

The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Trexler Jr.
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
April 5, 1996, Good Friday
Preached again by Pastor Gregory P. Fryer, April 4, 2001,
when Fr. Trexler was too ill to preach.
And again, Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

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I am an old man now. But I well remember that spring day 50 years ago. I was with the Roman Army of Occupation in Palestine. I had just received my promotion to centurion and was stationed in Jerusalem. The Jews were having their biggest yearly festival. It was called Passover. Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims - visitors from all over the world. Naturally we all had to be on the alert for trouble for these were, to us Romans, curious and enigmatic people.

I was in my barracks that certain spring morning. I was not on duty. I was sitting on my bunk polishing my gear. An officer came in and ordered me to take command of a detail that was to execute three criminals. He said I should get going fast because this order came right from the top--from Pilate himself, he said.

Well, I got my horse saddled quickly, got my men together and reported to the Praetorium. There I found that Pilate had already held the trial. The sentence had been pronounced. In the time between the handing down of the death sentence and my arrival to carry it out, the palace guard had had some "fun" with one of the prisoners. His name, I discovered was Jesus. He was from a little town up north called Nazareth, and claimed to be king of the Jews. So the soldiers had taken him and flogged him because nobody is king but Caesar. Now this flogging was done with leather scourges that had pieces of bone set at the end of the leather thongs. It was a terrible and bloody ordeal. Nothing much affected me because I had knocked around all over the empire and had been in every big campaign in which we Romans had conquered the world. I had seen some pretty gruesome sights on the battlefield. But this man! What those soldiers had done with him was beyond description. Many a burly ruffian would have dropped dead in his own blood if he had gone through the going-over which this fellow had received. When I arrived he could just barely stand up. The soldiers had taken an old military cloak and thrown it around him. Some bright boy had plaited a crown made out of thorn branches and shoved it hard down on his head. For a scepter they put a reed in his hand. They blindfolded him and gave him a blow on the face and then said, "If you

are a prophet, tell us who hit you that time!" Then they would all burst out in loud guffaws and spit in his face. Pretty rough? Pretty heartless you say? Yes. They were rough and heartless times and this was the army that had ruthlessly conquered the world.

As soon as I arrived the soldiers' good time had to come to an end. The centurion in charge of the palace guard turned over the prisoner to me. I had his own clothes put on him and hung around his neck the title that Pilate had written for the cross, identifying, as was customary, the criminal's indictment. It said in Latin and Greek and Hebrew "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews".

We brought Jesus out into the courtyard, and as was customary, laid the cross on him to be carried to the place of execution. The way he had taken the insults of the soldiers in the barracks had impressed me. But I was impressed even more by his attitude about the cross. Most criminals take it with a groan. But this man, even after what he had been through, held out his arms to it as the soldiers brought it out, as if he had been waiting all his life-long to take it on his shoulders.

So our strange procession started. It was about the third hour in the morning. The sun was getting hotter and hotter. I rode at the rear of the procession, my men preceding me with their scourges to keep the prisoner moving. Jesus was dragging the cross through the narrow streets of the city which were made even narrower by the crowds. I was wondering how far our prisoner was going to get with that killingly heavy piece of timber. The man was strong - of good physique - a real man. But after what he had been through, it's a wonder that he could carry it as far as he did. The inevitable happened. He stumbled on a cobblestone and fell to the ground. He tried his best but he just could not raise that heavy cross. One of my men tried to flog him on but to no avail. His body was soaked with blood. It was streaming down his face from that tomfoolery of the soldiers with their crown of thorns.

Just at that moment I spied a likely looking fellow in the crowd - good and strong - a black man from Africa - and I ordered him to give the criminal a hand. We started off again. As we were going out of the city we passed a well. There were a lot of women there all talking at once. But when we came by they all stopped and there was absolute silence. They started weeping and wailing when they saw our prisoner. They held up their little ones so they could look at him. Why, I didn't understand until later. Then Jesus said to them, "Women of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children."

Now I preceded my Quaterions, opening the road crowded with holiday

pilgrims from all over the world. We began the weary, hot, dusty road to a hill called Golgotha, a Jewish word meaning SKULL -- I suppose because it was shaped that way and also because crucifixions took place there. The morbid crowd began to shout "CRUCIFY!"

Before long, wearied with the night of suffering and the terrible burden of the cross, the prisoner again fell into the dust. A woman in the crowd ran to him and wiped the blood and sweat off his face with her kerchief. When she removed the cloth it bore the image of his face, divinely beautiful.

We passed through the Jaffa Gate. The way became steep and tortuous. In the distance we could see Golgotha. There were two crosses already there on which were hanging two thieves of Barabbas' bandits. Our prisoner, as a token of shame, was to be crucified between them. Our spears and standards were now lowered. Jesus was stripped and laid upon the cross. A soldier approached with a great hammer and spikes. At that moment the frenzied mob fell silent and pressed near. A stupefying draught was offered to the prisoner but he refused it. He preferred to look death calmly in the face. He stretched out his hands. The hammer fell. At the sight of the blood the crowd again broke forth "STAUROSON, STAUROSON!" "Crucify, Crucify!" but not a word escaped the sufferer. As the spikes tore into his quivering flesh, his eyes closed and his lips moved in prayer. Then with a wrench the cross was lifted into the socket prepared for it.

At that moment he spoke his first word, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." The bandits on each side began to join the crowds in their boos and shouts. But after a while the one on the right cross said, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom!" Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

It was high noon, a scorching hot Syrian noon. Gradually it seemed that a veil was gathering over the sky and shadows began to fall from the heights of Moab. It grew darker and darker for three hours. Then the Nazarene cried out, "I thirst". A strange thing happened. One of my soldiers, trained in the arena as a gladiator, and who had never been known to spare a foe, dipped a sponge into some sour wine and raised it to the sufferer's lips. It was the only act of kindness I saw on Golgotha that day.

Then Jesus cried with a loud voice, "TETELESTAI". "It is finished!" "Father into your hands I commend my spirit".

The supernatural darkness had given way to a calm twilight. The sky was crowned with a golden splendor. At that moment the earth rumbled under my

feet. It was said, that just at this moment, as the priests were kindling the lamps in the Temple, the great veil before the Holy of Holies was ripped from top to bottom.

Slowly now the people dispersed to their homes. Against the sky was silhouetted the three crosses. On the face of Dysmas was the peace of forgiveness. The other bandit's head was slumped against his breast in the anguish of death. In the midst Jesus looked upward, dead, but triumphant. Long and steadily I gazed upon him. The events of the day crowding upon me, my conviction deepened that this was no ordinary man. A tide of grief overwhelmed me. I dismounted from my horse. My soldiers looked on in mocking disbelief as I knelt before the middle cross. I prostrated myself to the earth . Able to restrain myself no longer, I cried out, "TRULY THIS WAS A RIGHTEOUS MAN. TRULY THIS WAS THE SON OF GOD".

I'm an old man. The end draws near. For half a century I have known and loved and served Jesus. I have learned from him the meaning of life and of his death and resurrection. Many glorious hopes have I. But the most earnest is that I who crucified him may behold his face in beauty and fall before his throne and say, "MY LORD AND MY GOD!"