

THE CENTURIAN

(Dramatic Monologue)

Trenton M. Thomas

I woke up, and it was just an ordinary day. As I stumbled out of bed, I vaguely wondered what the commotion had been last night. An entire battalion of soldiers had been sent out for some political threat that had the Jews all riled up. Ah well, it was not my men, so I rolled over for a little more sleep. I'm getting much too old for these barracks! It seems so long ago that I was pressed into service for Rome, and glad I was to go, too! In the army, I've been able to see the world! I've traveled places I only dreamed of as a boy, but my travels haven't always been pleasant. As part of the Roman army, I brought devastation to so many homes. The things I've seen and done . . . I don't want to talk about it. Sometimes I lay awake at night as images shriek across my mind, screaming for mercy. But I gave them none. I did my job. I always do my job. I'm a Roman soldier. Ah, yes, Rome! The glory of Rome! In two years, I'll be able to retire, and I plan on settling there! I'll get fat and wealthy for my years of service, and oh, the stories I can tell to them there! I helped build that empire. My sword helped make them great. But for now, here I am in Jerusalem.

I was wounded in a battle in Asia, while helping my Centurion stay alive. He had fallen from a blow across his helmet, and he was surrounded! He died from his wounds a day later, but I was rewarded his post. Unfortunately, my wounds make it difficult for me to fight now, so they sent me to *Jerusalem* of all places! Oh, these Jews can really get on your nerves! They always want freedom, and they're always stirred up about something! Herod even built them a beautiful temple, but they aren't happy! But none of that really matters any more. In fact, I'll probably never see Rome. You see, something happened. One day changed my life, and now I have a completely new purpose. Let me tell you about that day.

I got up, and strapped on my armor as usual. As I left my barrack, I heard some commotion down by Herod's palace. There was a mob, and they were shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" I wondered who they were shouting about, and as I got closer, I kept hearing the name "Jesus." I'd heard of him before, some sort of miracle-worker or the like. I couldn't imagine why they would want to crucify him, but it didn't really matter to me. I would do my job. Unfortunately, I happened to be in charge of crucifixions. It really used to bother me, but after a while I got used to it, and I even helped on occasion now. But even I wasn't prepared for what happened. The Jews *hated* this Jesus. That day, I gave watched as by *my order*, Jesus was beaten repeatedly. My men really got into these cruelties now, and they even made a crown of thorns for him, because the Jews said he was some sort of "king." Then they whipped him worse than I've ever seen a man whipped before. Honestly, I don't know how he lived. It turned even my stomach—he didn't even look like a man anymore.

Then it was off to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull where we did all our crucifixions. Since we had to do the work of one crucifixion, I decided to kill two thieves as well. We started out for the hill, but this Jesus was so beaten he couldn't even carry his cross! We forced a passerby to carry it for him. But somehow, even in all his weakness, this Jesus seemed to have some sort of . . . power. It was strange, and it intrigued me. I had heard so many stories of this man, and now I began to wonder just what kind of man he was. There was no way he should even have been

alive now he was so beaten, but somehow he made it to the hill. And then it happened. I decided to carry out this crucifixion myself. Pilate had even ordered an inscription made for his cross. It said, “This is the king of the Jews”—in several languages. I was curious, and I wanted to see how this “king” would die. I shudder now to think of the danger I was in.

I’ve never been so bothered by a crucifixion as I was that day. I drove one of the spikes in myself, and a strange thing happened. Even as my spike was tearing and shattering and inflicting excruciating agony, Jesus looked at me. His eyes were filled with pain, of course, but there was something different about them—something I’d never seen before. There was no anger, no bitterness, no rage at the shame and agony of the cruel cross. And he actually focused—on me! In his eyes I saw something I know I’ll never see again. There was love. For me. And even as I showed no mercy to this innocent man, in some way I felt that *I* was the one who needed it. And it was there—in those eyes. That gaze went far deeper than I wanted it to. He saw my past—all the things that I’d done. They were there in that gaze too. It was as if he were somehow taking the blame for it, and loving me in return. I couldn’t hold that gaze, but I couldn’t drop it either. I wanted to run and hide, or somehow keep Him from seeing my sin. I’ll never forget that feeling, or the look in His eyes.

I don’t remember much about the rest of that day. All I knew is that I had just done the most horrible act of my life. This man deserved my *worship*, not a cross. Couldn’t they see that? I wanted to scream at the crowd. I wanted to fall in worship before that cross, and I couldn’t understand why everyone else wasn’t doing that already. Then it grew dark, much darker than I’ve ever seen before. Somehow, that felt right to me, like the light of the whole world had just gone out when we hung this man on the cross. Then there was an earthquake, but not really an earthquake. Somehow, it seemed like the rocks were just splitting—almost like they were crying out in the worship that I could not bring myself to do. I know I was thinking it, and others have told me that I actually said it. I said, “Surely, this man is the Son of God.” And in that moment, I knew, and I understood; and I despaired like I’ve never despaired before. I had just crucified God Himself. I would have ended my life, had it not been for the words He spoke when He was hanging there. He looked straight at me and said something that I’ve never heard before or since. He said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.”

Forgiveness! That was it! That was what I needed. That is what He gave. That is why He was hanging there. I can’t really explain it all – I’m just a soldier – but I know it’s true. He forgave me for driving the nails, but He also forgave more. I really don’t think my nails were holding Him to the cross that day. No, my sin held Him there – My sin and your sin, and he stayed there willingly. He took all the things I’d done and replaced them with . . . love – The same kind of love He had. Somehow, I wasn’t surprised to find that He had risen from the dead three days later. I knew that death could never hold Him any more than that cross did. He went so willingly that somehow I know that He was allowing the whole thing to happen. I should have been there, *taking* the nails instead of giving them. I should have died. Instead, Jesus—Jesus the Christ, the Son of God took my place. And now I want to see that face again more than I’ve ever wanted to see Rome. I have a new purpose in life now. I no longer care about the glory of Rome. All glory, and my life, belongs to God and His Son, Jesus the Christ.