

Good Friday

Mother Emma

Third Reflection: Jesus and the Soldiers - Matthew 27: 27-54.

Last month I had the privilege of being invited to the service and celebration of the Freedom of the Borough, to witness two local regiments marching in Chelsea. In a marvellous speech afterwards, their Major explained to us that in such a Parade, the military are permitted to march with drums and with bayonets fixed – as though they were ready for battle – which demonstrates the absolute trust which the people of the Borough place in them not to behave with anything but respect and discipline. He then listed the values and standards of the British Army, which every soldier has to follow; the standards being to act at all times in a way which is lawful, acceptable and professional.

As we reflect this afternoon on the role of the soldiers in the Trial and Crucifixion of Christ, with all the details we have just heard, it is hard to imagine that their taunting of Jesus, the crown of thorns and the violent flogging – or indeed, their gambling over his clothing - would come into the category of lawful, acceptable or professional today. We need to imagine ourselves in a different age, one in which the life of a soldier was tough and even brutal.

From the second century before Christ, the Roman army had become a frighteningly efficient fighting-force; soldiers were paid, supplied with a uniform, weapons and training. At the end of their period of service, which could last up to 25 years, they could be rewarded with citizenship in recognition of their loyalty and bravery. Yet it was a harsh existence: any disobedience resulted in a flogging, and mutiny of a legion could end with the execution of every tenth man. There were long and demanding route marches and training exercises, and with constant warfare on the borders of the Empire, battles were dangerous and violent.

In between battles, however, soldiers served in other capacities, building roads, guarding dignitaries, maintaining an uneasy peace in the many occupied territories where people viewed them with fear and hostility. In Judea, there was a strong dislike of the Romans, who, alongside the feared Roman Governor, had installed a “puppet king” to do their bidding and keep his people under control. No doubt the Roman soldiers, unlike those who marched with the Freedom of the Borough, were only too ready to use their weapons if provoked and were extremely aware of the different terrorist groups seeking to challenge their authority – groups who, a mere generation after the Crucifixion, would rise up in revolt against them, only to be viciously crushed.

The Jewish religion would have seemed as mysterious and foreign to them as their polytheistic divinities did to the Jews. It has been suggested that peacetime abroad for those who longed to prove themselves gloriously in battle could be deeply tedious, and they might have looked for less than glorious ways to entertain themselves. And here, handed over to them with the order for a flogging, an appallingly routine procedure as far as they were concerned, was a gentle man, whom, they are told is claiming to be “*King of the Jews*”.

Did they see it as an opportunity to lighten the boredom and have a bit of fun? The crown of thorns and the sceptre of reeds have become such an iconic image in our faith, that simply to suggest it was just some bored soldiers messing about with a passive prisoner seems to undermine its power. But in their coarse jokes, the human power was all theirs.

Rowan Willians has written that accounts of Jesus' experiences between his arrest and death mirror those of people imprisoned under totalitarian regimes, during which nothing seems to make sense; in which laws and rules appear meaningless, and the victim lurches from one horror to another, under the constant fear of death. For Romans, used to the entertainment of gladiatorial games, the cruel and hostile teasing of a criminal would not seem outside the bounds of what was acceptable and just. He had been condemned to death – for whatever reasons – by the authorities, which for them put him outside the need for humane treatment, and crucifixion was after all reserved for the worst kind of criminals, the lowest in society, bandits and thieves and runaway slaves.

Yet there is a sense in which the role of the soldiers in this story is something more than simply men doing their duty and obeying orders to flog and then to crucify a criminal. In a passage we read at Morning Prayer earlier this week, from the Wisdom of Solomon, we heard the lines:

*[The righteous man] boasts that God is his father.
Let us see if his words are true,
and let us test what will happen at the end of his life;
for if the righteous man is God's son, he will help him,
and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.
Let us test him with insult and torture,
that we may find out how gentle he is,
and make trial of his forbearance.
Let us condemn him to a shameful death,
for, according to what he says, he will be protected."*

Perhaps, like Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, the soldiers play a vital role in fulfilling the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures, part of that terrible saga of false trial, insult, torture and shameful death.

Then, later in the story, they had a far more significant part to play, as some of the first present at the crucifixion to recognise Christ's divinity, even from their position as pagans and brutal, hardened military men: *When the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw... what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"*

The soldiers in this best-known of all stories to some extent represent those who are simply doing their duty as soldiers of the Empire, who are executing justice as they are ordered. Yet, unbeknownst to them, they are at the same time fulfilling the ancient prophecies which have laid down this role for them, and, in the recognition of Jesus as God's Son, they are also pointing the way ahead for us and for all the generations of Christians who hear their story each Holy Week and share their conviction.

Amen