

*A Reading for Good Friday
in three parts*

I saw a man fall



I saw a man fall He was on the way to his death. He was carrying the beam of a wooden cross to which his hands would be nailed before it was hoisted into place on the upright. I will spare you the rest. There is no worse way to die.

The man kept stumbling. That is hardly surprising since the soldiers had weakened him with cruel beatings. I could imagine how the metal tipped thongs had cut and wheeled his body. They had covered him with his own robe, but how that rough garment must have chafed and stuck.

His passing along the street where I saw him, was slow. The soldiers, only too well aware of the dangers lurking in these narrow ways, shouted and cursed the crowd, as they whipped them back, trying to make space for the man struggling to his feet again. Their curses were lost in the riot of voices, and yet shrill above the cries, I heard the women's calls and one voice louder than the others sobbing and calling relentlessly, 'Jesus ! Jesus ! Master !'

What happened next barely took seconds and yet it was a moment crammed with eternity. As the soldiers brutally pulled him to his feet, the man raised his head. Their eyes met. His and the woman's. Her gaze, blinded by tears, was fixed on him. The other women cried openly. Hers was a look of recognition. I wondered what story lay behind it. Who was she, this sallow faced, fascinatingly attractive middle-aged woman of Jerusalem ? What of her family; her husband and children; her life here in the city. What was her relationship with the Master. Surely she had met him before. There was something in that look. Was it love ? Was it a deep gratitude?

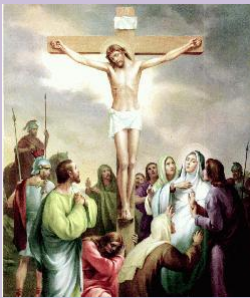
What lay behind the urgent and desperate agony she so obviously felt for his suffering. She called out again. The voice wavered brokenly this time - 'Master !' His eyes held hers. He was on his feet again now and the soldiers were laying the wooden beam on his shoulder once more. He called back to the women, and I think to her especially. His voice was amazingly strong still. 'Save your tears for yourselves. Don't weep for me. Cry for yourselves and the suffering you will have to bear. Cry for your children and all they will go through.'

I know now he was trying to tell them that the whole city, the nation in fact would suffer because they had rejected him. He could have given them peace. He was saying to them, 'They have thrown away the chance of peace and so there will be no peace, only pain. Save your tears. And I will weep with *you*.'

I cannot explain it, but in her look, for she said nothing, you could see her fear and her gratitude. I have seen it again, many times in my dreams. I believe she was the only person in all that crowd who understood. Out of his own suffering he was more concerned for hers and all those ordinary, loving, saints come sinners like her who daily thronged the city streets: He was concerned for their sadness, for their ignorance of God's love and truth and justice.

I saw God fall in the street. Later, when Jesus had risen from the dead, I saw it was not just a man. It was God, God almighty. It was God sharing our human weakness and saying to all the world of sinners, 'Don't weep for me: Don't stay mourning at the Cross: This is my victory - the weakness and the shame. Weep for yourselves. Share my tears for you and your world. Weep for a sinful world of warring, selfish strife which makes the Cross necessary, and out of your tears repent, receive my forgiveness, and live in the peace and joy and love of my resurrection life in you.'

I saw a man dying



I saw a man dying on a wooden cross. The physical agony is indescribable, but what of the emotional suffering: the shame of nakedness and exposure: the taunts of self-satisfied accusers: the gloating of self-styled enemies: and most of all the callous, carelessness: the disinterest ?

I saw him, in his agony, look at one of a group of soldiers. The sky was darkening but there was still sufficient light to see his face. The crowd had begun to dwindle and an eerie quiet began to settle on the faithful friends who would see this dreadful day to its close. The soldier, an older officer, was one of four who had been detailed as executioners. He had driven the nails. Another execution. It had long ceased to bother him. He felt no cruelty about the job, no personal malice, and certainly no guilt. It was simply a duty to be done and all that mattered was doing it with the least possible fuss and in the quickest possible time.

The soldier was gambling now with his fellows. They had decided to cast lots for the victims clothes. The man's robe, a beautiful, homespun, seamless garment, was too good to cut up and worth far more than all the other garments put together. Casting lots was the fairest way to deal with this situation. Whoever won it would have a bargain. It would either fetch a good price in the market or keep a soldier warm on his winter campaigns.

Even the gambling was thoughtless. The man dying on the cross knew that. You could see he knew it in the way he looked at him. Not a look of condemnation. More of pity, no, compassion. He could see into that soldier's life. He saw a seasoned, battle-hardened infantryman who had many wounds: who had seen many people die; who had experienced the cut and thrust of battle and fought with the conviction, 'it's me or them has to die'.

In time soldiers like him become not so much hardened to the cruelty as switched off from it. They make a hard shell around them. They creep inside like a mollusc and let the world of suffering go on without them. This soldier could gamble there, completely oblivious to the shouts and jeers, the weeping and the groans. He saw faces without features. He performed duties without feeling.

In his look I felt that that complacency pained the man on the cross more than the agony in his limbs; more than the terrible gasping to draw breath into his collapsing lungs. The most hurtful thing was a man's cold indifference; switched-off humanity.

And now I know, since his resurrection, it was God's Son who died. God himself was looking at that soldier. What I saw was how he looks at all people - everywhere - at all times. I saw a little of what God was feeling. The greatest act of love ever was taking place - God's love in human life, in human space and time - and what hurt most of all was the coldness; the not even wanting to know which leads to the acceptance of cruelty in life; the mollusc-like attitude to all the hurt in the world. But it did not stop that greatest act of love. The look from the cross said, 'even though you do not care, I will still love you !'

I wonder at times about that soldier. Did he win God's robe ? Did he in future years, soften his heart and think about that awful day of love ? Whatever happened to him, nothing can alter the fact that Jesus Christ still died for him. God's costly love does not exclude him, even now.

I saw a man silent

I saw a man, silent on a cross. In the most intense agony, he did not raise his voice. He did not accuse or rail against his enemies. His only words were those of hope, forgiveness, and love for others, gasped out from his breathless tortured body. For the rest, he was silent.

All around him there was noise, especially during the first hours before it grew too dark to see faces, and people hurried away fearful of thunder and earthquake - or of the anger of God. Women wept and wailed their sorrow. Soldiers brawled and uttered their course oaths. For some of the Passover pilgrims it was an extra spectacle to make their visit worthwhile - something shocking to tell the folks back home.

It was the jeering by the religious leaders - priests and lawyers - which got to me. I wanted to shout out to them to hold their tongues. But the man on the cross said nothing. He hung there. Silent. He made no attempt whatever to state his case or to retaliate. Not a word. Silent. Perhaps if his men had been there they would have spoken. No, of course not. They were too scared to be there. They certainly wouldn't speak against the religious.

There was one young Pharisee there who really irritated me. He was one of those who knows it all, but knows nothing. Proud of his ignorance. A rich man I should think from his dress. Like a lot of them he probably thought wealth gave him the right to position. It certainly had not bought him brains. He had a boy's piercing voice and a naiveté to go with it. 'Come on down,' he kept calling. 'You work miracles. Let's see one now. Let's see those nails pop out and you jump down with all the scars healed.'

Another young man standing the other side of the crosses laughed and shouted, 'You sound like a believer !'

'I will be,' the young Pharisee called back, his voice in an even higher key. 'I will be when I see a miracle ! He did say he could pull down the Temple and put it all back together in three days. Now that would be a real miracle.'

He went on with his taunts. 'Come down,' he kept challenging. The man on the cross was silent. It was that which eventually got to the young Pharisee. In an argument he was well able to shout down his opponent, but he did not know how to cope with non-retaliation. He became angry. 'Come down ! Come down ! Come down !' It became like a chant as his voice rose higher and higher. I could see him tensing, his face reddening, his fists clenched. And still the man said nothing. Then he looked. I saw it. Painfully, he raised his head. His eyes turned to the young man who stopped in mid flow. 'Come down ! Come.....' I was standing behind him then and I saw it too. Pity, compassion, love. I cannot find the right words to describe that look. It was the sort of look my mother gave us when we had done or said something utterly foolish. It had the same effect too.

The taunter fell silent himself, but then the silence seemed to un-nerve him and he started to shout again in an unbalanced, hysterical way, 'Come down ! Come down ! Then he was sobbing and shaking, until an older man led him away into the gathering gloom.

I remembered that look in the quiet days after Jesus' resurrection. It haunted me too. If Jesus the man, is Christ the Lord, then that look is God's look.

He looks at me, at you, at all of us, in silence, as he lets his judgements work out. Silently he bears the ignorant cries of those who say he doesn't care, or doesn't even exist. Silently he hears the accusations of those who blame him for their pains who do not understand the place of suffering in the overall purposes of God, who cannot trust him to know better than them; who do not accept that he is love and all he does begins and ends with love.

He is love and the look was one of love; love for all and especially for those who think they know all about him and yet have not met him at his Cross.