charged a whole cohort of heavily armed Romans. Some of my men stood their ground and fought bravely, but we didn't stand a chance. We were isolated from each other and there were no crowds to create chaos. Soon the three of us were fighting for our lives in a narrow alley. We were surrounded and, before we could turn our swords on ourselves, we were overwhelmed. We were bound and beaten and dragged off into the Fortress.

There we were "interrogated", Roman style—which consisted of being beaten and questioned, beaten and questioned, beaten and questioned. But none of us betrayed our friends. I lost all track of time, but it must have been about five days later we were transferred to the Governor's palace for trial. I say "trial", but it was a travesty. It consisted of the report of the centurion who

had captured us. Whenever I tried to speak, I was struck on the mouth. We were summarily condemned and sent back to the cells to await execution the following day.

That night was a torment. In addition to all the other faces that rose up before me, the face of that innocent girl rose up, not accusing me, but her quiet sadness made me burn with shame. What was it all for now? All our fighting for freedom, our brave words and our cruel deeds? It would all end in agony in a few short hours, and then perhaps I would have to appear before a higher tribunal. And what would be the verdict there? I didn't know.

Then about dawn there seemed to be great activity, the tramp of many feet, the noise of many voices. Some time later we heard the noise of a great crowd gathered on the Pavement in front of the Palace. At first we could make out nothing. Then we could hear quite unmistakably the shout going up, "Barabbas! Barabbas!" At first I thought the revolution had started without me! But then after a time, the chanting started again. This time it was, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" My heart sank. I knew there were people who hated me, but I didn't know there were so many!

Not long after that, the doors opened along the dark corridor, and I thought this was it. But instead a man in

chains was being led to the place of flogging. It was the other Joshua, Jesus of Nazareth! What was going on? Were we both to be crucified? Obviously the authorities wanted a king of peace as little as they wanted a king of war. We heard the flogging. And that's exactly what I mean. We heard the sound of leather and bone on human flesh, but no other sound. Not a cry, not a scream, not even a whimper. Not even a sound from the soldiers, until the flogging stopped and then after a silence there was laughter. We saw the reason when they returned – they had made a rough crown of huge spiky thorns and forced it on his head, and they had thrown a purple cloak around his shoulders, and they were making mock bows and saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" How I wished I had my sword then! But he said never a word and looked straight ahead with eyes that seemed to see a different world. The carpenter from Galilee went up in my estimation from that hour.

Only a few minutes later, the door opened again and an official accompanied by three soldiers entered and stopped at our cell. The soldiers dragged me out and along the corridor. So this was it. It was only when we were out, I realised my two men were left behind. What was going on? The official read from a document that said I had been specially selected by the grace of the Governor for release at the time of the Festival.

Then I remembered—there was this custom to release a prisoner by popular choice. I couldn't believe it, not even when the soldiers knocked off my fetters, none too gently, it must be said, and washed me down and gave me some clothes. I was full of questions, and although the official was none too helpful, the soldiers told me what had happened. Pilate had given the choice of the prisoner release to the crowd—Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah—and they had chosen me! Stirred up by the priests, they had bayed for Jesus' blood, and so he was to be crucified instead of me. I couldn't take it all in. I felt dizzy and sick. All I wanted was to have my men released. I said I was not going out without them. One of the soldiers, who was a bit kinder than the others, said, "On the other side of that door there is a crowd of people waiting to welcome you. You are going through that door. You either walk through it on your own two feet with pride, or we throw you through it!" I got the message and I walked through that door.

People greeted me like a hero, like a long lost friend. But I was in no mood for it. I would like to have known where they were when I was fighting for my life, and many of my men had died. But soon there was a great commotion as soldiers came out leading three prisoners carrying their crosses—my two friends and Jesus in the middle. I wanted to try to rescue my men at least, but

no one would help me, and I was too weak to even try. But I followed that sad procession. I felt a compulsion to follow—and not just for my two friends either. I was fascinated by this man who was dying my death. I couldn't get near for priests and other opponents of Jesus who were going to make sure he was executed. Out though the city gates we went, out to Skull Hill—a gruesome place, the place of execution.

There the Roman soldiers nailed each of them to their crosses, and while my men cursed and swore, the Carpenter said nothing, except one thing—the most amazing thing. He prayed. He called God his Father, like he really knew him. He said, “Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing!” The filthy Romans knew what they were doing all right! How could he forgive them?

They then nailed a notice over him that said, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” It was Pilate's little joke at our expense. This poor bedraggled figure wearing nothing but a crown of thorns would be the only king that Rome would ever allow us to have. This enraged the priests and they mocked Jesus, saying, “He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he is the Christ of God, let him come down from the cross.” I despised the whole godless crew of them. They would have mocked me just the same, only I happened to serve

some political purpose of their own. And the people and the soldiers and even my two men, one on each side of him, took up the chant. I said nothing. "He saved others." "He saved others." The words kept running through my brain. In a strange way he had saved my life. That was the irony of it. He was dying in my place. It should have been me on that middle cross.

But then I heard the strangest thing. One of my men, Joseph was his name, started to rebuke his friend. He said, "Aren't you afraid of God? We are all sentenced to death. And we deserve it. But this man" (he twisted his head towards Jesus) "has done nothing wrong." Then he cried out, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!" There was some mocking laughter at that, but then there was silence to see what Jesus would say. For me the world stood still, it seemed to me that more than my friend's redemption hung on Jesus' answer. Would he say, "Too late, my friend. No time left now to atone for your sins"? Or "You've lived a life of evil, and now you must pay the price"?

Jesus turned his thorn-crowned head to Joseph and smiled, and said, "I'm telling you the truth; today, you will be with me, in Paradise." Now, that was kingly! I could have wept with joy for my friend's redemption.

But what of Judas Barabbas? The world turned dark that day, from twelve noon for three hours, and I heard

much that I did not understand. But I heard three things that I will never forget. I heard Jesus scream in a voice that made my blood run cold, "My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me?" And to that there was no answer. I also heard Jesus, just before he died, shout in the greatest voice I have ever heard, louder than a battle cry, "The price is paid". The third thing was this. I heard the Roman centurion, who was supervising the execution, say on Jesus' death, "Surely this was the Son of God!"

Strange days! When a rebel on a cross believed that the crucified Galilean beside him was the true King who could introduce him to glory, and when a Roman soldier believed that the King of the Jews was the Son of God! And when the innocent Carpenter took the God-forsaken death that the murderer Barabbas deserved.

Where will I go now? Back to my friend Manahem, to try to regain the kingdom of the Jews and to die with him at Masada or in some other dark hole? Or will I follow a new King, the King who died my death? That is what I must now decide.

Mark 15:1-15

Luke 23:26-43

Mark 15:33-39