

A Soldier's Verdict

We had three executions to do that day. Nothing unusual about that. It was one of the things you had to get used to in the land of the Jews. I've never known a place that was more trouble. Usually once Rome had conquered a country, people settled down and gradually began to enjoy the benefits. But not there! I'd never seen so many bandits, terrorists, criminals and revolutionaries.

I've been here in this God-forsaken country for a number of years now—a centurion in the Roman Army in command of a company of 100 men. Well, it's supposed to be 100, but with the cuts nowadays, it's barely 80. I'm just serving out my 20 years until I can retire, and be done with all this.

So yes, executions were commonplace. And of course it wasn't the more honourable execution of beheading, reserved for Roman citizens; it was the execution for common criminals and slaves—crucifixion.

The day began ordinarily enough, although a little early. A prisoner had been brought in during the night. He was handed over by the Jewish Council, no less. They were only authorised to deal with religious

matters, and there were some accusations of a more political nature. So he was brought to the Governor, the Procurator, Pontius Pilate. They were after the death penalty because they had convicted him of blasphemy, of saying he was the Son of God, but they weren't authorised to carry out capital punishment. Of course Pilate wasn't interested in such religious mumbo jumbo, and so when they came to him, the charge was changed to one of revolution. They said this prisoner opposed the payment of taxes to Caesar and had also claimed that he was the King of the Jews. Now that was something that did interest Pilate. There were far too many revolutionaries, and one less would be all to the good.

But that's when things started to get strange. Right from the start Pilate was convinced the man was innocent. There was no love lost, of course, between Pilate and the Jews for a number of reasons, and if he could cross them he would. But it would have been politically prudent to have just given them what they wanted in this case—it was no skin off his nose. But he dug his heels in. It was all the result of his examination of the prisoner. I was there. It was the most amazing examination of a prisoner I have ever seen. I began to wonder who was examining who! Pilate asked this Jesus if he was the King of the Jews. Jesus answered by

saying his kingdom was not of this world. "So you are a king then!" Pilate says. Jesus agreed, but said he was the king of truth. The whole reason he came into the world, he said, was to tell the truth. He looked keenly at Pilate as he said that, but Pilate just shrugged it off and went out saying, "What is truth?" The truth never mattered to Pilate. It rarely does to politicians. It's what's expedient, or what will curry favour, or line their pockets. But I thought it was a dangerous motto for a judge to live by.

Anyway, he went out and told the Jews he could find no basis for a charge against this Jesus. By this time quite a crowd had gathered and things were beginning to look nasty. They weren't at all happy with that. So Pilate tried a second opinion. We had to take Jesus over to Herod's palace, because Jesus came from Herod's jurisdiction of Galilee. I'll never forget that scene. Seemingly Herod had wanted to see this Jesus for a long time, because he was a famous religious teacher. He had something of an obsession about it, ever since he had a cousin of Jesus beheaded. He asked Jesus one question after another. He wanted to see him perform a miracle. The religious leaders were there too, accusing him. But Jesus never said a word and never moved a finger. That was impressive. I know from experience how it is well-nigh impossible to stay silent in such a

situation where you are being provoked beyond endurance. Jesus just looked steadily at them. It wasn't an angry look. It was more sad, a look of pity really. Herod was enraged and mocked Jesus and had him sent back to Pilate dressed in a princely robe in mockery. But he could confirm no charge against him.

Then Pilate thought he could get the crowd to do his work for him. It was the custom at that time of year to release a prisoner of their choice. So he gave them a choice—Jesus or Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a real terrorist. I thought it was a dangerous choice. The crowd chose Barabbas.

Next he tried to appease them with partial punishment. He ordered Jesus to be flogged. It was just another chore for us soldiers. But again it was strange that under those leather lashes threaded with bone, he said never a word. No pleading for mercy. No cursing and swearing. I've seen such a flogging kill a man.

Taking their lead from Herod, the soldiers then added their own bit of mockery. At the time I thought there was no harm in it. They dressed him in Herod's purple robe, and someone twisted together some spiky thorns to make a rough crown which they stuck on his head and they mocked him, until I finally called a halt and brought him back to Pilate.

Pilate then paraded him in front of the crowd, and said, "Behold the man!" He certainly did have a way with words, did old Pilate! But if he thought that would satisfy them, he was very wrong. By this time they were baying for his blood. The shout went up, "Crucify! Crucify!"

Pilate was at a loss. I had never seen him so indecisive. And two things made it even worse. First, I passed on a message from his wife, something about a dream and Jesus was a righteous man and that he should have nothing to do with him. Second, some of the religious leaders said that Jesus should die because he claimed to be the Son of God! I could see the colour drain out of Pilate's face. I began to have a strange feeling myself.

But it was inevitable, looking back on it. The religious leaders played their trump card. "Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar. If you let Jesus go, you're no friend of Caesar!" Pilate got the message. He was in enough trouble already over mal-administration. With very little more ado, he condemned Jesus to be crucified.

So we led him out with the two others. We knew there were to be three executions that day, but we thought the third man would be Barabbas. Jesus was so

weak by this stage that he could hardly carry the cross, so we press-ganged a passer-by to help.

Out we went to the Hill of the Skull, three condemned men, one passer-by, four soldiers and myself, and the tools of our trade, ladders, ropes, hammers and nails, in addition to our weapons. But a crows started following us.

At Skull Hill we stripped them and crucified them, one on each side and Jesus in the middle—a nail in each hand, and one in each foot—and hauled their crosses into place. As we were nailing them, one, a young lad, cried for mercy, one cursed us to hell, but Jesus prayed. And what a prayer! “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing!” He spoke as if he knew God. And he asked for us to be forgiven. In all my years of executions, I had never heard that before!

We offered them all the drugged wine that some tender-hearted women of the city prepared for condemned men. They all took it—except Jesus.

We also had to put up a sign over Jesus’ head. It was a big thing. Pilate had insisted on it. It said, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”, not just once, but three times—in three different languages—Latin, Greek and Aramaic. That annoyed the religious leaders, but Pilate refused to change it.

The soldiers then divided up the prisoners' clothes among them (as they were entitled to do). But when they had shared out everything equally, there was a piece of Jesus' clothing left—a good woollen tunic, too good to tear, so they threw dice for it. It seemed more and more incongruous—this one who had the title King over him had nothing, and his executioners were gambling for his clothes.

By this time quite a crowd had gathered—mostly hostile, egged on by the religious types—but some of his followers were there, mostly women. Even his mother was there. He committed her to the care of one of his friends.

But the majority of the crowd were turning nasty. The priests were shouting, "He saved others, but he can't save himself. If he is the Christ, the king of Israel, let him come down from the cross and prove it!" The crowd took up the same thing and so did some of my men. Even the criminals being crucified with him joined in. But Jesus said never a word. Not until one of the other condemned men changed his tune. He must have been thinking things over, although how he could think at all, the state he was in, I'll never know.

He started to rebuke his friend. Didn't he fear God? They were all sentenced to death, justly, except for Jesus—he'd done nothing wrong. Then he turned to

Jesus and said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom!" Jesus was silent no longer. Nor had he one word of recrimination. He said, "This is the truth: Today you will be with me in paradise!"

He wore nothing but a crown of thorns, his throne was a cross and he was only hours away from death. But he believed he was coming into a kingdom, and he convinced at least one person there that he was.

But then something happened that silenced everyone. At high noon, with the sun at its zenith, and the heat unbearable, suddenly there was darkness. I don't mean a cloud or a storm. I mean the darkness of night. A darkness that could be felt. People had to get torches in order to see. I have heard all the theories. Eclipses and what not. But it was nothing like that. An awful silence fell. The birds went to roost and stopped singing. The animals went to their dens.

It was dark for three whole hours. I can't tell you the thoughts that went through my mind in that time. There was terror, there was wonder. My past rose up before me. My head was filled with all kinds of questions. What was happening?

Then we were all startled by a voice. It was like being awoken from a dream. It was voice that made your skin crawl and made every hair stand up. It was the most fearful scream of anguish and despair I have

ever heard, and it came from the middle cross. "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" I knew just enough Aramaic to know that meant "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But at that moment the darkness lifted as suddenly as it had fallen and the sun shone.

Jesus said he was thirsty and someone ran to him with a sponge full of sour wine on a stick and when he had wet his parched lips and tongue with it, he shouted in the greatest voice I have ever heard, greater than a battle cry, one word, this time in Greek, "*Tetelestai*", "it is done, completed, it's paid in full".

With the very next breath he prayed, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" and he was gone. What kind of man knew God as his Father? I have seen many deaths, but never one like this, so triumphant, so fulfilled.

I felt someone should say something. But no one said a word. So I said what had been forming in my mind all day. It finally came out. I said two things. I said, "Surely this was a righteous man." Now that may not seem much to you. But to a Roman like myself it means the world. It is the highest accolade we can give. He was just, innocent, righteous. But I knew even that was not enough. And so I said, "This was the Son of God." Sometimes just saying something makes it concrete. It had been forming in my mind all day. It's

what he had been accused of by the religious leaders—claiming to be the Son of God. But I heard him pray as no one had ever prayed, calling God his own Father—once asking for our forgiveness, and once asking that God would welcome him. Somehow I knew that both prayers had been answered. He had departed in peace after a great battle in the darkness of night, and at least one of those who crucified him was forgiven.

John 18:28 - 19:27

Luke 23:32-43

Mark 15:33-39