

For the Journey

March 27/24 - Rev. Dave Crawford



“Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way Jesus cried out and breathed his last, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’” - Mark 15:39

Mark’s Gospel is the earliest and shortest Gospel, sort of a “just the facts Ma’am” Gospel directed to a mostly Gentile audience in about the year 70 CE. Some scholars have described Mark as an extended Passion narrative with a brief introduction, although that brief intro contains nothing on Jesus’ birth or early years. Given its brevity there’s not much excess material in Mark. In other words, what we find there is likely crucial, for example the comment from an unknown Roman centurion, “Surely this man was God’s Son”.

At least two things can be gained from the centurion’s confession, firstly that there was something indescribably unique about Jesus and his crucifixion. Roman soldiers weren’t exactly bothered by violence, in particular crucifixion, which was unfortunately a common means of execution for the Romans.

There are reports, for example, that in the era of Spartacus (105-70 BCE), after the failed slave-led rebellion, some 6000 crucified slaves lined the Appian Way from Capua to Rome to deter other potential uprisings. The centurion whose words are recorded in Mark would not have been troubled by the violent death of a criminal. The implication in Mark, therefore, is that he was moved by something else, something holy, spiritual, charismatic, or otherwise inexpressible about Jesus that touched that hardened Roman soldier's soul. Secondly, the centurion's comment in Mark reminds readers that Jesus, Jewish carpenter from Nazareth, rabbi and healer and Savior with Jewish roots, has relevance for all humankind, Jew and Gentile.

In the middle of the last century, Hollywood, reflecting the Christendom-oriented American culture of the day, produced numerous biblical epic movies with Hollywood's biggest stars, one being "The Robe", (based on the popular novel by Lloyd Douglas) with Richard Burton in the lead role, playing a Roman tribune sent away from Rome to Judea as punishment for some minor infraction. While there he is assigned the task of overseeing the crucifixion of a local troublemaker, named Jesus. He ("Marcellus Gallio") observes his centurions performing the execution and the whole experience haunts him, even after he returns to Rome; it haunts him until it converts him. A great story, a great old movie, reminding us somewhat of the centurion in Mark. In both cases there is "something" about Jesus Christ that changes, transforms people. That's still the case today.

Holy Week is upon us once again. For most of Canadian society the week is not especially holy, not particularly spiritual, and Good Friday is good only because it gives us another long weekend. Truth be told, however, the events we Christians remember as the week unfolds are intended for us all, even those unaware or unaffected. The life, death, and new life of Christ is a spiritual gift meant for everyone. We gather at worship, we read the scriptures at home, we watch the great epic Bible films or newer ones, we meditate on the kind of love God has for us, and we pray for others to discover that love.

I enjoy N.T. Wright's writing. We'll close with his words.

"In Mark's Gospel, written quite likely for a Roman audience, the centurion's comment implicitly asks the question: Have you stood before the cross and recognized that here there is an act of love which marks out this man as none other than the Son of God?"

“Have you allowed yourself to accept what was there accomplished on your behalf? Do you still, like so many, regard Good Friday as an awkward, somewhat embarrassing moment, stuck between the Hosannas of Palm Sunday and the Hallelujahs of Easter Day? Or have you learnt to recognize that, on Calvary, Jesus - even through his fear, his doubts, his final bitter temptations - was completing the obedient vocation he had undertaken? And have you attempted to bring the pains and puzzles and tragedies of your own life into the searching, but amazingly loving, light of that cross? If you have, you may have begun to realize this great truth: that here we cannot reduce the cross to either an abstract idea of ‘atonement’, or to a set of ‘bare historical facts’. Instead, the cross itself summons us to rethink and remake the whole fact and idea of knowledge itself, belief itself, life itself. Here we are unmade; here we are remade.”

- N.T. Wright, The Crown and the Fire: Meditations on the Cross and the Life of the Spirit, Eerdmans Pub., 1992.

May this week be truly holy for you, “for surely this man was and is the Son of God”.