

11th SCRIPTURAL STATION - THE PENITENT THIEF

By Fr Robbie Low

(Lk 23: 39-43)

It wasn't meant to end like this, believe you me.

The preparation was nonpareil. We had toured the countryside, raising expectations, rallying the good people of this Holy Land to our sacred cause.

Regular visits to the Holy City, to check out the lie of the land.

Secret meeting places, covert signs and signals.

Passover, the perfect time. Zion buzzing with a million pilgrims, desperate from the diaspora, all longing for the freedom way of Moses to be restored.

All ready to overturn this long and intolerable pagan population.

All waiting for the restoration of the kingdom.

The numbers in themselves, orchestrated and inspired would overwhelm the garrison of this hated alien power.

The Master spoke of it often but in necessarily guarded terms. Not to arouse too much suspicion, too much establishment alarm.

Slowly, slowly, catchee monkey.

When he spoke, he mostly spoke in code, in pictures, in stories. Only the inner circle knew the key, understood the full import of the Son of the Father. That was how he was always known. I don't think most people knew his real name.

Instead here we are, tucked up on this bank holiday weekend, on a desolate hill on this bed of agony looking out across the city we had come to save, this people we had long prepared to liberate. And where is he? Where is the Son of the Father in our hour of need. He is nowhere to be seen. The charmed life of the renegade goes on. The Governor gives the mob the choice of whom to save and they chose, not this misplaced preacher man but good old Barabbas. Instead of swinging here with us, the Son of the Father is now in the wind. Vamoosed. To watch, no doubt from some safe distance and disguise, the final end of it all and live to fight another day.

We were undone, of course, by unforeseen events. When this man next door, my unlikely companion in the condemned cell, my neighbour on this tree of pain, rode through the Golden Gate and crowds went wild, the authorities

feared the worst. Understandably. Our discreet hidey holes were betrayed, turned over, shaken down and those of us who were not sharpish caught the fatal brunt. No time to take to flight, not a moment to burn the files, incinerate the plans – all laid bare, open and shut and bang to rights, as they say.

And so we hangin good company I may say.

This is not how it was supposed to end, believe you me.

I'm not a religious man, you understand. Well I amzealous for my land, my people my way of life. I put something in the Temple plate for old time's sake. Support the traditions and all that. I am a revolutionary, a rebel, a fanatic if you will, a man who wants the old ways restored, the wisdom of the desert and our sovereignty regained.

Mind you, going back some now, I was devout. Altar boy and all. Can you believe that? I knew every move and meaning of the priestly choreography and which way to swing the smoking pot of burning gum and when to move the lights of the procession and when to kneel and look holy.

It was real to me then, more real than I care to remember now.

Of course it all went down the primrose path of adolescence, the slippery slope of the priorities of testosterone, wine, women and song.

A walk on the wild side. Most men have been there. Just some of us never came back.

So I joined the movement. We trained, we planned, we bivouacked in the wild places together, a solidarity and companionship like none I've ever known.

We were mad with passion for the coming victory – no more eating desert dust, no more bowing and scraping to the eagle's tyrannical standard.

No more Rome. No more subservience. GOD ALONE IS GOD.

What am I saying? The battle cry of Elijah's holy name? The sacred task of anointing the future that fell to him as he was lifted in triumphal chariots? Is it just the imminence of death that brings me back to this, the only question that will always obtain and seek an answer from the soul of every man?

When it comes down to this, what can I do now to save myself or anyone?

I sought a kingdom. I have lost. I stand on this last masthead of revolt, a sign of every man's defeat and imminent mortality.

I hang beside this good man who also sought a kingdom. Son of David, Son of Man, Son, some say, of the Father. We walk, feet hobbled by these cruel nails, the same road to eternity.

Something there is about His Presence, even yet. His torturers He absolves. I seem to see again, through blood blind eyes, the lights of home, the candles of the altar and the hearth. I am returning to the streets of poverty and shame where He and I were boys. I hear the mother's prayers, so like my own.

But I have no-one here to mourn my passing.

Was this the real kingdom which I somehow missed? The King of Sorrows whom I now have come to serve. I have not prayed too long and mostly have forgot the catechism and the 'memorare' of my childhood pleadings.

So I can offer only this, these few words dragged from the little air that's rasping through my ailing lungs....

At the last, my Lord, when the sky darkens and the light fails

At the last, my Lord, both outcasts from the Holy City

Strangers all our lives, allies in adversity

Friends in the face of fate

At the last, my Lord, I'm with you

Both hung on a hillside

Suspended in interstellar space

Battered, beaten, blood blind

Exploring infinity, embracing inhumanity

At the last, my Lord

Breath broken, chest choking

By different routes to this same reckoning

Strange children of such other worlds.

Driven to prayer. Petition of the dying.

Hope of the hopeless. Help of the helpless.

At the last, my Lord

I cry not even 'mercy', only this

Remember me

Remember me

When your kingdom comes.