

JUDAS

It seemed a good idea at the time: Jesus I mean. He was good looking, charismatic, interesting to be with. He could charm the birds out of the trees! Everyone wanted to be with him and listen to what he had to say. His stories were just the best!

He was so patient too; he had time for everyone: the sick, the mixed up, the lonely. The funny thing was he was also razor sharp with those who tried to beat him in an argument. They always went away afterwards, looking like idiots!

In normal times he would have gone straight to the top. He would have been everyone's friend. He knew how to get the best out of people and to turn things round when there was a crisis.

But these aren't "normal" times. We have a standing army of Romans hanging around every street corner with their tax men extorting money out of us, right, left and centre. Look west and we have Greeks in their sports stadiums running around naked and offering sacrifices to Zeus. Look to the east and there are hordes of murderous pagans breathing down our necks.

And who do we have to look after us? The Jewish High Priests and that pathetic specimen, Herod, desperate to look like they are in charge!

And what does Jesus do? He talks about heaven, about loving our neighbour and forgiving those who hurt us – turning the other cheek. It's ridiculous! With his kind of leadership we could push all these foreigners out tomorrow.

But Jesus won't do it. 'My kingdom is not of this world', he says.

Well I am done with him. The chief priests have offered me money for some inside information.

And I'm going to take it...

PETER

My mother said I always talked first and thought after! ‘Just think what you are saying’ she would shout at me – smiling all the time because she knew I wouldn’t take any notice!

But I was still always chosen as the team captain. I was braver and stronger – and once I had made up my mind about something, there was no holding me back. It was me who got James and Andrew and the others to drop the fishing business and go off with Jesus; me who jumped over the side of the boat when we saw Jesus walking on the water; me who told Jesus we would all die for him if ever he got attacked. It was me who chopped off the ear of that brat from the High Priests’ house when they came to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane. I was tough and I was strong for all those years...

But somehow, in the dark, in that creepy courtyard of the High Priest’s House after they’d arrested him, with all those hangers-on sitting around their braziers keeping warm, suddenly my courage completely left me.

I was hiding in a corner with my thick cloak pulled up tight round me. I didn’t want to be seen and I certainly didn’t want to talk to anyone. I just felt I needed to see what they were doing to Jesus – to see if he could get himself released. I was sure he could do that if he wanted.

And then this girl came up to me and peered into my face. She came really close and half turning, shouted back to her friends: ‘Look here, this is one of the Nazarene’s friends. He’s come to see what we’re going to do to his boss!’

And then she turned back to me. ‘You are one of his group aren’t you? And, without thinking, I shook my head and said that ‘No, I wasn’t!’

Why, O why, didn't I keep my mouth shut? The second I spoke, my thick Galilean accent gave the game away. There was no chance that I sounded like a Jerusalem local. Twice they turned on me in the shadows: 'You are one of his friends aren't you?' - and twice more the coward in me said no.

And just at that very moment - when I wanted the ground to swallow me up - they pushed Jesus out through an open door above my head and I could see him looking down at where I was trying to hide - just as the dawn began to break and the cry of the first cockerel rang round the stone walls.

Then I remembered: Jesus had told me I would deny that I knew him. In fact he said I would deny him three times. How could he have known?

And how could I live with myself now?

SIMON OF CYRENE

It had been a dream of ours for years that me Simon, and my two boys Alexander and Rufus, would go up to Jerusalem for the Passover. We'd saved and saved and this was to be the year. The boat trip east had been pretty rough and we'd all been sick – but now we were in Jerusalem and all that was forgotten!

Jerusalem was massive – and so exciting. The streets were incredibly narrow, clogged with people from all over the Empire. It took for ever to make our way past the shops selling stuff we never saw at home and all the time I was keeping an eye open for the boys because if we got separated, I was frightened we would never find each other again.

Then we heard a roar from a Captain of the guard and a few blasts from a bugle. Behind us we could just about make out a team of soldiers standing on either side of a man, carrying a heavy wooden beam. As they got nearer to us the crowd parted as quickly as they could to give the soldiers a bit more space, men and women lurching into the tiny shops, falling over the baskets of goods as they went, terrified of the squad who were pushing their way through.

I grabbed the boys and we pinned ourselves against the wall but just as the party came level with us and began to march up the next set of steps, the man carrying the wooden beam crashed to the ground and the beam he was carrying came perilously close to the wall where we were standing.

I looked down at the prisoner. His tunic was stained with blood, sweat was dripping down his face and his whole body was trembling with the effort of walking. He was absolutely exhausted.

The captain of the guard had his back to me but I could hear him shouting to the man to get up. He kicked him in the ribs and tried to pull his arm. None of it was working. From the back I could see the muscles in the captain's neck getting tighter and tighter with anger.

And then suddenly he turned round and faced me, the metal armour clanking as he moved. In his right hand was a short sword. Screwing up his face he shouted, 'Hey you, black guy: help this man with his beam'.

There was no hope of refusing: people got nailed to the walls for less. So I gave my bag to the boys and went behind the prisoner who was hauling himself up out of the dirt. I picked up the other end of the beam and once more the execution party moved forwards, up more and more steps, the crowd in front making way for us before returning to what they were doing afterwards as if we had never been there.

The journey seemed to take for ever. The prisoner kept tripping, lurching as he walked. The captain spent most of the time swearing at him and there was a nasty tension in the air.

Finally we were through the gate in the city walls and out into the open space where all the city rubbish was piled up - and where prisoners were crucified. As the soldiers stopped, the beam we had been holding crashed to the ground. The squad moved away and the captain snarled at me: 'Get out of here, black guy. I don't need your sort round here'.

With some relief I caught sight of the boys. They had followed us. And we ran: ran away from that place as fast as we could. And we never saw what happened next.

MARY THE MOTHER OF JESUS

I can't say that my relationship with my son Jesus has been entirely easy. At twelve he skipped away from our party to return to Jerusalem where he spent time with the Temple professors discussing matters of faith which were completely beyond my comprehension. Later he would spend weeks and months away from home and we had no idea where he was. And sometimes, when we did catch up with him, he would say things which made us wonder whether our family was any more special to him than the great crowds he spoke to who seemed to hold on to his every word.

Over the years we got to know Peter and Andrew, James - and John in particular - but if I hadn't had those early messages from God, I really don't know how I would have coped. It was quite lonely being on the fringe of his discipleship group. So the visions I had certainly helped - but then so did the reports of all the wonderful stories that filtered back to us - things that Jesus had done for people like Peter's mother who was made well, Martha and Mary whose brother Lazarus was given his life back and total strangers who were healed.

But then there were also the terrible rumours, the close shaves he had when he was preaching and people had tried to stone him to death.

I have to admit this has got very much worse over this last six months and there was no doubt in my mind that the Chief priests and their friends would catch up with Jesus in the end. They just couldn't bear it that his brand of faith, based on love and respect, was just so much more appealing than a life where you spend your time worrying about whether you are keeping all the rules of the Law or not.

And now the final episode: they did catch him of course and - between that good for nothing Judas, the loathsome Sanhedrin and the Roman bully boys - they were somehow able to set up three trials in no time at all - in front of the Chief Priests, Herod and Pilate. What chance did he have against that lot? None at all.

They keep us women a long way away from the men being crucified. Women and men don't mix much in public but this is more to do with the fact that they don't want us crying all over the place.

But I can't cry. Not anymore.

You see I don't think the men understand yet what today is all about. I think they are still shocked that he has been killed – and killed so quickly. But Jesus has been telling us what was going to happen – there have been endless hints, here and there. 'Greater love has no one than to lay his life for his friends', he said.

To go blaming Judas or the Jews or even Pilate is missing the point. It isn't their fault because all of this hideous spectacle was God's plan from the very beginning when the angel came and told me I would be his mother. 'Unless the grain of wheat dies, there can be no crop'. 'God sent his son into the world so that we might have life'.

I know this dreadful death is not the end. But it still isn't easy.