

GOOD FRIDAY REFLECTION

“Slave, remove my tunic!” No-one comes. Mind you, I’m not surprised. Today, it’s been hard to tell day from night and they are all terrified. Darkness at noon – and such darkness – so thick you could taste it. Family, slaves, they’re all babbling away in the household shrine for Jupiter to save them. Me – I want time to think. What a day! And yet – I don’t feel fear, more....wonder.

It was that man we crucified. Rebel, they said, claimed to be king. Maybe. I gather he shambled into Jerusalem last week on a donkey. No royal beauty or majesty there. And his followers – a rabble waving palm branches. Nothing that a detachment of my boys couldn’t have dealt with in two shakes of a broad sword. And when he came in the gates, did he come and attack us, the occupiers? No, he went off to their temple and - I gather – shook up the money grubbers there. No wonder they hated him. But no trouble to us. No violence or deceit.

Then we got the order to come for crowd control to the palace. Pilate was debating with the chief Jews. They wanted this man out of their hair, that’s my guess, saying he was claiming to be king, rebelling against Caesar. Pilate was having none of it, at first – told them he could see nothing wrong with the man. Not my business, I suppose. Still, he gave the boys some fun by having the man flogged, with the trusty cat-of-nine tails with sumptuous bone and lead attachments. I had to keep their blood lust in bounds, I’m afraid – and not kill the man. Now there’s something unusual. Usually the client yells and screams for mercy, but not this man. He was silent as a lamb – despite the flesh of his back spattering the walls.

We mopped up his blood a bit with a soldier’s robe and crown of thorns. I let the boys have more sport, beating him up a bit “Hail king of the Jews” we said. Some king. Still silent. We tore the robe off and it reopened all his wounds – but still no words. Disfigured and marred we led him back. There the Jews were again, yelling and screaming. Made sure the boys kept order, roughed up a few of the wild ones. Funny how crowds can be swung round by a few people though – no sooner had their leaders called to crucify the man than the whole crowd was at it – like at the games. Frothing at the mouth in fury some of them. Just a few, quiet, in tears. Especially some women. But none of the men who had greeted him so enthusiastically only a week earlier. Ha! You get cynical about humanity in the army.

But all that yelling – and I think some insinuation that Caesar might get to hear about a reprieve - was too much for Pilate. What a decisive governor we have – full of integrity! He changes his mind completely and gives the man over to be crucified, reprieves a real killer, Barabbas. Washes his hands in public to cast blame on the Jews. More work for us. Can’t say I was too happy about it – couldn’t see anything wrong with him. But orders are orders. In the army you do what you’re told or your head’s off. They gave me the record of crimes “the titulus” it’s called, to fix to the cross. But it was strange what Pilate wrote on it “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” in Greek, Latin and Aramaic! The Jews were furious but here Pilate stood his ground. Anyway, I did my job and held it up at the head of the procession – to the place of death.

That flogging had weakened him a lot. He was staggering everywhere. Couldn’t take his medicine! And everywhere the Jews – yelling hate mostly – but the quiet ones, the women in tears... More crowd control but that cross was waving all over the place. Hit one of the boys on the head – we laughed – but had to get the thing sorted or we’d never get him to Calvary on time. Governor’s orders - we had to get moving so the client would be dead before evening – something to do with the Jewish festival – stop another riot I suppose... Tcha, so we just grabbed someone looking suitably muscular – poor bloke thought he was just going to their

temple with his son, ended up carrying a cross. Should think himself lucky it wasn't him! And the man staggered on, despised and rejected. And the women cried. And the crowd yelled. And it was getting hot...one woman gave him water – risking a beating from us. What was in it for her?

So we finally got to Calvary, banged in the nails and raised and lifted him up. Pierced and crushed. And the women cried, and the crowd yelled "If you are the son of God, save yourself". Some Jewish stuff I don't understand. And then he looked straight at me "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And later I asked the boys and they all felt the same. Those eyes, piercing but full of compassion, authority, love.....somehow bringing peace.

There were two others already decorating their trees. Now they were bad uns – transgressors with a capital T. Robbery and insurrection, no doubts in the governor's mind there! They shouted out, as clients do...but funnily they seemed to be calling to our man and not to us, or all and sundry. Now I've learnt some of this Aramaic, being in this godforsaken country for so long. One was just shouting curses at him like all the rest of them. But the other said something like "Remember me, when you come into your kingdom" and the man said "today you will be with me in Paradise". With compassion, with authority, with love, bringing healing. I listened ever harder to hear what other things he said...

Nothing for a long time. When you're slowly suffocating on a cross, there's no energy much for polite conversation. It's painful even for me to watch the clients, though I've seen many. Stretch up, agony on the pierced legs and arms, breathe, relax them they feel like the chest is crushed. And it starts again. And him with his back already in shards, his blood dripping down the wooden post, darkening the ground... Well, we have an old trick with crucifixion. Give them gall which dulls the effort, the pain, makes them give up quicker so we can go home. But he wanted none of it – despite his agony. And I'm thinking – who is this?

The boys got something out of it – his long robe. "Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." That's Roman soldiers – gamble for anything! Not strictly allowed but they'd had a hard day...

Then the sky spoke for him. And the ground. Darkness like Hades and an earthquake – everyone got terrified. The crowd ran in all directions. I had to keep order even among the boys. Frightened me too, my heart was pounding. But the women just knelt at the foot of the cross, looked, wept. What did they believe, that we don't?

He looked down at a young man with them – his only "disciple" left I suppose - and said he said to the oldest tearful woman "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the man, "Here is your mother.". Even after all that pain, he wanted to make sure his mother was well cared for.

Then he spoke again – "I'm thirsty". Gave him some of our lousy army wine on a sponge. Then he cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" My heart suddenly bled for him – I don't know why. Centurions don't cry – bad for discipline – but I wanted to. I could just feel his pain, right here in my guts. How he suffered – stricken and afflicted – by his God!

Then he called one last time "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit" and "It is finished". With relief, no more pain. And that was it. He collapsed inwards and died. For me, peering through the darkness, and after all that had gone before, I felt this deep conviction, like a stab from a sword. I couldn't help saying "Surely this was the Son of God". And it was as if

despite the darkness, where I was as lost as everyone else, a ray of pure white light had illuminated my heart. And I can't forget it.

Well, we did the usual tasks to finish the job. I got one of the boys to do the corpse test with the spear – sure enough, water as well as blood came from his pierced chest. No need to break the legs, not like the robbers, who wriggled like maggots till they died. I got called to go to Pilate. He wanted to know whether the man was dead – couldn't be more dead if he tried, I assured him. So he let the man's followers – a rich man called Joseph I think - have the body. The rich man's tomb, that was where they took him. And I left one of the boys there – Pilate's orders. Watch the tomb so the body stays there, he said, or it will be the worse for you.

So here I am at the end of the shift – left the deputy in charge. Sun came back then we had a normal dusk. Servants and family all babbling to Jupiter to save them. But not me.

I know more now, seeing that man, and how he died. I don't believe I've heard the last of him. I understand what I have not heard.