

Passing By

Is it nothing to you?



We are familiar with the pictures of cataclysmic destruction in Gaza City, Damascus, Jerusalem. Nearly six centuries before Jesus, a poet looked out from the walls of a similar bombsite which the Babylonians had made of Jerusalem and its Temple. Deep within him he knew everything could have been so different if God's people had followed their Lord's words - his ancient law - trusting and obeying him. The poet's words are recorded in the scriptures:

A lonely ruin now, Jerusalem recalls her ancient splendour. Her conquerors laughed at her downfall. They robbed her of all her treasures ... Listen to me all you people passing by ... can't you see - can't you understand?



Passing by

The day before Passover was always one of the busiest of the year. Marius pulled his toga close round him to push against the tide of people passing into the city through the Gennath gate. Once through the massive stone archway he felt a moment of relief, as though he was squeezing out of the city into a whole new life. No longer in uniform he was free to enjoy retirement. Enjoy? No doubt the hurt and bitterness would fade in time. There would be new opportunities when he went home - to buy a small farm not too far from Rome.

He had returned to Jerusalem to find Julia. They had met when he was stationed here with the praetorium guard and Julia was a serving girl at Herod's palace. When he had been ordered back to Rome she had promised to wait for him. Deeply in love, his waiting and longing had been both strength and hope through two years of relentless, often cruel duties.

No doubt Julia shared his hopes but bound by her family demands she could not escape their determination that she should marry within her own village community. Friends had broken the news as soon as he had arrived. Julia dare not approach him. In the past few days while the city prepared for sacrifice, Marius had passed through all the emotions of bereavement, working it out in the gymnasium and the wine shops. Even now anger quickly rose in him. He thrust a laden pilgrim out of his way, carelessly letting the man fall and scatter his purchases across the gateway to the accompaniment of impatient curses.

Marius stopped for a moment at the road junction before turning west along the road to Joppa and the coast. Time was not important now. There would be plenty of stopping places for a Roman citizen on the way. The road to the north - to Galilee and Samaria - with its by-pass of the city travelling south made a triangle connecting to the Joppa road and embraced the old disused quarry below the west wall of the city. His route would take him past the end of the quarry where the more well-to-do of the city had their beautiful quiet gardens and built themselves family tombs among the exposed rocks. The north end was level and used mostly now as a rubbish tip burning constantly and emitting its own unhealthy perfume. At the centre of the quarry was a higher outcrop of stone - stone considered too poor for general use. The hill, shaped like a skull, if you viewed it from the north, afforded magnificent views of the city walls, the Temple and Herod's palace. Not many climbed it for the view. Marius had been on the hill many times on execution duties. They kept the uprights of crosses there as they were used so regularly. Herod loved his crucifixions. The public spectacle drew crowds and helped to maintain law and order. Empty crosses were left as a warning threat.

The sound of hammering drew his eyes to the hill. Another poor wretch. He felt heart-sick. He had never welcomed the job. As a soldier it had been his duty. Now, with shards of broken love in his own heart, the memory of the screams and curses disturbed his



dreams. It is strange how one becomes another person in the heat of battle - when it is their life or yours. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth the Jewish rabbis said, and would go on saying until the whole world was sightless, but that did not take away the feelings of guilt and shame when the conflict was all over. *'You dare not confess that though, certainly not to your companions in arms,'* Marius told himself, *'but surely they felt it too - are we not all human? Are we not all broken people?'* Marius had confided a little to Julia in one of their tender moments. *'What if there is an after-life? Will I meet those men I was compelled to kill in battle - and the women and children who stood in my way? What would I say to them? They could never forgive me. Yet they are no different to the ordinary folk with whom I may spend the rest of my life.'*

There was more hammering. He could feel the tremor of the mallet in his hands. He stopped on the road, daring to glance briefly at the rock mound. There were three crosses erected today - two victims already hanging. He made out a group of people with the guard. There was quite a crowd close by - Priests too - that was unusual. A cheer went up from the bigger group on the pathway between the hill and the gardens. Marius turned away and strode on. He heard the third series of hammer blows, each one thudding in his own chest, but he did not hear the voice from the hill which cried, *'Father forgive them!'*



Marius had barely become a distant speck on the Joppa road before Aaron hurried towards the Gennath gate, tripping on his robes trying to avoid the dirtier stretches of the road. He had walked down from Gibeah for his priestly duties at the Temple sacrifices today. He had come early, leaving himself time

to visit his shops and properties in the market quarter to collect rents and other solicited gifts. With the city overflowing with pilgrims and visitors trade was at its best this time of year. His tenants had no excuse to default on their payments. He kept to the side of the road nearest to the West Wall. He too heard the hammering but refused to turn his head in that direction. One look .. one thought of the dirt of criminality may risk him being unclean for duty. They would deserve their punishment. They were not going to impinge on his purity. To look would be tantamount to touching a corpse, or a man with leprosy. He had gone through his ritual cleansing and his prayerful preparation to be holy before the Lord and must not spoil himself. *'I wonder how many pilgrims, or worshippers for that matter,'* he had said to wife before leaving home. *'I wonder how many of them realise the importance of Passover - of the sacrifice - of what it means to make yourself holy before God. Holy lives. That's the way to be ready for the Messiah when he comes - saying the prayers - making the tithes ... I thank God every day that he chose me for this way of life.'* Sermon over, he had donned his saffron robe of thin linen with its silk hem and tassels, and left his wife to the ministrations of her maids. Now the heat from the walls was making him sweat so he slowed his pace - *'I must be clean'*. A slower walk made it easier to find a careful path through the road dust and avoid actual contact with other people. He waited for a gap in the crowd of traders and pilgrims before entering the Gennath gate. He glanced upward to Temple. He was keeping his mind on holy things, oblivious to a voice which cried from the hill .. *Today .. with me ... in paradise!.'*



It was much later that afternoon when Uri came down that same road from the north. He had been many days on his journey from the Samaria border. It was his first visit to the city and as he almost ran the last half mile to the Gennath gate his excitement was not subdued by the thunderous humidity weighing on his tired body. He was disappointed. He had wanted to see the city walls, the Temple and all the visitor attractions in their full Passover glory, but a strange blood grey darkness filled the whole sky an eerie penetrating mist. Even

the open land to his right was shrouded low on the hill. The crosses stood unseen, unknown to him. There would be other days, he told himself confidently. He intended staying for some time, first to make his journey worthwhile, but mostly in the hope of seeing the Rabbi, Jesus from Nazareth. He was sure he would be here at the festival.

Uri had never had any great affection for religion as he had seen it and heard it either side of the border - Jews or Samaritans - but he had heard Jesus preaching and had been gripped by his ideas of the Kingdom of God, its premise of love, its simple way of life .. working out for the salvation of the whole world

Uri hoped to hear more and even perhaps see a miracle ... He had met travellers a few days ago who had been in the city and told him about the King riding on a donkey as a sign of a peaceable kingdom. *'Was it Jesus? The rabbi from Galilee?'* he asked, but they had not heard the name. Uri had hurried on, encouraged by his eager expectation. *'Perhaps this would be the time for Jesus to start a peaceful revolution.'* he reasoned - though he was not yet persuaded there could be peace without bloodshed. As if to prove the point, two Roman soldiers blocked his way through the gate. Uri angrily stood his ground and was thrown aside by one legionary while the other grasped the hilt of his broadsword ready for action. Uri yielded. He yearned for peace - for an end to the social, political and religious rivalry of his homelands and especially here in this Holy City. There would be many surprises for Uri on the other side of the gate. Passing into the city, he could not hear the voice of the one who shared his dreams and even now summoned last resources of human strength to call through the darkness .. *'I thirst!'*



The young family had not been far behind Uri on the road from the North. Silas had been carrying little Ilana on his shoulders, but now she craved her mother's arms. Vivid lightning drew curtains in the darkness, highlighting the Temple and the quarry, touching the top of skull hill and glancing off the city walls.

Violent thunder sent people hurrying in all directions. Ilana screamed and sobbed in Adi's arms. They hurried on for shelter inside the gateway. Perhaps it would rain and clear the air.

Silas and Adi had come from their Judaeen hill country farm looking for their elder son Gideon. They believed he would be here in the city for the Passover. Gideon, like so many other young men in the hills had become so patriotic and nationalistic, and so frustrated by religion and by Rome, by corruption and hypocrisy, had take one of two choices. Either join a religious sect or sign up with the zealots - the brigands of the hills, plotting against authority. Gideon had chosen the latter.

The rumour of an uprising at Passover brought their village to anxious, excited life. It happened every year but now Gideon was involved. Adi had worked herself into a maternal panic. She had to find him and persuade him to come home. Silas volunteered to go, but Adi knew Gideon would listen to her, and so the whole family set off to the city. Silas blamed himself - even for the choice of his son's name and its obvious associations with nationalism. He too had often spoken the thoughts which gripped his son, but he never imagined active involvement. Fine dreams but at what cost - life ... death ... family ... future ... There had to be another way. But would Gideon listen?

The thunder rolled even louder and then it was more than thunder.... the ground was moving beneath them .. small stones drizzled from between huge slabs above the gateway. *'Earthquake!'* someone shouted. The crowds shouted and screamed as they panicked and hustled one another into the open spaces beyond the Gennath gate. Silas looked back to where the whole world of darkness appeared to be turning itself up-side-down. He steadied himself, reaching out to Adi as the earth rocked again. Another spectacular flash of lightning opened up a view of the hill and three crosses where a mother stood with her two sons - one broken to death - but dying, sure of life and a whole new future for his world. But there was no way Silas could hear the voice cry aloud , with divine strength *'Father! I have done it! It is finished!'*



Nothing to you?

For us the Cross, that deadliest instrument of torture, has become the sign of victory - of hope for all humankind - the God-earthquake by which perfect love turned the world the right way up!

The Cross can be seen in every place
from a church stained glass window to a pendant dangling on a necklace;
embroidered on an archbishop's robes;
gripped in the hand of a condemned criminal;
an emblem of hope in a graveyard;
a happy trinket dangling from a young woman's ears.....

and the world passes by

un- forgiven
un- loved
un- peaceful
un- provided
un- satisfied
un-hearing
un-heeding the answer to humanity's every need
in the words and actions of the God-man on his Cross.

The prophetic voice still calls from the ruins;

'Is it nothing to you all you who pass by?' (Lamentations 1.12)

Sparrow-Simpson brought those words from the Lamentations forward to the time of Jesus' death when he wrote the words for John Stainer's oratorio 'The Crucifixion'

From the throne of his Cross the king of grief cries out to a world of unbelief.
O men and women afar and nigh, Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by?
I laid my eternal power aside, I came from the home of the glorified.
A babe in a lowly cave to lie. Is it nothing to you all you that pass by?
I wept for the pains and sorrows of men.
I healed them and helped them and loved them but then,
They shouted against me Crucify! Is it nothing to you.
Behold me and see Pierced through and through
with countless sorrows - and all is for you
For you I suffer, for you I die. Is it nothing to you all you who pass by

O come unto me come unto me.