

11 A Soldier

(John 19:17-19)

There were only three that morning. That's about the minimum. Its usually more, sometimes far more, but just three that morning. Well actually we thought it was just two. We were all ready to get them out there. You have to get them up pretty early you know other wise by night fall they're still hollering as loudly as they were at the start. But as we were about to leave we got a message that there was another one on the way. There was some big fuss going on out at the governor's place.

We must have waited, O. nearly two hours I should think and then this guy arrived. Well I've never known anything like it! There were thousands of people following him. They were yelling and hollering and crying and wailing like no body's business, it was a dreadful commotion and quite honestly I wondered whether we would get this one done. I mean, if that crowd had turned we would have had no chance.

Anyway we fitted him up with a cross bar and set out. Well it was like trying to drive goats to market. The crowds were so thick we had to fight our way through . Now and again we had to stop and I could hardly believe it, this extra guy, half or even three quarters dead already, this guy has a chat with the crowd. He couldn't hack it though, that old cross bar was too much for him. So we grabbed some other poor sucker out of the crowd and made him carry it instead. After all we didn't want this guy to die before we got him there, then there would be no point in crucifying him would there.

Anyway, eventually and its nearly nine o'clock now, but eventually we got there. Still with the crowd yelling and hollering and weeping and wailing. We got on quickly, a mallet and a dozen nails and then we could rest.

Normally it takes two or even three of us to hold them down when we do the nailing. You'd be surprised how even a half dead man can fight when it comes to it.

Last in, first up is our rule. So I grabbed the arm of this extra guy expecting to find the usual resistance to the inevitable. But to my surprise there was nothing, no fight, no strain. As I bent the arm back and flattened his hand against the wood there was no pulling away, just a gentle acceptance of what was about to happen. I was taken aback, I think I was probably shocked, so shocked that I broke the rule; I turned my head and ... and looked at him, the man I was about to nail to a cross. And to my amazement he was looking at me.

Now I've served under many officers, most of whom I have to say have been right ... well you know what I mean. They bark their orders, they throw their weight around, and we soldiers, well we obey because the consequences of not obeying are pretty dire. The officers who command us in the Roman army wield fear and brutality as their weapons.

I've never looked at a man at the moment of crucifixion before so I don't really know what I should have expected. A desperate man on the edge of insanity in the face of the agony that is about to be his? a pleading man begging for mercy? I didn't know what to expect, but one thing I do know is that I could never have expected what I saw. For the eyes of this man were without doubt the eyes of a commander, the eyes of a man who knew what it was to speak his orders and know that they would be carried out without question. A man who had said go and come, and do and do not. And what was amazing, even frightening, was that even now, even now, beaten, bruised, flogged, tortured, bleeding, facing inevitable death, even now he was still commanding.

I couldn't tear my stare away. If at that moment he had said: No, I'm sure I would have laid mallet and nails down and waited for his next order. But what still stuns me, what I will never understand is that his order was not: No, but with the little strength he had left he motioned his head toward the hand that I held flattened against the wood.

For a moment I was frozen, could this be? Could this be true? This man was giving me the order? Giving me the permission? And even now he was good to me, he closed his eyes and sunk back. I watched him for a second more, but having given an order he knew that it would be obeyed. There was no question about it.

I looked away and with tear filled eyes focused on the hand and, with the skill that is only gained from years of experience, I drove the first nail in. No scream, a moan, a jolt, but no scream.

The left hand, the right hand, up on the vertical and then quickly through the ankles, my job done.

"Get a move on man," barked the officer, "there's two more to do!" I obeyed, fearful of the consequences.

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