

A Criminal Released

Background

A number of years ago a number of members of our church, Stanton Road Baptist in Luton, were asked to portray different characters from the Easter story. In response, I put together and performed a short monologue. Recently I have felt that I should revisit and expand that monologue, the result of which follows below.

Introduction

The following is a work of fiction and speculation taking inspiration from Matthew 27:15-26 and parallel passages plus a minimum of historical background. I hope it may be thought provoking.

The scene is a number of years after the resurrection and an old man is sitting with a group of people, telling them his story.

"People used to call me a revolutionary, the sort of person they were looking for to free them from the oppression of the invaders. A messiah some called me.

Grand words, but the harsh reality is that I hated the Romans with a passion, not for any patriotic reasons, but because they restricted my freedom to make a quick denarius by any means I chose, honest or otherwise.

So I gathered a few friends together and we would creep through the shadows until we found one or two soldiers separated from the rest. We'd grab them, drag them into a quiet alley and beat them to death. The people hailed us as heroes but the Romans called us murderers. I just got a glow of revenge for the trouble they gave me. Life was hard enough without their interference!

Over time the authorities captured us one by one, tried us and put us to death. I managed to avoid being caught longer than most but eventually my turn came and I was thrown into jail awaiting judgment.

At the same time they seized another man called Jesus. I'd heard stories of him before I was caught. Folk said he went around teaching about God, not in a holier-than-thou manner like the religious leaders, but in a way which made him seem more down-to-earth and human. He even referred to God as 'Father' as if he knew him personally. The stories also said that he healed the sick and raised the dead. Of course it couldn't be true or why would they arrest him? Still, when did being innocent count for anything with them? They just loved flaunting their power.

Most prisoners filled the day protesting their innocence or moaning about the conditions in the cells, but not this Jesus. There wasn't much light so I couldn't see what he looked like, but he seemed to spend most of the time praying, not for forgiveness but more like a favourite son talking to his father. Now, I'm not someone who prays a lot, haven't really thought much about God since my parents were killed by the Romans when I was a kid and I had to fend for myself on the streets. I remember thinking that he might have lost the plot and really thought he was someone special, but I didn't see any reason for him to be in jail. I never heard anyone say that he'd done any harm, most folk said he was a good man, someone who really cared about people. Sure, he seemed to have rubbed the priests up the wrong way, but I reckon they deserved it with their "I'm better than you" attitude.

It was around Passover time and we could hear the sound of a crowd gathering outside. We couldn't see anything and their voices were muffled and indistinct. Suddenly a shout went up and we could make out one word being repeated, 'Barabbas, Barabbas!' - my name! Then it became muffled again until another shout went up, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!'

I remember thinking that it was all over. People wanted me dead and the Romans certainly weren't going to step in and save me, not the man who had been killing their own soldiers. I knew it was coming but the reality of it suddenly hit me. I was going to die – TODAY! I'd come to the end of the line. I didn't know whether to feel scared or relieved it was all over.

Soon the jailers came to get me along with some of the other prisoners, including Jesus. As we came out into the light I managed to get my first clear look at him. He didn't have the frightened look of a man about to die like the rest of us did. No, he had an air of peace and authority, like he was in control or something. I'd never seen anyone going to the cross looking like that. Weird! Was he crazy, or what? Did he understand what was happening?

Then an amazing thing happened. The soldiers started leading prisoners off to where the crosses were stacked, waiting. Most struggled and protested while others just cried. Somehow Jesus and I were at the end of the line. Then it was Jesus's turn. Unlike the others he went quietly – almost as though it was what he wanted. Then they told me that I was free and to get out of there. I didn't waste any time and bolted for the gate. They'd obviously got us muddled but I wasn't going to argue

I should have headed for a place of safety before someone realized the mistake, but somehow found myself drawn to the place of execution. There was Jesus hanging on a cross between two other men. I didn't think I recognised them, but people like us try not to attract attention. He seemed to just accept his fate. Yes, he was in pain – I'd seen a number of men crucified and it was never a pretty sight. One moment they would be screaming in agony and the next they were struggling to breathe. Most ended up begging the guards to kill them. While Jesus was visibly suffering, there was also a sense of purpose to him, like he'd planned it that way.

And then he looked right at me. I wanted to look away but somehow I just couldn't. It seemed he was looking right into my innermost being. But it wasn't a look of hatred. No, it was one of tenderness, love and forgiveness. I will never forget it.

After he was dead, I left Jerusalem and found somewhere to hide and think about everything. There was something about this Jesus. There were rumours that he'd come back from the dead. Rubbish - or was it? He'd claimed to be God's son but didn't seem to be mad. Stupid for dying for his beliefs perhaps, but not mad. And if he really was God's son like he said, then maybe he *could* come back from the grave. What was I to believe? Some said the Romans had taken the body but that doesn't make any sense to me. If they had, then they could bring it out to prove that he wasn't dead. And it couldn't have been Jesus's followers, I'd met some of them and they weren't that bright. Besides, the Romans were guarding the tomb so how would they manage it?

I spent the next few years trying to find out more about him. It became an obsession. I spoke to his followers and others who had known him. I found out more about his teachings and life. And I saw what his followers were now doing. People were being healed in miraculous ways (I say **were** being healed, but it's still happening). I bumped into one guy who was running down the street who looked a bit familiar. I looked again and realised that he was a lame beggar who had sat by the temple gate for years. I grabbed him before he could run away and asked him what had happened. He said that a couple of Jesus's followers said they didn't have any money but told him to stand up because Jesus had given them the power to heal him. Amazing!

In his teachings, Jesus explained that the Messiah promised in the Scriptures would not come to overcome the tyranny of men, but rather to break the power of evil which separates us from God. It would take a special person, one not tainted by sin and guilt to accomplish this. After all, washing with a dirty rag won't make you clean. Jesus claimed to be that man. One of his disciples, John, explained it when he said something like, 'God loved mankind with so great a passion that he sent his precious, only son into our world to utterly destroy death's hold on those who surrender their lives to him so that he could give us a new and vibrant life that can never be taken away from us.'

What I think he meant was that nobody's perfect, we all have things in our lives we're not proud of. These things come between us and God. It needs someone who is perfect to break down the barriers. The priests offer lambs and bulls and so on, but it's not enough. They are only a short term answer. What we need is a perfect sacrifice. If what Jesus's followers say is true, he was that perfect man, the only sacrifice that really counts. And he proved it by coming back from the grave.

I realised that I had to make a choice, to reject Jesus as a someone with delusions of divine power and return to my old ways or to believe and accept him and allow him to transform my life. I say it was a choice, but really it was a no-brainer. I had to choose him. I found that the guilt and shame of my past life was shattered like a hammer hitting a clay pot. I came to believe he was who he said he was and that his is the only way to bring peace into the world though love, forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Now I find it hard to hate anyone, not even the Romans. Who'd have thought it?

I am now his servant, friend and brother. My life is changed forever. Praise God."

Pete Bennett
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With help and advice on the dramatic aspects from
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