

My Burden of Shame

It was the most humiliating day of my life. But it came to be the day for which I have been most greatly honoured.

It is a terrible thing to suffer shame – to be humiliated and ridiculed and scorned. I should know, as my name will tell you – I am Simeon the Black – a black Jew from Africa. Yet from such inauspicious beginnings my business prospered and I became rich. I was able to travel far and wide – from my home city of Kuraynay to Alexandria, to Jerusalem and even to Antioch. But wherever I travelled I knew what it was to be mocked – for the colour of my skin or my religion.

It was different in my home city. It is part of a Roman province – very cosmopolitan, consisting of local citizens and farmers, together with many resident aliens and a sizeable Jewish community. And I was very much part of the business community. Our port is famed for its export of corn, wool, dates, and the herb silphium.

However, when I travelled abroad it was another story. People looked down on me for the colour of my skin. If it was not that, it was my Jewishness. And the combination was irresistible for some people. You know how some people just love to humiliate others

who are different from them? Well, in my case I was different in two ways, so no matter where I travelled, there was always something people could pick on. Even when I travelled to Jerusalem – you would have thought I would be safe there among fellow Jews – but I soon discovered there are Jews and Jews. In spite of the fact I was scrupulous about keeping all our laws, you are never good enough for some people.

In fact it was in Jerusalem that the most shameful thing happened to me. At least I thought it shameful then. I had travelled to Jerusalem for the great feast of the Passover. It was the time when every Jew who could afford it made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, because this feast commemorates the time when God sent Moses to set the people of Israel free from slavery in Egypt. It was called Passover, because when God judged Egypt with the death of their firstborn, the Angel of Death passed over the houses of all those who had sprinkled the blood of a lamb on their doorframes.

Jerusalem was incredibly busy. At Passover time the normal population of a few hundred thousand more than doubled with all the pilgrims flocking to the city. So I could only find accommodation in a nearby village.

Anyway, early on the morning of the sixth day of the week I was on my way into the city, along with

thousands of other pilgrims. Although the Passover started the night before, the celebrations lasted a week, and indeed there were differences amongst the various Jewish sects as to when exactly the Passover lamb was killed. And in any case, because all the lambs had to be slaughtered in the Temple, it was impossible to do it all in one day. This was also the day of Preparation for the Sabbath, the following day, and so there were special services at the Temple.

I was amongst crowds on the way up to the Gennath Gate into Jerusalem from the north-west. I had almost reached the gate, when there was the tremendous clamour of a crowd trying to come out of the city, and with a blaring of trumpets, a detachment of Roman soldiers came forcing their way out of the city pushing the crowds out of their way. There wasn't much room and everyone was trying to get out of the way of the Roman spears and shields so, what with all the jostling and shoving and the general confusion, I found myself, quite unintentionally, at the front of the crowd on one side of the road. With the result that I had a perfect view of what was going on.

I rapidly realised it was an execution squad. There were three men being led out to die, four soldiers to each criminal, with a centurion in charge. But my eyes were drawn to the man in the middle of the

detachment. He was struggling along, dragging a huge wooden cross on his shoulder, going painfully slow. He was covered in blood and – the strangest thing – he had something on his head that looked like a crown. At first I couldn't make out what it was. But as he came nearer, I saw what it was. It was made of the huge spiky thorns that grow in profusion in that part of the world.

I asked someone beside me, who'd just come out of the city, what was going on. Who was the man with the crown of thorns? He scowled at me and sneered, "Where have you been, black boy? Don't you know the Blasphemer when you see him? That's Jesus of Nazareth." Then he started shouting at the condemned man, "Tried to throw us all out of the Temple, did you? You don't look so high and mighty now, do you, Jesus?"

I realised then voices were raised on every side in mockery. "You're supposed to be the great healer. Heal yourself now, doctor!... So you were going to demolish the temple and rebuild it in three days? Is that plank of wood too heavy for you, carpenter?... Crucify the blasphemer!" I think they would have torn him to pieces, if the soldiers hadn't kept them back.

Although I had only recently arrived in the area, I had heard of this Jesus. Some said he had done wonderful works – healing and blessing and doing

good. But others said he was a blasphemer claiming to be the Messiah – even claiming equality with God! Still others said the authorities wanted rid of him because he was politically dangerous. They thought he would lead a rebellion and the Romans would wreak terrible revenge on the Jewish people.

I didn't know what to believe, but one thing I did know. I wouldn't have wanted to be in Jesus' place then. I had spent all my life trying to avoid being ridiculed, trying to ingratiate myself with people, using my wealth to win influence. None of that would have been of any use to Jesus, such was the level of the vitriolic hatred directed against him. And as it turned out, none of that was any use to me either.

Just as he nearly reached where I was, Jesus stumbled and fell. The procession stopped, in some confusion. The centurion ordered two soldiers to lift Jesus. They dragged him to his feet, and he started to walk again, but he could only move his feet a few inches at a time. The Centurion said, "This is no use. It'll take for ever to get to Skull Hill."

I was suddenly struck by the difference between the soldiers and the crowd. Whereas the crowd was vindictive and hate-filled, the soldiers were merely doing their duty, following orders. They just wanted it over and done with as quickly as possible.

But my musings were suddenly and violently interrupted. “Seize him!” said the centurion, and he was pointing at me! I couldn’t move for the crowd. Indeed, several people behind me were helpfully pushing me forward into the hands of the soldiers!

I started to protest, babbling wildly. “But I don’t know this man. I have nothing to do with this. I am a respectable businessman from the city of Kuraynay!”

“Silence!” roared the centurion, “I hereby commandeer you to carry a burden for the Roman Army!”

Without further ado, the soldiers pushed me under the cross behind Jesus and told me to carry it. This was greeted with howls of laughter and renewed jeering from the crowd. “You’re mixing with the right kind of people now, Jesus – a black slave!... String up the black boy as well!” And more to that effect that I couldn’t repeat.

How I wished the ground would open and swallow me up! In all the humiliations of my life, this was the most humiliating. To be forced to carry the cross of a condemned criminal to the place of execution! I would be accounted unclean, and not able to go up to the Temple or to the Synagogue of the Freemen until I had been cleansed with ritual washing. Our law says, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”, and I would

be tainted with that curse. But as I was thinking only of myself, Jesus turned his head and said, "Thank you!" I was astonished. I thought he would be too weak to speak and too preoccupied with his own pain and his own fate to even notice me. But there seemed to be some inner fire in him that was burning brightly.

The centurion gave orders and the sad little procession moved off again. The cross was heavier than I imagined, although Jesus was carrying the heavy end. As we went on, I became aware that there were two distinct sections in the crowd around us. Those in front who were jeering and mocking were men, while behind us there were many women who were weeping and wailing. It's a fearful sound, the wailing of women. But this was not the howling of the professional mourners. This was heartfelt weeping. It sent shivers down my spine.

Just then Jesus spoke again, and it was astonishing to hear such a loud, strong voice come from that battered and bleeding body. He turned to the women – and it was the longest thing he said that day – he said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children."

He didn't sound ungrateful, he said it with compassion, but I wondered what he meant. But he went on, "A fearful day is coming, when people will

say 'It's the women who are childless who are blessed.' And people will beg the mountains to fall on them and the hills to bury them."

I recognised the last words from the Prophet Hosea, warning of judgement to fall on Israel for all her rebellion against the Lord. And as he spoke, a terrifying vision of destruction passed before my eyes, of city walls collapsing, of blood and fire and utter terror. I could understand why he had compassion on these women. He seemed to be seeing a day of reckoning coming that would be like the end of the world.

And then he finished with something really mysterious: "For if they do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it's dry?" What did he mean? Did he mean that, if the Romans were doing something like this to him, who had only done good, how much worse would it be for those who were really evil? I don't know, but some of those around just started shouting "Well, the tree you're carrying is dry and dead anyway! And you'll soon be as dry and dead as it!"

And so the mockery went on. They soon forgot about me, as Jesus bore the brunt of their ridicule. I thought the misery would never end, but eventually we reached Skull Hill, the place of execution. The soldiers

took the cross and threw it down on the ground. They told me I could go.

Throughout the whole, long, miserable, shameful episode, I was longing for this moment. To be free, to have my life back. But when the moment came, I found I couldn't leave. I felt compelled to see what would happen to this Jesus, and if he would say anything else. So I stayed. I had never seen a crucifixion before – not close up – and it was horrific. But I'm glad I stayed.

There are certain things I will never forget. The first was that the three men to be executed were all offered a drug to dull the pain, the other two both took it, but Jesus didn't. I marvelled at that.

Then they laid the three of them on the crosses, hammered nails into their hands and feet and then raised the crosses into place. Whereas the other criminals were screaming and cursing and swearing, Jesus prayed! He said, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing!" He prayed in Greek, so the soldiers knew what he was saying, and I will always remember the look on the centurion's face when he heard what Jesus said. It was a look of utter amazement. He had never come across anything like that before. But the other soldiers seemed completely unaffected. They just started gambling for his clothes.

They had put up a notice on the cross above Jesus' head. It read "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". This angered some of the religious leaders who were there. They complained to the centurion that he wasn't the King of the Jews. It should say he *claimed* to be the King of the Jews. The centurion told them they'd have to take that up with the governor.

Then some of these leaders started sneering at Jesus again. They said, "He saved others. Let him save himself if he's the Christ! Let him come down from the cross, if he's the King of Israel! He claimed to be the Son of God. Let God rescue him then!" And so on.

Then the soldiers took up the theme: "You're supposed to be a king, so save yourself." Even the criminals crucified with Jesus started ridiculing him, and one of them said, "Aren't you the Christ? So save yourself and us!"

There was one thing that struck me in all the mockery. They said, "He saved others." I wondered at that. They wouldn't have said that unless it was true. They simply had to admit it. So the rumours of the wonderful things he'd done were true. And if it was true he had divine powers to heal the sick, raise the dead and rescue the enslaved, why wasn't he saving himself and demonstrating the reality of his claims?

But I had no time to pursue these questions for I heard the strangest thing. One of the criminals 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. He turned his thorn-crowned head to the man and said, "I'm telling you the truth; today, you will be with me, in Paradise." It may have been only a crown of thorns he was wearing, but no king ever said anything as majestic as that!

It was then noon with the sun at its highest, when suddenly it was completely dark, as if night had fallen. And in the middle of that darkness, Jesus let out a bloodcurdling scream: "My God, My God why have you abandoned me?" He had reached the depths of shame and alienation. I didn't understand it all then, but it seemed as if others were rescued, because he wasn't.

But his end was peaceful. He called out in loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit", as if he knew God as his loving father. And he died.

I had much to ponder as I left Skull Hill. But I was not alone. It was a very different crowd who left that place – thoughtful and sombre. Things had been witnessed and experienced that day that would leave their mark. I know it left a mark on me. I could not rest until I learned more of this man whose cross I had taken up and whom I had followed.

I have taken up his cross and followed him every day of my life for many years now. And my sons, Alexander and Rufus, follow him too. I travelled to Antioch and there told some Greeks about Jesus, and that was the start of a whole new chapter that led to Saul and Barnabas setting out on a great mission to the West.

I still get mocked and ridiculed. But it has ceased to matter. Ever since that short journey out of Jerusalem, I have learned how to bear such derision. There are many things I've done of which I am ashamed, but following Jesus is not one of them.

Luke 23:26-49