

A Centurion Surveys the Cross

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Uniting for the Good Friday Ecumenical Walk & Service on April 3rd, 2026 – Matthew 26:1 – 27:56)

A soldier stands at the foot of the cross surveying the scene. However, he is not just any soldier, he is a Roman soldier, a representative of the occupying force in the land, a foreigner and a gentile, that is, non-Jewish, his bosses and superiors are Pilate and Caesar. More than that he is a Centurion, a centurion as the name suggests commands 100 soldiers. A career soldier I suggest, a seasoned soldier. One can only imagine the kind of violence he has seen and participated in. As Jews did not do crucifixions it fell to the Romans to carry out this form of capital punishment. How many crucifixions had he seen before? Hundreds I suspect. He would have come across plenty of violent offenders before, he would have watched them cry out as they died, he would have watched the horror of this kind of punishment time and time again.

As I think about this man, I wonder how else he had participated in the events we have pondered as we walked along this morning and the events we have commemorated this past week. Was he part of the other procession that took place on that first Palm Sunday, the one taking place on the other side of the city that was a show of force and power, showing all the strength of the occupying force, the one filling the people with absolute fear, was he marching with his men that day?

What did he think as Jesus entered the temple and threw the money changers out and overturned the tables of all those who had made the house of God an exclusive place where the poor could not afford to go?

Was he or some of his company there in Gethsemane, as back up to arrest Jesus? Had he witnessed one of Jesus' friends violently attack one of the High Priest's slaves and did that anger him?

Was he involved in the bringing of Jesus before Pilate? Did he witness Pilate wanting nothing to do with this man and this charge? Did he watch Pilate capitulate to the angry mob (egged on by the religious leaders who clearly wanted Jesus silenced but didn't want to do the dirty work) and order the crucifixion? What did he think as Barrabas, a known violent revolutionary was released to continue his murderous activities?

Did he watch or participate in his soldiers mocking Jesus, placing a crown of thorns on his head, spitting on him, stripping him and committing all kinds of indignities against Jesus?

Was he the one who forced an African man called Simon carry the cross for Jesus for a time? Did he mix vinegar with the wine (a mixture designed to prolong the agony) and give it to Jesus? Did he nail the sign detailing the charge against Jesus, which also ironically said 'this is Jesus, King of the Jews' to the cross above Jesus' head? Did he nail Jesus to the cross of just watch some of his troop do that, did he flinch as that was done? Did he too gamble for Jesus' clothes? Did he tell the other crooks on either side of him to shut up as they continued to hurl insults?

What did he make of all of this? Did he think that this crucifixion was different? Did he understand that the Romans were doing the dirty work of the religious leaders? Did he

feel manipulated? Did he feel guilty about his own participation in such a violent and unjust act? Sure, he had seen it all before, but was this instance different?

Make no mistake, crucifixion is one of the most violent ways to die. However, having seen many such deaths, he was probably desensitised to it, much like it seems we, in 2026, seem to have become desensitised to violent and unjust deaths in wars and conflicts all over our world.

This man is a source of hope for us. This crucifixion is different from the countless others he had witnessed before. This crucifixion moved him in ways this seasoned soldier had not experienced before. We are told he, and those with him keeping watch, are terrified as the world goes black and come to the conclusion that Jesus, was truly the Son of God.

Why this conclusion? Throughout this whole sordid event did Jesus reveal to this seasoned soldier a different way to live and die? Did he see a man of peace who tells off Peter for raising his sword against another? Did he see a man who was incensed that the ordinary people are being exploited by the religious leaders and those who profit from said religion? Did he see a man who did not retaliate when he is treated unjustly and stripped of his dignity? Did he see a man who shared the humanity of us all and cried out in pain, asking why he felt like he had been abandoned? Did he see love and forgiveness as Jesus looked him in the eye, and conveyed that he understood he was simply doing his job and did not hate him for that? Did the hypocrisy of it all dawn on him as the day grew dark? Did his own guilt in his own participation kick in?

We will never know, but something moved this man, this foreigner, this soldier, this commander of others. Something changed him.

I like to think his confession of faith meant he left his post that day, and followed a different way of living, such was the influence of Jesus on his life.

I pray that today as we too come face to face with the events of this day, albeit 2000 years later, that we might be changed, that we might recognise the injustice and pain inflicted on so many in our world and demand another way. That we might see mockery, political expediency and outright violence as being unacceptable. That we might see, the way in which we change the world, is through love and forgiveness.

As we move toward Saturday, the time of waiting, the time of not knowing, the time of despair may you take seriously the horror and the hope Good Friday presents us with. And may that make Easter Day, Resurrection Day just more meaningful. I pray you too, might also, come to the conclusion, that 'Truly this man was God's Son' and live out that truth in your life. Amen.