

This Lenten season we have been studying some of the **miracles of the Passion**. It's been interesting and uplifting to focus on these miracles: • the **darkness** from 12 noon to 3 o'clock on that first Good Friday, • the **tearing** of the temple curtain, • the **earthquake**, • the **splitting rocks**, • the **raising** of many of the saints from death. Today we look at yet another miracle of the Passion. St. Matthew records it with these words: *When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and explained, "Surely He was the Son of God!"* (Mt. 27:54)

Today, I would like to direct your attention to the miraculous faith of these **Roman soldiers. Who were they?** Probably mercenaries or conscripts from conquered nations. A number of commentators have concluded that they likely were from Gaul (France) and/or Germany. The officer in charge of the Roman soldiers was a **centurion**. A centurion would normally command a company of one hundred soldiers, but for the task of crucifying Jesus and the two thieves, he probably used no more than twelve soldiers. **What were these soldiers like? Religiously**, they were Roman pagans; probably very coarse, very seasoned; probably very detached and unemotional. Being a soldier is what they did—and they did it very well.

The soldiers may have been assigned to watch Jesus when He first appeared before Pilate. They, or at least the centurion, had some understanding of the issues. They had **heard the charges** of the Jewish leaders brought against Jesus and probably had some **personal contact** with both Jesus and Pilate. They knew that **Herod** had concluded that Jesus was **not worthy of death**. They knew that **Pilate** had pronounced Him "**not guilty**" of what He had been accused. They knew that Jesus had claimed to be the **Son of God**, as well as, a king and that He had a kingdom. They saw **the sign** that Pilate had placed on Jesus' Cross: "...the king of the Jews."

Certainly Jesus didn't look like a king. Oh, the soldiers mocked Him as if He were a king, putting a purple robe on Him, putting a crown of thorns on His head, and mockingly saying, "*Hail, King of the Jews.*" No, Jesus didn't look like a king and when they were through having their fun, they took Him out to Calvary to carry out their assignment – to crucify Him. There is a good chance that the soldiers had heard about Jesus before His arrest. They would have been stationed in Caesarea, a port town 60 miles northwest of Jerusalem and would have often been sent to Jerusalem to patrol and keep the peace.

On this day the soldiers had already witnessed **several of the miracles** of the Passion. They had experienced the **three hours of darkness**. They had **heard the seven words or phrases that Jesus had spoken** from the cross: He had provided for the care of **His mother**, He **promised a place** in paradise to the penitent thief. After the terrible anguish of being **forsaken by God**, He said He was **thirsty**. Then they heard Him loudly and solemnly declare that **His work was finished**, and heard how He confidently **commended His spirit** into the hands of His heavenly Father. The soldiers had not seen anyone die such a death. It seemed that death did not come to Him and overcome Him; rather He came to death and overcame it.

Probably the words that stood out in their minds above all were the first words He spoke, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34). I'm sure that they had never before heard words like those from one being crucified.

When all had been accomplished for our salvation, Jesus died. The soldiers would not have been aware of the **tearing of the temple curtain**. But I'm sure that they were very much aware of the **earthquake**, the **splitting of the rocks**, and possibly the **opening of the graves**. We are told that these soldiers were "*terrified*," literally they "feared exceedingly". Certainly there was **dread**. But it could also imply **reverential fear** or wonder. Perhaps this feeling drove home to them the idea that they had been on the wrong side: that what Jesus had been charged with was true, that He was no ordinary person but was indeed the **Son of God**, a term that implied deity. Did all of this activity drive home some understanding that they had personally done **wrong**, that they had **sinned**. Though they always had the witness of their conscience, they had been able to push aside the thought of sin and guilt, so it hadn't bothered them much. They had been able to dismiss such guilt thoughts as people today still do – it wasn't so bad, everybody does it, I just couldn't help myself or the ever popular, I can do what I want to do and nobody can fault me. Whatever excuse they had used, they had not been much concerned about it before. But now "*terrified*" with the conviction of sin, they knew the feeling of guilt.

Jesus had expressed His love and concern for others as He was being nailed to the Cross. He said, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.*" After what the soldiers had witnessed and experienced, the centurion was heard to express their feelings "*Surely He was the Son of God!*" Was this faith? In the simplest form, we trust that it was. That the centurion and the soldier's knowledge of Jesus may still have been imperfect is highly probable, but that by no means disproves faith. A weak faith is still a true and saving faith. We trust that the Holy Spirit had been at work through the words spoken by the Savior from the Cross. The Holy Spirit may even have taken the negative words that the Jewish leaders had spoken about Jesus and turned them around in such a way that the soldiers perceived them as positives. Keep in mind that saving faith is not something that we do. It is rather what the Holy Spirit does through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament to convert or change the sinful, unbelieving heart. Conversion is a **miracle** in each and every case.

One miracle of conversion that stands out in our minds is the one that changed Saul a passionate persecutor of the Church, into Paul an apostle even more passionately proclaiming the Good News of Jesus. Certainly, the words of these soldiers indicate that **some change had taken place**. It appears the Holy Spirit changed the hardened, callous, heartless Roman soldiers and kindled a spark of faith in Jesus as Savior. Whenever that spark of faith is lit, God the Holy Spirit does it. St. Paul said it this way: *You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.* (1 Corinthians 6:11)

During World War II, a young paratrooper, David Webster of E Company, 101st Airborne wrote his mother, "Stop worrying about me. I joined the parachutists to fight. I intend to fight. If necessary, I shall die fighting, but don't worry about this because no war can be won without young men dying. Those things which are precious are saved only by sacrifice." What a profound statement! And how much more true that is when it comes to our salvation.

If we are going to experience eternal joy and peace with the holy God, then somebody has to sacrifice. And that someone is Jesus. Jesus didn't ignore our sin, brush it off or hide in a cosmic footlocker. The holy God never would have settled for that.

Instead, Jesus assumed your sin and let God crush him. It was on his cross that the kindness of God and the justice of God came together.

So, let the wounded sinner come forward and God will forgive, not because you belong to a Lutheran church or a certain family or because you have been so good. He forgives you for two reasons. One, because he loves you. Two, because Jesus satisfied his justice. You ever get a coffee burn? I watched a dad holding his little boy in one hand and his piping hot coffee in the other. All of a sudden the little boy said, "I want to get down," and he began to squirm violently. The coffee began spilling on dad's hands, burning him. But dad held on tightly because he did not want his little one to fall and hurt himself on the tile floor. So, the dad carefully lowered the squirming boy down while piping hot coffee scalded his hand. Since we were struggling, self-destructive sinners, we needed to be punished. But Jesus did not want us to endure the horrible burn of hell. So he let God spill justice on him. And he kindly lowered us into the arms of our loving God. And that's where we shall spend eternity!

We can't bring another person to faith in Jesus Christ. We can't even bring ourselves to faith in Jesus Christ. We are totally incapable of doing that. This is always the **work of the Holy Spirit**. It is always a **miracle** of God's grace and power. For the soldiers, the Holy Spirit both **convicted** them of their sins and **brought** them to faith through the Gospel, part of which was conveyed by the words, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.*" Saving faith is always a **miracle**. It was in their life as it is in ours. Will we meet the centurion and some of his soldiers in heaven? We can't say for sure, but I would say that they received some very special, undeserved blessings. They were **eye-witnesses** of the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation and heard Jesus announce, "*It is finished!*" They **saw** the "Son of God" make the perfect **sacrifice** for their sins. They **heard** the **Gospel message** from the Savior's own lips. I hope the centurion greets us in heaven and says, "See, I told you so 'He is the Son of God.'" He won't have to convince us, but it will be special to hear it in his own words. May his confession of faith ever be ours! Amen.