

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, April 7, 2019 – Lent 5

Hymns: 375 – Fairest Lord Jesus; Lamb of God; O Bless the Gifts;

238 - Beneath the Cross of Jesus; 353 – Hail, our once rejected Jesus

Scripture: Matthew 27:27-31; John 19:23-24; Luke 23:44-47; John 19:31-35;

Mark 15:42-46

Sermon Title: Soldiers of the Cross

*Matthew 27:27-31*

*Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.*

*John 19:23-24*

*When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.*

*"Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, "They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment." So this is what the soldiers did.*

*Luke 23:44-47*

*It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.*

*The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man."*

*John 19:31-34*

*Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.*

*Mark 15:42-46*

*It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.*

A longer Scripture reading this morning than we normally have. There are two reasons for this; first of all, I believe with every fibre of my being that what the Scriptures say is of far greater value than whatever I have to say about them; and secondly, I wanted you to get a sense of how the Roman soldiers – the soldiers of the cross - the guards – are central to the story of the Crucifixion. They are there in every scene; even when they're not in the foreground, they're in the background, moving things forward with organised, efficient brutality.

In fact, “organised efficient brutality” is a pretty accurate description of the Roman army. It is the key to understanding how the Rome became the Roman Empire, and not just one among dozens of other powerful city-states. They were organised. They were efficient. And my God, were they brutal.

The Romans were organised. They had a vision of the world beyond the walls of their city. Rather than the old ways, which said, “Conquer a people by utterly destroying them, their land, their homes, their crops, grab what you can, and go back home,” the Romans incorporated conquered lands into their own territory, eventually their own Empire. For the Romans, it wasn't as much about sacking a city for what you can get out of it before you burn it to the ground – although they did plenty of that too – for the Romans, it was all about what you could bleed out of that city long-term, by way of tribute, produce, and most of all, taxes.

Romans loved taxes. They loved collecting taxes. They loved raising taxes. They loved seeing just how hard they could squeeze their subjects, by taxing everything they did, everything they owned, everything they ate. And if you didn't pay your taxes, here comes the Roman army.

It's a bit like Canada that way, although instead of the Roman army, Revenue Canada sends auditors, which are scarier by far. And in Canada, now we even have the Carbon Tax, which means we are not only taxed on what we consume, but also on what we emit. Taxed, as it were, on both ends. “Why didn't we think of that?” say the Romans.

They were not only organised, they were efficient. They more or less invented things like a regular postal service, like paved roads, like aqueducts of fresh water, like flush toilets and sewers and hot baths and all the things we love but hardly pay any attention to.

They were not only organised and efficient. They were brutal. For instance, Julius Caesar, who is remembered for many things, should be remembered most of all for his brutality. To secure the Northern border of the Empire, in what became known as the Gallic Wars, Caesar himself calculated that he killed over a million people, including retreating and defenseless populations, and enslaved a million more. The Roman Senate charged him with war crimes, which was astonishing for the day. Nevertheless, he was welcomed into Rome as a conquering hero.

Organised, efficient brutality. That's the Roman way. That's what was drilled into the head of every Roman soldier. And you have to understand that, if you're going to understand just what happened, and why, on the day of the Crucifixion. And the Roman role in it.

First of all, while other cultures invented crucifixion, the Romans really ran with it, using it not only as a form of punishment, but as a propaganda tool – “This is what happens when you don't do what we say.” There are no firm records of how many people the Romans crucified over the years, but to give you an idea, in reaction to the slave rebellion led by Spartacus, the Romans crucified over 6000 runaway slaves, the crosses placed along the main Roman highway, every ten metres, for over 50 kilometres. And that story is repeated in other events, time and again. Which is to say, the Romans were very good at it.

And to be good at something like that on such a vast scale, you have to shut down any tender feelings of humanity, any sympathy for another, any regard for your victim as worthy of compassion – or as even human. The key to being a good Roman soldier was to not think about what you were doing, to shut down any feelings you might have about who you're doing it to, and to regard whatever brutality you are ordered to do as “just doing your job.” Or, worse, as a source of recreation and amusement.

Which is why the shocking story of Jesus' crucifixion reads the way it does. We read it, and are horrified – the mocking, the beating, the scourging – the crown of thorns. Why, on top of this horrible execution, do we have this sadistic sideshow? Sadly, those reading these accounts in the time of the Roman Empire wouldn't have been shocked. At all. That's the way it was done. To live in the Empire meant to have seen this time and again. It was all part of the de-humanization of the victim. Makes the job a bit easier. Passes the time.

Same with the soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothes. This awful image of the soldiers playing dice, casting lots at the foot of the cross, to see who gets the one thing of material value out of this man – again, nothing special. Nothing to see here. That's how it's done. Move along. Time and again, that's how it was done.

Or the death of Jesus itself; the seemingly heartless breaking of the legs, to hasten the end. It was a cruel mercy; break the legs of a crucified man, and he'll suffocate in minutes. That's what they did to those who were on crosses with Jesus that day; the religious leaders, whose big festival kicked off at sundown, didn't want one of the main gates of the city to be decorated in this unpleasant way, and asked to have them all taken down. But when they came to Jesus, the soldiers saw he was already dead. No leg-breaking necessary. A quick spear through the side and into the heart, just to make sure. "He's dead, all right," they said. And when Pilate asked, "So soon?" he was assured by the supervising Centurion himself. "Saw it with my own eyes." And you can bet he had. Lots of times.

So to the earliest readers of the Gospels, all of this rings all-too-sadly true. The scourging. The beating. The humiliation. The crown of thorns. The dragging of the cross through crowded streets. The callousness of the soldiers. The Crucifixion itself. The gambling for the clothes. The breaking of the legs. The spear to the side. They'd seen it all before. No surprises here. That's your Roman soldiers, that's your Roman army at work.

But there are surprises in the story nonetheless, even for those early Roman readers. But the surprises aren't from the brutality. The surprises are from the moments when the light breaks through. When even a Roman soldier – when even a Centurion, no less – the very symbol of Roman brutality, the personification of Roman evil - opens his eyes and sees. Sees what he's done. Sees to whom he's done it. Sees a condemned, beaten, crucified man as more than a thing, as more than a job – but sees that this man is a man – no, more than a man; that this one they crucified was innocent, righteous; was the very Son of God.

That was the surprising moment for the audience for whom the Gospels were written – that a Roman soldier can actually see what they have done. Can be moved. Can be shaken to the very core. Luke records the moment: "*The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, 'Surely this was a righteous man.'*" Mark confirms the story (Mark 15:39): "*And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'*" Matthew goes one better (Matthew 27:54): "*When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'*" That's the surprising moment. That's what would have

grabbed the attention of those early Roman hearers of the events. That even the Roman soldiers, that even the Centurion, believed.

To understand in a more modern context, think of a Jew, in 1946, who somehow managed to survive the horrors of Auschwitz. He reads a newspaper account of another concentration camp, Bergen-Belsen. He reads of the cruelties, the suffering, the inhumanity. None of this surprises him. But then he reads that the commander of the camp, a high-ranking Nazi officer, comes to realize one day that the Jews he was so ruthlessly exterminating were people, human beings, loved by God. The camp commander is filled with remorse. He converts to Judaism. That, to say the least, would be a surprise to the Holocaust survivor. But no less of a surprise than the conversion of a Centurion, to a reader in the ancient Roman world.

The only one who would not have been surprised by a Roman soldier coming to faith, was Jesus. Unlike his fellow Jews, who regarded Romans largely as subhuman monsters, whose memories of Roman soldiers were of the organised, efficient, brutal lot who had sacked Galilee just a few years before, who had imposed blinding taxation, who had taken Jewish children as slaves, who enforced Roman rule over Judea with an unfeeling iron fist, who, under Pilate's orders, had slaughtered protesting Galileans in the precincts of the very Temple itself – unlike his fellow Jews, Jesus saw the humanity in the Romans, forgave them from the cross itself, recognised them as people in need of God's compassion and love, every bit as much as you and me. And so there are uncomfortable stories like this (Matthew 8:5-13):

*When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly."*

*Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?"*

*The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."*

*When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith..." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that moment.*

Much later, a good ten years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles tells an equally startling story – that of a Centurion who becomes a Christian. The Apostle Peter has been summoned to the home of a Centurion (Acts 10). Upon entering, here's a precis of what happened:

*Peter told them, “You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean... I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.*

Peter then preaches a sermon, outlining the story of Jesus, and to his amazement, the Centurion and his household believe, and are baptized by the Holy Spirit and, by Peter’s own hand, in water. Peter returns to Jerusalem, and reports the news: God’s love extends even to the Romans. Even a Centurion can be saved. Even a Centurion can believe.

We’ve heard the story of the Crucifixion of Jesus so many times, we’ve largely lost the capacity to be shocked, to be surprised. We might be offended at how uncomfortable it makes us to hear it again, but shocked? Surprised? Not so much. And as for the Centurion and the soldiers recognising what they’ve done, and to whom they’ve done it – well, we just skip by that without so much as a thought. Our eyes have glazed over, our ears grown dull, our hearts are a little bit hard. Like a Roman soldier, we’ve lost the capacity to be moved. By what Jesus went through. By what Jesus did. By how Jesus died. For us.

But it wasn’t too late for the Centurion. It wasn’t too late for the soldiers. And it isn’t too late for us; it isn’t too late for us to open our eyes, our ears, our hearts, to the story of that day; to understand just what was done, and why, and to whom; to realise that even though our names are not written in those pages, it is nevertheless for us Jesus does it; it is nevertheless for us, he dies.

My prayer is that as Holy Week approaches – and next Sunday it begins – as the story of Easter comes closer on the calendar, it will also come closer to us. To who we are. To our understanding. That we will come closer to appreciating the story as not just something long ago, but something which concerns you and me this very day. That we, too, might come to Jesus for help. That we, too, might stand with the Centurion at the foot of the cross, and believe. That we, too, might allow the Holy Spirit to fall upon us, as we come to realise that Jesus is not just for other people, but that Jesus is for you, for me; that salvation has come to our house.

*“This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel – and for us all - that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.”* For the soldiers at the cross; for the Centurion in charge of it all; for Jesus, who suffered at their hands, yet forgave them as he died; thanks be to God. May we, too, come to believe, and place our lives in His hands. Amen.