

LENTEN VESPER
Matthew 27:51-54
Surely He Is the Son of God!

If Rome was the head of the Empire, Jerusalem was the armpit. If conquering was the highest task of a soldier, crucifying was the lowest. Three types of men served in the Roman Army in Palestine: criminals, perverts, and ambitious men working their way up the ladder. These were men sent to serve in this perpetual grease fire of a hole in the earth with its never ending political and religious skirmishes and revolutions as punishment for disobedience, because they sought out the sort of cruelty that serving in a unstable region afforded, or because they knew that serving there would bring a promotion down the road. As a t-shirt of a relative of mine said, "Better to rule in hell than serve in heaven." Some people are willing to take power any way they can get it, even if it means a tour of service in Jerusalem.

We are not told which of these kinds of men the centurion, whom church tradition has named Longinus, was, but we do know what kind of men he commanded: perverts and criminals. He commanded dogs who delighted in surrounding helpless men and tearing their flesh like a raw steak, bathing in blood and gambling over dying men's clothes. He commanded men who laughed at the nakedness of the condemned, who knew the sound of a nail piercing a hand and loved it, who joined in with the locals to mock the condemned, whether they be guilty or innocent. We are not told what kind of man the centurion was, but he commanded a bunch of hoodlums who used the Roman emblem on their shield as an excuse for every kind of torture and cruelty.

It is completely possible that Longinus, if we can use the name church tradition has given him, didn't want to be in this dung heap of a town any longer than he had to be. It was possible that Longinus had not chosen crucifixion duty, but rather had been assigned it. It is possible that Longinus detested those under his command and did what little he could to restrain their perversity. It is possible, but we just don't know. What we do know is that whatever brought him here brought him smack-dab and boot-deep into the single-most horrific and beautiful day in all of human history.

The day had started the night before, as this Galilean was arrested and railroaded with a mock trial and trumped up charges. That was when he had started to hear about the mini-furor igniting among the Jews. It wasn't long before their problem became his problem, as they brought this beggar-king before his boss, the Roman governor, famous for his lack of scruples or a backbone. Pilate had two ways of dealing with things: going too far or not going far enough. He either set off a firestorm or caved to the demands of the locals. Only in Palestine would Rome let such a worthless man be its public face.

So, they brought this Jesus before Pilate. Nothing of what the Jews said made sense, to Pilate or to the other Romans gathered. It sounded like a bunch of outdated, prehistoric, superstitious babble. Who got so worked up about matters of religion anymore, after all? But the Jews were mad, and Jesus was resolute, and Pilate was between a rock and a hard place. The Jews wanted one thing. His wife, the power behind the throne, wanted another. And the one person who should have spoken up loudest of all, the One accused—accused, it was becoming increasingly clear to many of the Romans, unjustly—said nothing. This was one of those quagmires we hear so much about these days. Pilate was nervous. One more revolt, one more screw-up, and he was going to be removed from the throne by Caesar. Rome had made matters clear: get your house in order and keep it in order. Pilate couldn't afford to upset the Jews, and so he did what a spineless man does when faced with conflict: he caved. He let them have what they wanted. "Crucify him," were the orders that later would so hauntingly ring in the centurion's ears, for he was the one forced to do Pilate's dirty work.

Finally, they arrived at Golgotha, the hill whose very landscape looked like death, shaped like a skull. His soldiers had some fun with the condemned man, and then they finally nailed him to the cross, all

to their great enjoyment. Many of the Jews lined up like they were waiting for a ride at Cedar Pointe to cast aspersions and spit on this KING OF THE JEWS, as his placard read. "You said you were the Son of God; let God save you now," more people than he could count had taunted. "King of the Jews, Son of God"—these words of derision were repeated again and again like a sorry refrain. Only later would he realize the irony of it all, as he too would speak the same words, only in faith and not in callous unbelief and hatred.

All hell broke loose when Jesus died. Some understood the significance of it all; others just knew it was scary. The curtain in the Temple that divided man and God, that kept sinful men out of the most holy presence of God, was rent in two. Later, Longinus would learn that this showed that Christ had entered heaven as the last and greatest High Priest and, by offering the Father the sacrifice of His own very Body and Blood on the altar of the cross, the same sacrifice we receive still today in the Supper, reconciled God and man so that where sin once divided them grace now made them one. A terrible earthquake split rocks and left onlookers trembling with fear. God had used earthquakes in the Old Testament to signal His presence and promise keeping with His people. Many of the Jews present recognized that. As the Son died, God signaled His presence, God pronounced a promise kept. Finally, some of the dead saints from the past, godly men and women who had looked forward to this day through faith, rose from the dead. No one knew this yet, since they did not enter Jerusalem until after Christ, the firstborn from the dead, was resurrected, but it would only prove the centurion's suspicions: with the Son's death the Father was now speaking His condemnation of those who rejected Him and His acceptance of all who would receive Him through faith, perhaps even those who crucified Him.

That's when the centurion spoke the words he could never take back, because they would be recorded in Sacred Scripture, nor would he ever want to take them back, because they were the most precious words in all the world: "Surely He was the Son of God!" What the Jews had spoken in mockery, the centurion now spoke in vindication of this wrongly condemned King of the Jews, of this righteous and innocent Son of the Heavenly Father. Church tradition says Longinus then became a Christian. We do not know for sure, though I see no grounds upon which one could say that these words were anything less than a confession of faith. What we do know is that there was forgiveness even for Longinus, even for those who pierced Christ, even for those criminals and perverts who tore at His flesh like dirty dogs. His body, once abused and defiled at their hands, could just as marvelously later be offered to them one day in the Sacrament as to any other catechized and repentant believer.

And there is forgiveness for you. Where? Hanging on the cross before our eyes today. The Son of God is your forgiveness, preached with the tongues of a million heralds since His death, eaten and drunk with the mouths of a million beggars, placed as a beautiful robe of righteousness upon a million little infant wretches born of flesh and reborn of the Spirit through the washing of water with the Word. "Surely this IS the Son of God." No matter how many times you have insulted him with your careless words, no matter how many times you have carelessly passed by His crucifixion without noticing in your apathy, like so many that day, no matter how many times you have spat upon him with your lust and greed and anger, no matter how many times you have pierced him with your betrayal and crowned him with your shame, recognize who He is now, now that the curtain between God and man has been torn and the graves of the saints cast open. He is the Son of God. He is your Savior. No matter what brought you to His feet today, like the centurion, leave certain of one thing: this dead Galilean is who He says He is. He is the Son of God. He is your only hope. Amen.