

April 02, 2021

Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

John 18:1-19:42

It's been a wonderful week here in Jerusalem. The weather's been fair with only a hint of the summer heat yet to come. But no matter the weather, the Jewish high holiday weeks are always wonderful for me. Not that I'm a particularly religious man, although I do observe the most sacred of our religious traditions like Passover which begins at sundown tonight.

These high holiday weeks are wonderful for me mostly because I'm a businessman. Together with my wife, Veronica, I operate a business that makes and sells the finest leather footwear in Judea, footwear that provides the ultimate in protection and support when navigating the treacherous cobblestones of Jerusalem's streets. The business has been in my family for generations.

The high holiday weeks are good for business for two reasons. The obvious reason is the crowds who come to Jerusalem from all over Judea and beyond to worship at the Temple. It seems they do as much shopping as worshipping, and that's good for me. The streets of Jerusalem have been packed all week, and I'm sure will be again today as folks make their final Passover preparations. The other reason for the brisk business this week is the occupying Roman army. Except for a small cohort permanently garrisoned in Jerusalem, the Roman legions are usually quartered at Caesarea Maritima, a very long day's march from Jerusalem. Evidently the Roman Governor, Pontus Pilate, hates Jerusalem and prefers the sea breezes at Caesarea Maritima. But during the high holiday times, Pilate and all his troops occupy Jerusalem with a full show of Roman force as a deterrent to the zealot

revolutionaries. Personally, like everyone else, I hate the Romans—but I love their business. I have the contract to provide their military footwear.

My business is located on the Decumanus Maximus, just down the street from the Roman Praetorium. If the last few days are any indication, today will be another highly profitable day for my business.

Like anyplace, there's always the talk of the town in Jerusalem. In my business, I hear it all. Lately the buzz has been all about a guy they call Jesus of Nazareth. A few call Him an imposter—a rabble-rouser. But many call Him a prophet; others call Him a wise teacher; still others believe Him to be the promised Messiah sent by God to liberate Israel. Some even say He's the Son of God Himself because of miracles and signs that He's performed. They say He even recently restored a man to life over in Bethany, a man who had been entombed for 4 days already. It all sounds pretty fanciful to me, but what's intriguing is that, according to the word on the street, all the religious authorities are apoplectic with jealousy over this guy. Why would

they get so worked up if this Jesus is an imposter? And if He's the real deal, why wouldn't they be embracing Him? I like to sort things out for myself, so perhaps I'll do that with respect to Jesus of Nazareth once Passover is finished and things slow down. They say He's often in the Temple area teaching. Maybe I'll go introduce myself and check Him out—see and hear for myself what He does and what He says.

I better go open the shop. Veronica's already busy arranging merchandise. People are probably queued up waiting to get in.

That's odd. There's no one in the streets. But there is a loud commotion coming from the direction of the Roman Praetorium. Please, Lord, don't let there be a civil disturbance today of all days. It's your Passover and one of my busiest days of the year.

Now here come some people hurrying away from the Praetorium. Some of them are visibly upset. I stop one young man to inquire as to what's going on. He tells me the Romans will be carrying out 3 crucifixions today. Well, that's the end of business for me today. They'll be marching the condemned men right past here on the way to the execution grounds. Most everybody will head indoors, cowering in fear of the Romans.

The commotion sounds from the Praetorium now seem to be heading this way. The death march for the condemned has probably begun. I ask another man if he knows the identity of the condemned men. With tears streaming from his eyes, he informs me that one of them is Jesus of Nazareth. I'm incredulous. All the talk I've heard about Him has been filled with awe and love and devotion. He sounds like the gentlest, most caring person who ever lived. Could He have somehow crossed the Romans?

Now I can see the Roman soldiers approaching with a condemned man in tow. The man I've been speaking with points and tells me the man carrying the cross is Jesus of Nazareth. At that moment Veronica joins me and I tell her what I've been told.

Sadly, I've seen spectacles like this before, demonstrations of Roman authority meant to intimidate and subjugate. But this one is different. This man Jesus has already been beaten to a bloody pulp. He's been savagely scourged to the bone. Someone put a wreath made of thorns around His head and pushed the thorns deep into His scalp. His face is nothing but blood and spittle. This particular execution, for whatever reason, is being carried out with exceptional cruelty and hate. Even now there are those in the crowd hurling hate-filled language at this poor man. What could He have possibly done to deserve this? It seems

that the hate and malice are coming from my Jewish brethren, not from the Romans. This is most unusual. It's a nasty mob.

Just as Jesus approaches my shop He collapses. The Romans start whipping Him to get up. Jeers emanate from the crowd. There's no one who's going to help Jesus because Roman justice for interfering with an execution is swift and severe. Just then I see Veronica wiping Jesus' face

with her veil. As I instinctively reach for her to pull her back to safety, I catch Jesus' eye. As we look into each other's eyes for just a moment, it seems as if He's penetrating my very soul—with nothing but love, a kind of love I've never before felt. How can it be? Here's this man who has taken and continues to take a beating. He's on His way to the cruelest torture and most painful death ever devised. There is nothing but hate being hurled at Him. Yet after absorbing all that, He can only dispense love. What kind of man is this? Perhaps He is all that people say He is—even more. In an instant He's gone—whipped along by His executioners.

I look at Veronica clutching her veil. Without speaking a word, we close the shop and follow along. Keeping our distance, we witness the crucifixion. After lingering three long hours in agony, Jesus dies.

I walk Veronica back to our home. There's still a bit of time before sundown—before our Passover meal. I feel the need to go to the Temple, an unusual feeling for me. When I arrive there is another commotion. The veil covering the Holy of Holies split down the middle right about the time Jesus expired. The barrier separating God from man for centuries was gone. What does that mean?

I hurry home, arriving just as the sun sets. Veronica has our Passover meal prepared. The veil she used to wipe the face of Jesus was lying on the table. The blood and spittle she wiped from Jesus' face appears to have formed into an image of His face—the most loving faced I've ever gazed upon, despite the wounds and the pain and the blood and the gore.

What really happened today? I have no idea. I doubt I will ever be able to fully sort it out. I do know that I've never, ever felt such love. Did I gaze into the face of God today? I don't know. I certainly encountered the most extraordinary human being I've ever come across. Was this Jesus a teacher or a prophet? Was He, as some say, the Messiah? Could I have encountered the Son of God? So many questions. For the first time in my life I feel unsure. There is weakness in my armor of self-confidence. But one thing I know for certain. I have never felt more alive in my entire life. I feel the love of this man Jesus calling me to something—to what I yet don't know.

I think I'll be spending more time in the Temple, because somehow I feel that today was not the end of anything, but the beginning of something very special. I'm reminded of two words that define the culture in which I was raised: L'Chaim! To life! Even in the face of this day of death I feel called to live.