

“Eyewitness to the Crucifixion”

Matthew 27:32-54

April 1, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons



“The Crucifixion” by
Francesco Del
Cossa
1470, oil tempera on
panel. National
Gallery of Art,
Washington, DC

Those of us who are Christians believe that the Bible is a witness to the facts of Jesus Christ, as well as the theological expression of its writers. We believe that the eye-witness descriptions, in the Bible, are based on things that actually happened in history – on certain days, during certain weeks, under certain weather conditions and so on. And because we believe these events took place as they were described by the writers, we read the Bible and try to understand it in the same ways its first readers read it and comprehended it in the late first century and early second century. So while we realize that we don’t have a video tape rerun of what happened, we do understand that we have a fairly consistent picture of what Jesus was generally about.

To help us get a more in-depth understanding of these familiar passages, let’s try to relive this incident as one who was an eye-witness, one who was on the scene when it happened. Sometimes we forget that these were real people, who were involved with Jesus – people who were not so different from us. Putting together what we know about the closing moments of Jesus’ life, let’s view it from the Roman soldier’s point of view – the one who was on the crucifixion detail that put Jesus to death. This is what he might have said, that evening, when he told his family and friends around the table of his experience.



It started out like any other day, except there were a lot of people in town because of the religious festival. Today my orders were to report to the Praetorium¹ and pick up a few prisoners and execute them.

When I got to the lower chambers of city hall, they had two robbers chained and ready to go. They were tough looking characters and had to be held down when they were being whipped – something we always do just before execution.

As I picked out the detachment of soldiers to help on the detail, two guards brought in another man Who was already beaten. He was charged with political subversion but He didn’t look like most of the criminals we usually put to death. We made up signs, indicating their crimes, which would be hung around their necks and then later nailed at the top of their cross.

Two of the signs said “Robbery” but the third, the one for the man named Jesus – His sign was unusual. Pilate had sent down special orders that his sign would say: “This is Jesus – King of the Jews” – and it was written in three languages: Hebrew, Latin and Greek.

¹ The *Praetorium*, or *Pretorium*, is the Latin version of the Greek word pronounced prai-tor-e-um. The Romans [see Ancient Empires - Rome] originally used the term for a general's tent in an army camp [see Roman Legions], but later it also referred to a military headquarters in a city where the Roman governor or procurator also often resided. The Bible variously refers to the Praetorium as the “common hall,” the “governor's house,” the “judgment hall,” “Pilate's house” and the “palace.”

As usual, we whipped all three of the prisoners again and then made them pick up the horizontal timber of their cross – the vertical posts were already in place at the execution site. We made them put their timber on their shoulders and marched them down the street out of the city.

As we began walking through the streets, it was surprising how many people were coming along with us. Even the temple priests were out and they were unusually bothersome. They kept insulting this Jesus so much that I had to push them aside, just so we could keep moving on.

As I mentioned before, this Jesus was awfully beaten up before He was brought into us, so when we got near the North gate of the city, He collapsed to His knees in a bloody heap. I had to conscript a passerby to carry His timber.

Crucifixion detail is the worst part of my job. I avoid getting on it but whenever I must, I just try not to get too involved with the work. No matter how many times I've been on execution detail before, there is something haunting about "Skull Hill" at the city garbage dump. Those posts that stand upright all the time – they seem to wait for their cross pieces with the criminals dangling from them. This day was no different.

The higher-ups, in the government, say that these tortures and executions actually prevent crime but somehow you don't think about that when you see the agony and hear the screaming for hours.



Once we arrived at the hill, as usual, a few women offered the prisoners some drugged wine to drink. To our surprise, this Jesus refused it. You know, He's the first one I have ever seen to refuse it, ... almost as if, ... well, I can't explain it.

We tied their arms down to the beams, temporarily, while we drove the nails into their

wrists to keep them from being ripped up through their fingers. But just before Jesus was nailed, He was gazing up and said: "Father, forgive them, ... they don't know what they're doing."

Usually our victims would curse and spit on us and try to bite or kick us between their cries. The pain would be so bad that they'd break their teeth off. But this Jesus, between His cries and thrashing, He never spoke harshly at all. It was clear to me that this person wasn't a criminal.

Even though He remained in control, the people around watching, were mocking Him and calling out stupid challenges, ... saying, ... that if He is the anointed of God, He should jump off the cross magically.

These executions are so bloody that people would usually watch silently from the roadway. They would stay only a short time because most would become nauseated while watching. Even between their moans, the two robbers, on either side of Jesus, mocked Him, ... but never did this Jesus return even a curse.

I don't think I've ever told you this but we have to drive a spike through their heels to keep them from tearing themselves off the cross. I've seen, countless times, strong and rugged men break down or go insane with fear before they were crucified. Every time I'm assigned a crucifixion, I wish they'd make them illegal. No crime is worth that amount of agony.



After a few hours, I guess it was toward noon, the sky turned black, ... the robbers were nearly exhausted. One of the robbers, despite his weakness, said something to Jesus about remembering him. And Jesus said something softly back to him – I didn't make it out because we were over drawing sticks to see who got the clothing.

When I went back over to check on them, I saw that the robber on the left had passed out exhausted. The other robber was nearly out but he had dislocated his shoulders from writhing in pain. This is what usually happened by this time. They'd be exhausted and unconscious, ... but Jesus was still conscious and was breathing in staggered rasping breaths.

Since the sky had gotten black and the wind began to blow, the crowd of onlookers had thinned out. All the jeering and mocking had stopped. There were several men standing quietly on the road, many with tears in their eyes and there were almost as many women there sobbing and crying. I think even Jesus' mother was present. I've never seen an execution like this. It was as if we were killing a prince or someone of royalty.

I heard Jesus calling out for help – possibly the name was Elijah or someone. Then Jesus quietly said He was thirsty so I ran over and held a wet sponge up to Him. I hesitated, though, because I didn't want to prolong His suffering.



From that time on, all I could do was watch Him die. I don't know how He lasted this long without succumbing from exhaustion but He lasted on into mid-afternoon – and with the darkness, it felt like we were all standing in the middle of Hell itself.

By then, the thief on the right was unconscious and near death. The gasping breaths of Jesus got further and further apart. His head was dropped and I thought He was finished too. But He raised His head, somewhat and whispered ... "Father, into Your hands I send My spirit, ... it's done." And with that, His body hinged to the side, still.



A chill went up my back. I heard thunder, that might have been going on for a long time, except I hadn't noticed it. And I still couldn't take my eyes off Him, despite the storm. Even the earth shook beneath our feet. I could feel the evil around us while the body of this Man remained quiet – almost as if it had finished its task.

The people were leaving – hurrying to get back into the city gate – horrified at the earthquake and the darkness. The soldiers, under my command, were picking up their tools and belongings. I took a mallet and broke both legs of the robbers so the shock would kill them, even in their unconsciousness. And I don't know what made me do it, ... maybe it was the dignity of His dying, ... maybe because I knew He was already dead but I ran my sword into His side.



I've never experienced anything like it. For the first time in my life, I knew I killed Someone Who had been totally innocent.

From the talk during the day, I had heard that Jesus claimed to be the One sent from God. I saw how the people acted toward Him – as ugly as the dying criminals usually act. I saw how Jesus died, like no one I've ever seen in my thirty years of being a Centurion. They say that the way you approach your death is the way you've handled most of your life and I discovered the truth of that saying today.

You see, I saw, for the first time in my life, One Who was so concerned for others, that even during the agony of His torture, He had only kind words for His tormenters. My friends, there is no doubt in my mind – I have crucified the Son of God.



If we would have been in the family, listening to this soldier, what would have been our response? The disciples of Jesus, at this time, were numb with horror and shock. And until the news of resurrection morning, all they did was remain together in their homes – confused, bewildered and hopelessly depressed.

The crucifixion scene was horrible beyond words but the scriptures witness this event to us, so that we know what Jesus went through for us. How different would our lives be today if we had been there watching the crucifixion?

If we had witnessed the torturous death of Jesus, so much in our lives would change. All of our concepts of success would change. All of our embarrassments about talking to others about what we value most would disappear. And we all would be amazed to silence, ... in thinking about why a holy, almighty and powerful God would die for us, personally, ... simply out of love for us.

Are we living our lives, at home, in the office and at leisure, out of response to God's personal love for us? For what are we really living our lives, during this very short time we have on earth?

