

## Simon of Cyrene's tale

It was the time of the great festival. Jerusalem, as always, was packed. I was thankful I had relatives who lived a couple of hours walk from the city, in a small village in the country. Whenever I came to the festival I stayed with them – it was so much more peaceful and relaxing than the noise and bustle of the city.

Sometimes though it was too quiet. You missed out on the gossip of the city. You didn't always know what was going on.

Yes, I had heard about Jesus. Most people had. He was causing quite a stir up North. I had heard lots of people talk about him as I travelled down to Jerusalem. But I'd never seen him or heard him myself. Until that day.

I left my uncle's house and was walking into Jerusalem to do my duty at the temple. I had a lot on my mind. Things I had done wrong; big mistakes I had made. As the festival approached I felt I really must bring it all to God and make the required sacrifices.

I'd set out quite early to avoid the crowds. But as soon as I entered the city I knew something was up. Crowds everywhere. Shouting, running, straining to see.

I asked a couple of guys what was going on. It was Jesus of Nazareth, they said. He had been arrested. Been saying too many things that had upset the religious leaders. And the zealots were annoyed that he didn't seem to be gearing up for a fight with the Romans. Seemed to be getting on the wrong side of everyone. I heard the word crucifixion mentioned. Surely not?

Then, as I turned the corner, I saw him. Surrounded by soldiers. Badly beaten; struggling to even stand. Yet they were making him carry a cross. It was true then. Crucifixion. Even the sound of the word made me go cold.

One of the soldiers turned and saw me. Then he shouted at me to come over. Ordered me to carry the cross. It was clear that Jesus wasn't able to carry it any further. How he was even walking was something of a miracle.

I took the cross from him, took its full weight on my shoulders. As I did so our eyes met. There was no bitterness or anger there. There was no pain. He had the look of someone who was doing what he knew had to be done. Not resigned to it, but accepting it willingly. As if it was always his destiny. And even in the noise and bustle; even amongst the shouting and screaming he radiated peace. He looked at me with such love and gratefulness. As I took the weight of the cross from him, it seemed he took the weight of all the mess of my past from me.

## The Soldier's Tale

I had hoped for a good posting – you know, somewhere in the warm and sunny part of Gaul. Not a lot of action, but some good food and plenty of wine. Instead, here I am, in this gods-forsaken city at the edge of nowhere, with this murderous race of individuals who believe that there is only one God, and that they are His chosen people. And who are itching to rebel.

And regular as clockwork, another one puts himself forward as the one who's going to throw us out. Gives me special pleasure to deal with them as professionally as possible. The skill is in getting the distance between the nails in the hands and the feet just the right distance apart so they can only just draw a breath.

That day we had been promised a real revolutionary. When I saw him approaching I was a bit disappointed if I'm honest. The lads in the palace had been let loose on him, his face was swollen beyond recognition and his flesh was in ribbons from the flogging. He wasn't going to last long, and one of the few perks of this job is a bit of a spectacle as they go.

So we did our job, got him into place, and I lifted the hammer to put the nail through his hand, and he turned and looked at me. I mean - really - looked at me. And I'll swear it was as if he looked into my very being and saw me exactly as I am. No, exactly as I would have been if all those things hadn't happened to me when I was a kid. I felt – re-made. And when I looked back into his eyes, it was like looking into eternity. And then he said, "Father forgive them..." And somewhere deep within myself I knew that I had been set free.

## The Criminal's tale

I suppose we had been pushing our luck for years. Dodging the authorities, hiding when we had to, keeping out of the way. But I guess we always knew it would catch up with us. One day we would be arrested. The price we'd have to pay for the good times. The money; the wine; the laughs.

And this is it. Nailed to a cross. I always hoped it would be some other way, but no.

The surprise though is this guy alongside us. I heard him once. We were up in the Galilee area. Saw a crowd. Here's some easy pickings I thought. Everyone seemed caught in his spell. They were all listening, and paying no attention to us creeping round the back. Looking for purses, anything that we could get our hands on. And I heard some of what he said. "Blessed are the poor". "Love your enemies". "Don't store up treasures on earth". And stuff about his Kingdom that was to come and the authority he had to forgive people.

A crazy man – but surely harmless.

So why was he here? What had he done? I overheard some words in the prison last night about him being framed by the Priests. So maybe there was something in what he said. Maybe he was trying to get rid of those priestly parasites...

And then my friend – the only person I've ever called friend – began to mock him. Surely that's wrong. So I says – we deserve what we're getting – but this guy has done nothing. "Jesus remember me in your 'Kingdom'". – then his words to me – Truly today you will be with me in paradise.

Paradise .... me....

## The Beloved Friend's Tale

The heat. The dust. The flies. The smell. The humiliation. The sheer gut-wrenching horror of it all.

So  
Much  
Violence

Against one whose only crime was to offer life – the Father's Life – to all who would reach out their hands and take it.

I had never seen a crucifixion before. Of course, I had heard of them – it's not possible to live under Roman occupation and not be aware of their "methods" for "keeping the peace" – but the absolute brutality of it all was close to unbearable. I wanted to vomit. I wanted to run away. Again.

But the women. The women – they kept me there. Their love. Their loyalty. Their presence. I remember looking at the torn and broken body of my friend hanging there in such agony and thinking "If only he could see them here, surely he would find some comfort in knowing that not everyone had abandoned him. That the women were faithful, even if the rest of us ran away."

And then, unbelievably, he spoke. I have no idea how he found the breath to do so, but he spoke – clearly and directly. To his mother. And to me.

Not only had he seen the women, but in the midst of his own unbearable pain he was still thinking of others, still caring, still loving, still offering life and hope for the future. To his mother. And to me. Who had been his best friend. And who had failed him. Even as he was dying, he trusted me, gave me new purpose.

And for a fleeting instant of time I saw his outstretched arms not pinned to the cross in agony, but stretched out wide to welcome the whole world in to the new life he had promised.

The bystanders tale

Its always good entertainment at a crucifixion. Seeing these ne'er do wells getting what they deserve. Seeing them suffer. One of the few pleasures in life...

But this time it was really strange.

No sooner had these three been nailed on the crosses when it seemed like someone turned the lights out. It all went dark. And cold. And quiet. Eerily quiet.

And as though not wanting to break the silence people around me muttered and whispered. It's to do with this Jesus. The one who claimed to be God's Son. The one who had had crowds follow him; the one who had supposedly brought someone back to life a few weeks ago. The one that the high priests had now had arrested and crucified.

It's to do with him that its gone so dark and cold.

And then the silence was broken by a loud cry from him – Eli Eli Lama Sabachthani My God My God why have you forsaken me.

Someone shouted – he's calling for Elijah. But somehow I knew he wasn't. He was in agony. Not physically (though he probably was) but spiritually. This man who had been so close to God was now alone ....

That's why it was so dark and cold and quiet...

## Mary's Tale

I cannot bear this. My heart is beyond breaking. It is being torn apart, fibre by fibre as he is torn on that evil cross.

What monster invented this torture for the sons of mothers like me?

That is the body which I carried, which I fed and clothed and comforted. And now – he is thirsty and I can't even give him a drink.

I wiped away the blood and cleaned him at his birth, and now I watch as his lifeblood falls in to the thirsty dust, and the sweat blinds his eyes.

No mother should have to witness this - the violent death of her child. No territory, no regime, no power, is worth this unspeakable evil.

A lifetime ago, an old man in the temple told me that a sword would pierce my soul. He was a prophet.

I wish I had said no to the angel.

No, no – I don't. For the love which is tearing me into pieces is only a pale copy of the love which I have seen in him – for everyone.

The angel promised that the child, this child, my son, would reign over a kingdom that will never end.

I have no idea how that works. But my own experience tells me that nothing is impossible with God.

## Joseph of Arimathea's tale

His name had come up at Council meetings many times over the months. We always talked about and debated these so called Messiah figures. And this Jesus was no different. Initially there was some sympathy with what he was teaching. After all, its hard to disagree with a message of God's love and forgiveness.

As time went on though some of the hardliners on the council began to get worried. The crowds he was drawing; the way he talked about fulfilling the law; the way he criticised us – the religious leaders. It was all getting to be more than a little threatening. The Romans were beginning to take notice too – and that was NOT good news.

But a couple of us wanted to know more. Nicodemus and I had some long conversations going deep into the night. Both of felt there was a lot of truth in what he was saying about us – the religious leaders. Maybe reform was needed; maybe we hadn't got everything right. But we had to be careful. The opposition to him was growing daily. Not just the hardliners now. Nicodemus and I had to be careful about what we said and where we went.

I felt I had to take things further. I secretly spent some time with Jesus and made up my mind to throw my lot in with him. But I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone. I lived a double life. Pretending to go along with council decisions, but at the same time listening more to what he had to say.

I knew I had to come into the open, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. There seemed to be too much to lose. It was tearing me apart.

Then those awful few days. It was the Sunday when the crowds cheering for him seemed to fill every street in the city that was the turning point. Things were clearly coming to a head. And then what he was saying about the temple and the law. The hardliners couldn't tolerate it. I found out later they had come up with a plan when I wasn't around. They had suspicions I think.

He was arrested – one of his own followers had given them a tip off; false witnesses testified against him; the crowd was stirred up by some rebel rousers and in no time the Romans had stepped him and he was on his way to the cross. I still wonder how it happened.

Perhaps I should have stayed away, but I felt I had to be there as he died. I suppose it was to help me draw a line under it all. Help me to see that he had been just one more failed Messiah figure.

But seeing him on the cross. Father forgive them, he said. He seemed to have no bitterness towards them. He accepted it all with grace. He seemed more concerned with those around him than with the pain and agony he was going through.

And as he died I felt I couldn't keep quiet anymore. Crazy as it might seem, when all appeared lost, I realised this was the time to speak up. I asked for his body and placed it in the tomb I had made for myself. It was the least and last thing I could do for him. I just wished I had had the courage to speak up earlier.