

**Good Friday Three Hours' Devotion**  
**Blessed are the peacemakers: The Centurion**  
**Mthr Jennifer Strawbridge**

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” – *Matthew 5.9*

According to tradition, his name is Longinus. A name that suspiciously corresponds with the Greek word for a lance. He is an Italian according to some traditions and in the Roman and Greek Orthodox churches, he is celebrated as a saint on, perhaps not ironically, the ides of March. In some stories, he is a martyr. For many Christians, the focus is on his sudden proclamation of faith rather than the reality that he has just crucified our Lord. And yet for many Jews and other contemporaries, he is despised. He is the enforcer of the Roman agenda, the constant threat of violence, the persecutor of those who are different. He is part of the Roman machine. He is a saint. He is a sinner. He is a threat. He is just doing his job. There is a wealth of legend around the centurion who makes an appearance at the end of three of our four gospels. And yet we find a poverty of exact details in the gospel narratives themselves, where we simply meet him at the foot of the cross, looking at the lifeless body of our Lord, and saying something like what we heard in the portion of

Matthew's passion just read: "Truly this was the Son of God."

And we wonder, why is he in this story? Why at the end of this lengthy passion and suffering, why after Jesus' death and the earthquakes and the darkness, why after Jesus has been abandoned by all except the women who stand far off from the cross, why are the first words to break into the silence of a world where Jesus is dead spoken by a centurion? A Roman officer? A pagan? Why leave Jesus alone to die on the cross, abandoned by all who love him, with the only people standing near, the only person at the foot of the cross being the one who has put him to death?

For some, the centurion's sole purpose is to proclaim once and for all what the disciples never fully understood about Jesus while he was with them. That he is the Son of God. For others, he is there to give Jesus' death a better, neater ending. Telling us that someone who is a part of his death, the violence done to him, gets it. And for others, he is there to make us feel uncomfortable, saying what we can't quite bring ourselves to say aloud before the cross. Recognizing something, someone we cannot quite bring ourselves to see in that lifeless body.

So why put this mysterious character – the pagan at the foot of the cross, who leaves us with more questions than answers – alongside a beatitude about making peace?

He's not exactly the first person in this narrative that springs to mind when we think of a peacemaker. When we hear "blessed are the peacemakers" from the lips of Jesus, we don't tend to think of a Roman soldier. And yet such figures ironically were central in the Roman imperial world in maintaining *Pax Romana*, in maintaining Roman peace. They were the visible, forceful presence, whose very being echoed with the threat of violence in order to maintain peace, order, and Roman supremacy in the lands and among the people brought into the empire. If you are promised the incursion of swift and horrible violence for threatening peace, it's no wonder that such peace is maintained. Though we might question what kind of peace this really is. But that is the peace this centurion represents: peace embodied by *Pax Romana*; peace that is enforced, maintained, protected. But this leads us to wonder whether perhaps this figure, this centurion is actually more of a peace *keeper* than a peace *maker*. He, like the other peacekeeper in this story – the figure of Pilate – is an enforcer of peace. And here, peace is understood primarily by what it is not. Peace is not about what is

present, but is what is absent: the absence of violence (at least of certain kinds), of conflict, of rebellion, of difference. This is what defines peace.

We live in a world with a lot of centurions, with a lot of peace *keepers*. To the point that we call UN Soldiers, UN Peace keepers. To the point that massive bombs are dropped in the name of maintaining peace. To the point that diplomats are sent into the midst of fraught regions and conversations and charged with keeping peace. To the point that we seek out relationship counselling in order to maintain some kind of peace in the midst of our brokenness.

But Jesus doesn't say blessed are the peace *keepers*, does he? Nor does he say blessed are the *peaceful*. Jesus isn't talking about those who keep the peace, who preserve what is most comfortable, who are focused only on what peace is not. Nor is he talking about those who have a peaceful disposition, lovely as they are. Jesus isn't focused on our personality when he says blessed are the peacemakers.

And so what do we do with this blessing, how can we even think about peacemakers on this day when we are asked to embody a story filled with peacekeepers?

Here's the thing about peace: however we look at it, even if we are only its keeper, the peace that is kept, the peace that is maintained doesn't happen on its own. It is made. To make peace is to create something that wasn't there before. And this peace is not simply defined by what it is not, it is something more than the absence of conflict and violence. This peace is defined by the presence of things that we can strive for. This peace involves action and not just negative space. Actions such as working for justice, equity, human potential. This kind of peace is risky. This kind of peace makes us vulnerable. This kind of peace making exposes us to the violence of the peace keepers.

And yet what we come face to face with in this gospel is a peace keeper. We come face to face with a centurion who keeps peace, and perhaps even believes he is making peace through violence. He is complicit with violence in the name of peace. He is complicit with the evils of killing those who might be innocent in the name of peace. He is complicit with injustice and inequity in the name of peace. And in his duty, in his desire, in his attempt to keep peace, he crucifies Peace.

And it is here, at the foot of the cross, that this one who is complicit with violence in order to keep peace,

encounters the one who is our Peace. Here at the foot of the cross the centurion recognises that in this violent act committed to keep peace, the victim of this violence is the one who not only makes peace but the one who is our Peace. “Truly this was the Son of God”, he exclaims. Truly this was Peace.

And we have to wonder whether in this moment, in this momentary recognition of God in his midst, the centurion moves from being peace keeper to peace maker. We have to wonder whether in this moment, the focus shifts even if just for an instant from maintaining and protecting, to the creation of something new, where life is forever changed. For this is the moment when violence can no longer maintain peace but peace, true peace, God himself enters into every crevice of this broken world. This is the moment, with Peace suspended on the cross between earth and heaven, that a glimpse of the new creation promised to us by that Peace is caught. And we wonder, is this what the centurion saw? Did he catch this glimpse? Did he see this Peace? There’s a chance we will never know.

For after his recognition. After his exclamation, this part of the story ends and we never hear of him again. We don’t know whether after that one moment, the centurion returned to removing the

dead, broken bodies and preparing for the next round of executions in the name of a different peace. We don't know if he turns to the women standing far off and asks where he can find the disciples for a chat. Within the gospel narratives, he doesn't show up on the Road to Emmaus. He isn't a part of the resurrection appearances. We don't hear that he set down his spear and took up a less violent way of life; that he becomes a volunteer at a local charity for peace. Maybe all these things happened, but we don't know.

We don't know, and yet we do. We do as on this day, we stand at the foot of the cross. We do on this day as we realise that we are all that centurion. We are all that centurion who try our best to keep peace, to maintain peace, not to rock the boat, not to draw too much attention to ourselves. And yet how often as we strive for the peace we think we need, do we strive for that which we only use ourselves, for our gain, our success, our recognition? How often do we strive for that peace which simply covers our errors, our sin, our insecurity? Which inflicts violence in order to maintain the peace in our life? Which uses others in order to keep our peace? How loudly do our lives mirror the centurion? How easily do we deceive ourselves into thinking we are peace makers, when in

reality we are at best peace keepers and at worst peace killers?

For we are the ones this day who like the centurion stand at the foot of the cross and watch Peace die. Who crucify Peace. We don't do it knowingly and we can't even fully grasp what it means. But neither did the centurion. And yet unlike the centurion, we know what happened that day, *this* day. He might not have known why there was an earthquake, and a strange mid-day darkness, and a bunch of bodies rising from their tombs, but we know. For unlike that centurion, we are called to follow Jesus through the darkness of his death and to celebrate new life, to celebrate unexpected forgiveness at the foot of the cross and to receive grace as we walk the long road to and through the cross. Unlike that centurion, we know about God's love, we have encountered Christ before, and we know that in this one death, death is defeated for ever. The centurion didn't know this, but we do.

And all of this is most clear from the only words the centurion speaks in this story: "Truly this was the Son of God." But we know differently. Yes, this *was* the Son of God. But it also *is* the Son of God. Truly this *is* the Son of God. For this death is not the end. This death does not put everything Jesus did into the past. This death does not defeat him. For this death

defeats all death. And this Peace overcomes all violence. The centurion didn't know this, but we do. For on that cross is our peace, who has reconciled us to God in one body. On that cross is our peace who by that cross has redeemed the world. The world represented by this centurion, by this one who in the eyes of many couldn't be farther away from God, and yet in this moment, sees God. In this moment sees Peace. And in this moment he is called a child of God.

For the centurion, with this one sentence at the foot of the cross, the story stops. On this day as you stand at the foot of the cross, as you gaze at the lifeless body of our Lord, as you watch Peace die, does the story stop for you too?

As we emerge from this place into our broken world, do we continue to be complicit with violence in our world? Do we continue to exploit others? Do we continue to turn a blind eye to injustice? All in the name of peace? On this day, when we recognise the magnitude of what Jesus has done for us, as we like that centurion catch a glimpse of the peace which surpasses our understanding, are our lives at all transformed? What difference does our standing at the foot of the cross make within us this day? And if it doesn't change us, if we simply return to our daily

lives and routines unaffected, need we not ask ourselves urgently, why?