

“Keeping the Pax Romana During Pascha” by David Lloyd



Palm Sunday

April 10, 2022

I'm glad to see you, Lucas, old friend, and here in Jerusalem! But this is a busy time for me. It is time for Passover, the festival the Jews call Pesach, Pascha, in Latin. Jews are coming into Jerusalem as they do every year, mostly from the eastern half of Mare Nostrum: from Judaea and Galilaea of course, and from Syria, and Cuprum; from Aegyptus, Creta, and Cyrenaica. But some from other parts of the Empire.

The Jews say that the Passover commemorates how a leader named Moishe freed them from slavery in Aegyptus more than a millennium ago. They say their god performed miracles, somehow killing every firstborn Aegyptian male and drowning the

Pharoah's army that was chasing them. It had to be miraculous, because Moishé had no army! In every crowd of Jews during this Passover, someone starts talking about how their god – whose name they are forbidden to say – will drive out our Roman army and bring world peace. Once I said to one, "If so, your god will have to perform another miracle, since you have no legions." He just smiled, and said, "The Holy One will provide us a Mashiach, a leader."

The Jews should like the peace we bring them, the Pax Romana. They don't want us here but they know that it is our Roman legions in Syria who prevent the Parthians from slaughtering them here in Jerusalem. We auxiliaries keep the Pax Romana in Judaea, Samaria, Idumea, Galilaea, and the Decapolis. We may be auxiliaries rather than legionnaires, but we train as hard as the legionnaires do, we have the same weapons and armor, and we'll fight just as hard, too. Every Pascha the Procurator Pontius Pilate orders our cohort, almost five hundred auxiliaries down from Caesarea Maritima into the fortress Antonia here. I'm now a centurion, and I keep my soldiers alert for trouble. We have standing orders to arrest any agitators inciting rebellion and to bring them to the Procurator for judgment. If he finds them guilty, we scourge them and then crucify them outside the walls, usually on Calvariae Locus, which the Jews call Golgotha, to send a message to any would-be rebels.

As I said, we're posted in Caesarea Maritima. My father enlisted in the Roman army as an auxiliary there. I did too and I rose through the ranks to centurion, so now I command a century of auxiliaries, eighty soldiers. When my father retired he moved to a town called Capernaum in Galilaea on the shore of Lacum Tiberias, also named Mare Galilaeae. After he died I inherited his home in Capernaum and I will reside there when I retire. I visit it often. It's quiet there.

I speak Aramaic and even a little Hebrew, the Jewish religious language similar to Aramaic. That's how I learned about the Jewish god. There's a lot I admire about the Jews, aside from their silly fixation on wanting to be independent. I've been to their synagogues when they gather for worship, parading their scrolls of scripture they call Torah. Such joy you've never seen. I've even paid for the construction of their synagogue in Capernaum. When my best servant became deathly ill and one of their wandering healers and teachers who was becoming well known had come there, I asked the elders to send for him to come to my house and heal my servant. Then I realized that it wasn't right for me, a non-Jew to ask him to come to my house, so I went to him, and told him to just say the word and my servant would be healed. He said he would, and my servant was healed.

I like the Jews but I am always tense around Pascha. When I was a child King Herod the Great had placed a golden eagle over the entrance to the Jewish god's temple here in Jerusalem. The Jews saw this as blasphemy and chopped it down. Herod's auxiliaries arrested several rabbis and forty young rebels and burned them at the stake. Then Herod died and his son Archelaus came here at Pascha to win over the Jews, but they stoned some of his emissaries to death. So he ordered a cohort to kill the rebels, and they slaughtered about 3,000 Jews. Then he cancelled Pascha and sailed for Rome. Publius Quinctilius Varus was governor of Syria then. The Jews complained about Archelaus, about his high taxes and how ruthless he was, and they began refusing to buy or use our Roman pottery. It turned into an open revolt but Varus sent his legions here and put down the rebellion by crucifying another 2,000 of the Jewish rebels.

Six years ago, we nearly had a riot when Pontius Pilate became the new Procurator. He ordered that the eagle standards of the Empire be taken to Jerusalem and planted on the mount where their Temple is. We had huge protests here in Caesarea

Maritima, which we stopped by just coming out of our barracks.

Soon after we arrived this year there was a disturbance in the courtyard of their Temple, where they offer animal sacrifices. Some religious disagreement caused Jews to riot against other Jews. The Temple guards couldn't stop it, but when I sent a squad they killed a few people, quelling it. Pontius Pilate gave orders to mix the rioters' blood with the blood of the slaughtered animals. The Jewish priests refused, calling that a violation of Torah, their religious law, so they started rioting again, but against us! I had to send three other squads to enforce Pilate's order. The Jews are still upset about that. Pilate should stay out of their religious squabbles.

We are always watching crowds because Zelotes, ultra-religious Pharisees who are political radicals and agitators, start preaching Jewish independence and fire them up into mobs ready to start a revolution. Some Zelotes carry sicae, daggers, so we call them the Sicarii. In a crowd they'll stab any Roman and any Jew who helps us. I'd crucify every one of them!

On dies Solis we heard loud shouting and could see a small procession coming in through one of the gates. The crowd was shouting "Hallelujah!" – which means "Praise God!" – and praises like "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" You could tell that they weren't angry, they were joyous. I looked and saw a man riding a donkey and people walking with him were putting palm fronds and their cloaks down in the street. He looked familiar and I looked closer. I did know him! It was Jesus, or Yeshua as the Jews call him, the teacher who had healed my servant up in Capernaum! I swear, he looked right at me, and he smiled at me!

I asked one of the Jews who was cheering why Jesus was riding a donkey like that. He tried not to answer but when I confronted him he said it's to fulfill the words of one of

their prophets, Zechariah. I pressed him and he said, it's how the Jewish king will enter Jerusalem when his kingdom is restored by their god.

I didn't think this Iesus was a king at all and I'm not sure he wanted to be. He had authority, yes; when he spoke people stopped what they were doing and listened to him. And from what I had heard, he was very skilled at arguing with the Pharisees. But in Capernaum he acted so tenderly to those who were sick or lame, to children, and to widows and other women. He wasn't at all like that greedy Herod Antipas in Galilaea, who's always looking for more power.

But Iesus was entering the city as if he was a king. I know my duty so I went and reported all this to my superior, the Primus Pilus. We try to keep our troops from entering their Temple grounds so he sent for the deputy to the High Priest who served as captain of the Temple guards. The Primus Pilus told him to be on the alert for this Iesus, to hold him if he caused any disturbance, and to send for the nearest centurion. He agreed eagerly, as if he longed for the opportunity to arrest this Iesus.

Each day this week I sent patrols out to find this Iesus, to warn him if possible but to arrest him if necessary. But they didn't find him; he must not have been staying in the city. I heard that he came onto the Temple grounds every day to teach and to argue with the Pharisees, but he always left before the Temple Guards arrived or if they did arrive the crowd wouldn't let them arrest him. One day he caused a disturbance, knocking down the tables of those who sell the animals and birds for their sacrifices, and spilling their coins everywhere, but he quickly left and disappeared. On another day, the Pharisees tried to trap him by asking him if it were lawful to pay the tax to Caesar; if he said no, that would be sedition, and the Temple Guards could arrest him and hold him for us. But I was told he held up one of our coins and said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God,"

which was a clever answer, so they didn't arrest him.

Last night I was told he was praying on the Mount of Olives outside the city in the garden they call Gethsemane, and the captain of the Temple Guards arrived with a patrol. Supposedly, one of Iesus' own followers betrayed him. When another of his followers cut off the ear of one of the guards, Iesus touched his ear and it instantly healed, and he told his disciples not to resist. I am told he embarrassed the guards by asking why they came at night with swords and clubs because they could have arrested him every day in the Temple. But they arrested him and took him to the house of their high priest, where some of the guards mocked him and beat him. They took him before their ruling council and questioned him as to whether he was the Mashiach. He refused to answer. I was told that they asked him if he was the Son of God and he replied that they said that he was.

So they brought him to the Procurator. I stood there, hearing them claim that he fomented rebellion by saying that people did not have to pay their tax to Rome, and that he said he was the Mashiach, but an eyewitness told Pilate that both were lies. Pilate asked Iesus directly, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Iesus answered, "You have said so." Clever; even Pilate could see that. Pilate told them that there was no basis to charge him, but they insisted on his guilt, and said Iesus had started his blasphemy up in Galilaea. So Pilate told them he had no authority over a Galilaeian and ordered my squad to take him to Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilaea. Meanwhile, I sent a messenger to the Fortress Antonia to bring two more squads; I could see this crowd was out for Iesus' blood.

Apparently, Herod Antipas too had heard about Iesus and had wanted to meet him or to see him perform a miracle, as if he was a magician. He interrogated Iesus, who didn't reply, even as his accusers kept shouting for his death. Herod got frustrated and his guards began mocking Iesus, cloaking him in a robe as if he was a nobleman. Then Herod asked me to have

the squad return Iesus to Pilate.

Pilate wasn't pleased to see us return. He told Iesus' accusers that neither he nor Herod had found any cause to execute Iesus, and so he would punish him and then release him. But they exploded, calling out "Release Barabbas, the rebel to us!" I didn't like that at all. Barabbas' gang had killed some of our auxiliaries and had been very hard to capture. Pilate said again that he would punish Iesus and then release him, but the crowd began shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" over and over. Pilate tried to calm them again but they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" I knew right then that Pilate would not release him and my heart sank, knowing I would have to lead the crucifixion detail. I looked at Iesus. He didn't look like a rebel. He didn't look like a king, either. He looked exhausted and in pain, and saddened, and yet somehow serene, even...holy. I almost started to argue with Pilate, but I could feel Iesus looking at me. His look seemed to say that he understood, and that he forgave me. I felt empty inside.

Pilate turned to me and said, "Put your troops on the Via Dolorosa, I do not want a riot." I sent a man to the fortress Antonia to get the crossbeam, then led Iesus away onto the Via Dolorosa, the street that led outside the wall towards Calvariae Locus to wait for it. Our procession was slow, mostly because the crossbeam was too heavy for Iesus to carry in his exhausted state, so I picked a man from the crowd to carry it for him. Our little procession was followed by a group of Iesus' followers, which included women mourning in loud cries and wailing. Iesus managed to croak to them, "Don't weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children." My men tensed up as the crowds swelled, lining the street, jeering at him.

We came to the crucifixion grounds, where two criminals on their crosses were already being lifted into place. The immunis hammered the pegs through the crossbeam into the

upright, and then two of my soldiers pushed Iesus down onto the cross. The immunis fastened him to it, hammering a nail into each palm and one into his crossed feet. Then he nailed the ironical notice Pilate had sent above Iesus' head that read, "Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum," which means, "Yeshua the Nazarene, King of the Jews." I gave the order and my men pulled the ropes around the crossbeam while others pushed the upright until Iesus was hanging. The weeping of the women and the jeering of his accusers was all mixed together into one deafening din, but I heard him say, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." But I did know what we were doing, and for the first time, a crucifixion felt wrong. I didn't want to look as my men were drawing lots to see who would get his clothing.

Then the accusers came by along with the usual ruffraff. They shouted up at him, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Mashiach." He said nothing; he just looked at them. My men began to mock him, "If you're the king of the Jews, save yourself," and laughing. He said nothing. On my orders, one offered him wine and vinegar to dull the pain. He shook his head in refusal. He didn't moan in pain. He just hung there.

At noon it grew dark, and he cried out, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit," and then he died. His death had come much more quickly than most who are crucified, but he didn't die like a coward, crying for his mother. But I couldn't say he died bravely like a soldier – or like a king, either. He didn't curse me or my men. He never cursed the ones who'd demanded he be crucified. He never cursed Pilate for giving in, or Herod for mocking him. He just accepted it all. The serenity of his death was unreal. I thought of how tenderly he had taught and ministered to his fellow Jews at Capernaum, and how he looked as he entered this city, and how he said he forgave us for crucifying him, and I couldn't help myself, I said, "Praise to your god, surely this man was a

righteous man.”

The crowd melted away except for his closest followers, including some women who'd been weeping, so I ordered a squad leader to find out if his corpse were merely going to be thrown into the valley to rot or be chewed to bits by the jackals and vultures, or if he would be buried someplace. If the latter, I ordered the squad to roll a stone over the tomb entrance, and to stand guard. If his followers stole his body, no good would come from it.

And then we left too. Pascha is starting at sundown, there may be more trouble next week. We will keep the peace.