

November 9, 2014 "A Soldier's Story" Mark 15:33-39

It's a soldier's story. And therefore almost by definition, it is the story of soldier far from home. Serving on foreign soil. It is about routine and discipline. It is about duty. It is about being prepared and at one and the same time, sympathetic and tough. It is about learning to cope by not overthinking the situation. Letting the training kick in, working with the men, watching the crowds, doing crowd control.

You see, he was an officer. When the whole unit was assembled there were 100 men under him. He understood the concept of authority like few others. "I say to one go and he goes. To another come and he comes. I say to my servant, do this, and he does it!" You had better believe it. If you don't follow orders, in a war zone, bad things happen to you and they happen fast. The centurion gave orders. The centurion received orders. He had a particular place in the chain of command. He made things happen by giving orders, receiving orders, and seeing to it orders were carried out.

Today's orders had come from the office of none other than the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Crucifixion detail. Three prisoners, a dozen soldiers, enough to assemble and erect the crosses, keep the peace and control anyone who made the mistake of objecting to the carrying out of sentence. The orders came down. He gave orders. He named the "volunteers" he could depend on. The day was filled with duties all about getting it done. Carrying out orders...in a conquered and occupied province. Carrying out orders. At times you know enough not to ask questions.

This one prisoner was so badly beaten and whipped he could barely walk. After falling several times under the burden of the main beam of what would become his cross, the centurion had give another order. Get someone to carry it for him, otherwise we will wind up carrying Him to Golgotha! The civilian was not keen to participate. But he wound up doing as he was told. Orders were carried out. No one wanted to deal with the alternatives if they were not. The procession got under way, again. There was that moment when the officer wondered if the detail should have been larger. The crowds that lined the way were huge. Strange place this Judea. The people were....different.

They had arrived at the place of execution without incident. It was the centurion's job to be the one who must not relax. Keep an eye out for trouble. Keep the work going forward. Assemble the crosses. Fasten the prisoners. See it is done right. That one prisoner had refused the wine mixed with myrrh....his choice. They had erected the crosses. One at a time. Do it right and keep things moving. The crowd here too, was larger than usual. These execution sites were all located on highways. The traffic swelled the crowd that watched. Even those who kept on moving cursed the condemned, their anger was palpable. These executions reminded everyone of the singular fact of life. Judea was a conquered province of the Roman Empire. This province they called their home land was an occupied province. These Gentile soldiers were inflicting their godless ways on a people who cherished faith in the one true God. Reminder. Stay alert. Keep the work progressing. Watch for trouble. Perhaps with nightfall some of these people would go home. Another reminder. This could go on for days...even a week.

The one thing that was obvious was the really religious people, priests and such hated the one on the cross in the center. They couldn't stop their continuous flood of reviling statements, their

shouting and so on. He spoke to the squad leader. Another order. "Stay sharp. I don't like the feel of this crowd.

On the other hand there were friends and family of this guy in the center too. Quiet. Weeping. Waiting for the end. It was inevitable. They would die, the three of them. But who knew how long that would take.

He got that feeling on the back of his neck that went with "strange circumstances." Something was going to happen. He saw the dark clouds gathering on the horizon. He watched as it rolled in...some kind of storm. Darker and darker. It was....unnatural. Almost night like. He had heard things about this Jesus. You could not be in Jerusalem this past week and failed to hear things about Him. Preacher. Teacher. Healer. That jogged a memory. He had never met the man, a fellow officer, another centurion. They said his servant was sick....dying, paralyzed and bed ridden. The story went he had approached some priests, asked them to ask on his behalf for a miracle. He couldn't remember a lot of the details....he just remembered how the story ended. The servant was alive and well when that centurion got home. Something about great faith....no...greatest faith in all Israel.

It was sudden...it brought the centurion out of his musing. The quiet one in the centre shouting something in their local tongue. Someone had a translation for him in a moment. But there was confusion too. Was it part of their scriptures? Or was he calling on one of their dead prophets. It stirred the crowd. A man approached the cross, a sponge soaked with wine vinegar and offered him a drink...this time the condemned man took some. The man with the sponge called for quiet to see if the prophet Elijah would actually come, materialize, whatever. And it got darker. The prisoner went limp. He stopped breathing. It was always obvious at these crucifixions. They worked so hard to breathe....and then it just stopped.

The centurion could not explain it. He had struggled to remain cool to the whole thing but it moved him. He had wondered about that sign they had been instructed to fasten in place....Jesus, King of the Jews. The orders were specific. No compromise. That sign was to go top center. No tampering. No changing of the message. By order of the Procurator himself. And now he felt emotion welling up from somewhere deep down inside. And he heard himself whispering...no it was louder than a whisper...even his men heard him say it. Some of them agreed with him. They had all heard stories about this Jesus..."Surely this man was the Son of God." And then the storm broke .

It's a soldier's story. He was standing his post. Carrying out orders. Seeing the work of his troopers got done. At the foot of the cross.

Let us pray....

Lord the week that begins this day is dedicated to remembering those who have served on our behalf, often at great cost to themselves, their fellow troopers, brothers and sisters in arms. As we remember them, we also remember this centurion. He reminds us of things many could not and cannot see...that Jesus is your precious Son. Lord bless our troops, bless our veterans, and we pray continue to bless Canada. Amen.