



A RETREAT FOR HOLY WEEK by Father Robbie Low

Five Characters in Search of an Author

5 – THE CENTURION

It is an irony of philology that the Marian reforms should have brought the first explicit witness to the foot of the Cross of Jesus.

The Marian Reforms of 187 B.C. were nothing to do with Our Lady but rather the work of the military commander Gaius Marius. It was his work, more than anything that set the Eternal City on the eventual road to world domination by the construction of the greatest human war machine in history, The Roman Army.

Marius took a class-ridden volunteer force and turned it into a professional, highly skilled, rigorously trained standing army. Before Marius the army was raised when needed and only open to the property owning classes who could equip themselves with armour. These fell into five classes from the Velites who would rush forward and unleash a rain of javelins (before skedaddling back through the lines) through three increasingly armed and skilled infantry formations back to the Equites, the cavalry, the early knights.

Marius saw the potential for a national army and opened the career to all.

Can't afford your armour? The state will provide it. A new permanent career opened to ordinary men based on merit and valour. They leapt at it.

Each legion had 6,000 men. This was ten cohorts of 600. Each cohort had six centuries. The centuries marched, eat slept and fought together. They were blood brothers and, at the end of their service, there was a state pension and a grant of land in conquered territories – thereby ensuring a further grip on the Empire. The ascent of Rome had begun.

So, some two hundred and twenty years later, on a hilltop outside Jerusalem, the fruits of that successful democratisation of the army sat gambling for the clothes of the condemned, ensuring the peace of the town and, in one especial case, giving testimony to the central figure in the scene of which he, the centurion, was a part.

Here was no north-country fisherman, no soft handed tax gatherer. Here was no lawyer or philosopher. This was no courtier or clergyman. Here was a man whose every day was spent in the service of the Imperium. This was a man forged in battle, rigorous, disciplined, physically tough, potentially brutal and a leader of men. He was not given to idle speculation or religious niceties. He may have carried his household gods in his knapsack. His most likely faith was early Mithraism, a Roman adaptation of Persian theology. The initiate would pass the test of valour by lying under a small pit while a raging bull was slaughtered above him drenching him in blood. It is a little more rugged than the fancy dancing of the Freemasons and light years from the gentle banquets of the Catenians.

He was used to blood, familiar with wholesale slaughter, an adept of particular sacrifice.

So this man stands at the foot of the Cross and witnesses yet another death. For him it is another shift, another day on duty. The victims merely the rebellious putrescence of an incomprehensible race and a troublesome culture. Two of them are terrorists, one is a potential rabble rouser caught in the vicious internecine disputes of this argumentative city.

We do not know the thought processes that move this battle hardened warrior from indifference to affirmation, from dutiful executioner to exclamer of the Gospel. All we know is that it happened.

We know that he was not the first centurion to come to Jesus. There was the centurion who sent to Jesus for his beloved servant in the travail of mortal illness. The centurion who gives us our words in the Mass at the moment of the greater elevation and the declaration of the Presence. *'Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof but only say the word and my soul shall be healed'*. The centurion who understands the authority and power of Jesus before anyone else. The man who comprehends 'command' and has the long experience of victory by discipline, unity and obedience. He is the man whose faith Jesus will commend above all He has met.

He will not be the last centurion. Peter will encounter Cornelius at Caesarea and their encounter will confirm Paul's vision and open the Gentile world to the universal gospel of Jesus Christ.

So here stands the unnamed centurion at the foot of the Cross. He is in the company of his soldiery and of the mourners. He is beside Mary and John and the Magdalene, those whose lives are marked by the deepest love of Jesus. He is, unaware, in the company of the saints.

He is familiar with the railings of the dying. There are those who admit their guilt and sob and seek pity. There are those who 'die game', spitting their contempt on their persecutors and glorying in their villainy, unrepentant to the last. And then there is Jesus.

Jesus forgives his enemies. Jesus gives His mother to His beloved disciple. Jesus expresses human longing. Jesus stares into the face of death and abandonment. He promises Paradise to the penitent thief and commends His spirit to God. These are not the normal practices of the condemned. In these responses to injustice and cruelty and mortality the centurion witnesses dignity and grace of a wholly different order. He admires the courage of a true man locked in the final battle.

In the sign above the Cross INRI (Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum) he no longer sees irony. In the response of the natural world, the darkening sky on a hot Judaeian day, the shuddering of the foundations of the earth, he sees testimony to a man whose existence is profoundly connected to the created order but whose immensity he can only guess at.

We do not know where this centurion ends up, what part of the Empire he will finally retire to and die a pensioner who has fought and survived and who has been present at the heart of the cosmic struggle. We know only that, at the death of Jesus, he gave glory to God and pronounced that this surely was the righteous man. The word righteous is heavy with the meaning of the Law. The centurion recognises here not only THE Righteous Man but also the fulfilment of the Law – the One who is to come.

The death of Jesus on Calvary first effect is to bring forth glory to God. It has not changed in two millennia of the faithful.

For our spiritual exercise on this leg of the journey, let us go back to before we truly believed and wonder at Christ's mercy and pity on the Cross for us and for the whole world.

Let us stand with the centurion in awe of the grace and majesty of the True Man of Righteousness God meant us to be.

Let us pray for those who, after many battles, come to Calvary.

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