

Rev. Dr. Thomas Nelson Green  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY

**SERMON 040315 + GOOD FRIDAY + IMMANUEL LUTHERAN  
CHURCHES + ST. MARK 15:37&39 + IN NOMINE IESU CHRISTI**

**AND JESUS UTTERED A LOUD CRY AND BREATHED HIS LAST. . . . AND WHEN THE CENTURION, WHO STOOD FACING HIM, SAW THAT IN THIS WAY HE BREATHED HIS LAST, HE SAID, “TRULY THIS MAN WAS THE SON OF GOD!”**

While some did not recognize it and others denied it, the men and women who came to Golgotha on Good Friday were in the presence of God incarnate. Earlier appearances of God among mankind were generally accompanied by numinous signs--thunder and lightning, trumpet sound, pillars of fire and cloud, impossible victories over enemies, plagues and the voice of God. All of these appearances pointed to the majestic glory of God. On Golgotha God revealed Himself in the form of a Man, condemned, crucified and dying.

On earlier occasions the disciples seemed to recognize who Jesus of Nazareth was. He was the Christ the Holy One of God! On Good Friday, with the exception of John the beloved, the disciples scampered away like frightened sheep fleeing from danger. The faithful women, including the Blessed Virgin Mary, saw in Him more than an ordinary man, but on Good Friday as He breathed His last they experienced heart-wrenching sorrow and disappointment. His enemies, especially the Jewish religious leaders, thought of themselves as His triumphant, victorious enemies and took delight in mocking and ridiculing Him.

Today, aided by faith, we find ourselves among the crowds that have gathered in the place of execution. This means that we too are standing in the presence of God incarnate. Like the earlier crowds we see God in flesh, condemned, crucified and dying. Now, we know far more about the meaning of the death of the Son of God than did the original groups of people who had come together on Calvary. Strangely enough, of all the people standing there we can perhaps learn most from the unnamed Centurion.

When the Centurion arose early on Good Friday the day did not seem to be promising. As one might expect, there would be no lack of rumors in the fortress residence of Pontius Pilate. Everyone seemed to know that the leading Jews of the city had gathered in the courtyard of Pilate demanding that the governor pronounce the sentence of death on one of the Rabbis. The Centurion would probably have heard something about the trial of Jesus, and that Pilate considered the accusations against Him to be without foundation. The accusations were made as demands of loud, jealous, influential men, men who were able to stir up the crowds to do their bidding. Even the governor's wife had been upset by the trial and warned her husband to have nothing to do with that just man Pontius Pilate was neither a man of courage nor a stalwart defender of Roman justice. Against his better judgment, and symbolically washing his hands of the matter, he sentenced Jesus of Nazareth to death by crucifixion.

Then the really bad news came to the Centurion, he was commanded to lead the group of soldiers charged with carrying out the governor's sentence. Even for a seasoned veteran this was far from a pleasant order, especially since Pilate himself had declared that the condemned man had done nothing meriting crucifixion. After the sentence the soldiers had their gruesome entertainment and mocked and abused and flogged the condemned man. Finally it was time to walk along the way of sorrows to Golgotha, located outside the city walls. There were curious crowds of people huddled together in the narrow streets of Jerusalem. Women were crying as only emotional Jewish women, who were well acquainted with sorrow and loss, could weep and wail. Jesus was weak and soon fell under the weight of the cross. A man named Simon of Cyrene was forced to relieve the condemned man of that burden, and the procession continued on to Calvary. There the crucifixion began.

What was it about the way in which Jesus of Nazareth breathed His last that moved the Centurion to the conclusion that He was the Son of God? First, Jesus thought about others and thought relatively little about Himself and His suffering! There was something otherworldly and divine about the words that He uttered. With the divine voice of mercy He prayed for forgiveness for those crucifying Him. With the divine voice of compassion He promised paradise to the penitent thief. With the divine voice of grace and love He committed His Virgin Mother to His beloved disciple and the disciple to His mother. With the divine voice of understanding He knew that in completing His work He would be forsaken and alone. With the voice of human weakness He spoke of thirst, He tasted the wine, but with divine strength He did not drink. With the voice of divine authority He declared that His work on earth was finished. With the divine voice of confident trust the Christ committed His spirit into the hands of His heavenly Father. Throughout the hours on the cross Jesus of Nazareth was in control!

The Centurion witnessed all that took place during those three dark and dreadful hours and heard the words spoken by Jesus of Nazareth, and what he heard and saw moved him to make this confession: "Truly this man was the Son of God." Whatever his past religious experiences may have been, on Good Friday he knew that he was in the presence of God. This God was far different from and infinitely greater than the gods in the Roman pantheon. This Jesus of Nazareth was the incarnate God of mercy and forgiveness, of compassion, grace and love, of perseverance even when forsaken, of divine authority and of childlike trust.

Today, by faith that transcends time and space, we find ourselves standing with the Centurion in the presence of God incarnate. We see His actions and hear His words as He breathes His last. What is the impact of this experience on us on this Good Friday of 2015?

We dare not see ourselves simply as curious onlookers to a scene that has been reenacted countless times in services of worship, in passion plays and in music for thousands of years. Looking on in a detached way at an engrossing episode in the history of religion is relatively easy. We may be momentarily moved, but very soon we go about our business

in utterly human forgetfulness.

No! We must stand next to the Centurion and recognize that we are in the presence of God, witnessing His death that He has offered up for us.. It is only when we are caught up in this truth and see the death of Christ as something that He endured for us in order to reconcile us with the heavenly Father that Good Friday will have meaning and significance every day of our lives. With the help of the Holy Spirit and the faith and insight He gives every day becomes a Good Friday, and we find ourselves standing daily in the presence of God. Standing in his presence we recognize the connection that exists between the death of Christ, the Son of God, and our hope for eternal life. Life does not end for us when we breathe our last in this world, but it extends beyond death to paradise in the majestic splendor of God's presence. It is possible for us to pass from this life to the next because today we have stood in the presence of God and today we have recognized once again eternal life is ours because of the death of the Son of God. Amen!