

CROSSROADS

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Torches scattered shadows across the garden. In darkness and the dim dancing of orange light, the centurion—sent by Pilate—watched the mob. Hidden, he watched as the Traitor kissed the Teacher. He watched as metal flashed: the first sword drawn. He watched as the blade swept down and struck its target. The high priest's slave fell, clutching his head where his ear once was. The centurion braced himself for the violence to come, but into the pause of pregnant tension, the betrayed man stepped forward. The centurion couldn't hear what was said, but the images burned into his memory. The rabbi stooped down to the fallen slave. Looking him in the eyes, he placed his hand upon the wound, and when he removed it, it was to reveal a face unmarred. Then he rose and let the mob take him away.

What just happened? The centurion couldn't stop asking the question as he delivered his report to Pilate and returned to the barracks. His mind grew increasingly agitated. They had all heard of this prophet, this wonder-worker who supposedly gave sight to the blind and life to the dead. But the centurion had seen war. He knew that the dead did not rise. He had fought under Caesar himself, and men called *him* a god. But Caesar couldn't heal the wounded, and no one claimed that this Jew was a god.

What, then, had just happened? The centurion had seen the wound with his own eyes. He had seen the man rise, healed, and he could not convince himself that it was a mere trick of the shadows and darkness. The wound had been as real as the wounds he had received on the battlefield. His mind turned back to his



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fallen friends. If only *he* had had such power to heal, if only *he* could have made them whole with a touch of his hand . . . If this miracle worker could accomplish such marvels, why wasn't he *there*, saving lives? If he could raise the fallen and heal the sick, why was he *here*, wasting himself on these Jews?

The next few hours transformed agitated thoughts into tortured ruminations. Doubt gave way to despair and a dark cloud of memory and sorrow, wrath and regret settled upon him. When news came that Pilate had ordered the Nazarene to be flogged, the centurion made arrangements with the commanding officer. He was ready, scourge in hand, when they brought the prophet into the Praetorium. As soon as he had been stripped and tied to the pillar, the centurion lashed out. Once, twice, three times. Over

and over, he gave violent vent to his anger. But as he continued to wound the healer—as blood poured down the man’s back—something twisted, sickeningly, in the centurion’s stomach. It was as if he could hear the voice of his victim reproaching him, *What have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!* But the centurion had no answer. This man had done only good, and now he was bringing down scourges upon him.

When the last lash fell, the centurion stumbled backward in a daze. *What had he done?* The other soldiers were gathering around the weak and blood-lost man, and their every insult, their every curse, turned the centurion’s stomach even more. *What had he done?* Guilt disoriented him. Shocked and bewildered, he could only watch as they robed the man in a fake purple cloak and mocked him for a would-be king. He could only watch as a wooden stick was handed over to play the role of a ruler’s rod.

He watched as a crown of plaited thorns was passed forward through the crowd, and he winced as the awful object was jammed upon the brow of the man he had brutalized. He watched as the prophet’s knees buckled under this new pain. He watched—but he did not move to help him.

Slowly, the man climbed to his feet, struggling for balance. The centurion was looking on when, through the obscuring streams of blood flowing from his forehead, the healer looked at him. It was not a glance, but a gaze. Their eyes locked. *Jesus* looked at him, looked into him, and that look pierced the centurion’s malaise. In that look, the centurion knew that he was known.

More terrifying still, in that look the centurion saw love. *What had he done?* The power and the depth of the love contained in those blood-draped eyes was too much for him. Raw and exposed, he backed away from a love he could not bear. Then, breaking for the first time in his life, he pushed his way through the crowd, fleeing from the gaze of *Jesus* as he had never before fled from the field of battle.

Safely distant, far from that gaze that was far too intimate, the centurion trembled. *Who was this man? How could he have loved what he saw?* It wasn't possible. You don't love a man who volunteered to whip you. You don't love a man who envies your power to do good. You don't love a man whose hate is kindled by healing. And yet the centurion could not deny that Jesus had looked upon him with love any more than he could deny that Jesus had restored the ear of the wounded slave. *Who was this man?*

It was then that he made the decision to turn around. He would not get close enough to be seen. He would not chance another unbearable gaze. But if he kept his distance, if he stayed far enough away, he could see what happened without being affected by it. He could observe Jesus without getting involved.

Thus, the centurion found himself following the crowd. From afar, he saw Jesus take up the cross, weak though he was, and fall under its weight. He saw a woman approach, but he couldn't hear what passed between them. A man was enlisted to help him carry the cross, and for a fleeting moment, the centurion desired to be that man, to make up for what he had done with the whip. When another woman came and wiped his face, the centurion again missed what was said.

If he wanted to hear, he had to draw closer. Again Jesus fell. Again he struggled back to his feet. He spoke, but the wailing of women made it impossible to hear, so the centurion came closer still. Men he knew—soldiers he had eaten and joked with—stripped the clothes from Jesus' back and laid him down upon the cross. The centurion's hands had become clammy. *Stop this*, he thought, *there must be some way to stop this. The man has done nothing wrong.* But the arms were outstretched. The nails were set. The hammers were raised. Then, for the first time, he heard the voice of Jesus, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do,"—and his heart broke.

The crucifixion itself was a blur. He watched them raise Jesus upon the cross, but he didn't really see it. He overheard the

exchange between the crucified and the pair standing at the foot of the cross, but he didn't really hear it. The only things that were real to him were the echoing words, *Forgive them*. He knew that they applied to him. He had come too close. He had gotten involved. But this time, the love was not unbearable; it was liberating. Contrition crashed upon him, but waves of gratitude followed. He could leave this place behind him. The man Jesus had forgiven him before he died.

He looked up and saw that it was true. The body of Jesus hung, lifeless, upon the cross. The centurion came forward to get a closer look before leaving. Longinus, a man he knew well, stepped beside him, carrying a spear. As the lance thrust into the dead man's side, the rest of Jesus' prayer leapt into his mind: They know not what they do.

Blood and water splattered down upon him. He turned and saw tears streaming down Longinus' face. Despite the tears, however, his friend's voice was bold. *Truly, this was the Son of God*.

Frantically trying to understand the scene that lay before him, the centurion felt as if his mind was flailing about in the darkness: The man hung. The words echoed. And the centurion stood at the crossroads.

Oh God . . . Is that true?

Philip Neri Reese entered the Order of Preachers in 2009.