

"Truly this man was the Son of God" Mark 15:39

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This is the conclusion that a nameless soldier who stood at the foot of the cross made as he faced Jesus dying on the cross. Maybe he hadn't wanted to be there on that Friday, but since he was probably the commander of the execution squad he had no other choice, But had he not been there he would have missed the most important turning point of his life. And we would be the poorer for not having heard his confession: "Truly, this man was the Son of God".

This was not his conclusion when he arrived at the hill outside Jerusalem. It came to him during the 6 hours he stood around waiting for Jesus to die. This was just another execution, this time of a fanatic who claimed to be king.

And the soldier knew there was no king but Caesar.

But in the process of doing what he had to do, the soldier had the unpredictable happen: He changed his mind.

All the events of the day seemed to pile up, like a convincing display of logic and emotion. The attitude of those who reviled, the cruelty of the opposition, the forgiveness from the cross, the noise of the crowd, the strange quietness of Jesus all worked together to alter his mind and heart. And his conclusion "Truly this was the Son of God" shook the foundations of his allegiance and changed it from Caesar to Christ. He was renewed at the foot of the cross.

How ever many Roman gods this Roman had when he arrived ⁽²⁾ at the scene of the crucifixion, he went away with someone who had not been in his heart before. One can almost hear him muttering as he leaves the scene "Truly this man was the Son of God".

1. One of the distinguishing characteristics about this nameless soldier is that his mind was open. As he stood there before the dying Christ, he entertained the thought that new life was at hand and that he could have it. His mental doors were ajar. And Jesus entered.

This is the only kind of mind that Christ ever enters into. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock, if any one opens the door I will come in". He doesn't force himself in. The artist in depicting this verse shows the door without a latchstring on the outside. It must be opened from within. So the redemption of man is an inside job; it is the consequence of the secret happening within the inner regions of of a person. It is there that Jesus inaugurates the quiet unheralded alteration and altar-action which profoundly affects life.

The open-mindedness of the soldier is a characteristic of those who live expectantly, waiting for some new truth to come, for a new life to begin. It is a sign of humbleness, a willingness to consider new evidence contrary to current conviction. The Christian man realizes that he is not a fin-

ished product, but there is still newness of life coming thru Christ. (3)

It is then that a man, like the soldier, refuses to bow down to old altars to which previous loyalties have bound him. He can share in keeping the door of his mind unbolted.

To have Christ on the inside is wonderful, but to get him there requires openness. Now is the time to open the door.

2. Now the soldier at the foot of the cross reminds us that people can not only change their minds, but do change them. I recall doing it many times. One the best friends I have is a man whose initial impression on me was of a dour, grouchy, unattractive person. How wrong I was, I discovered after I got to know him. He is really a man of great likeableness, wit and warmth.

On a different plane..many years ago when our nation was younger, the newly introduced bathtub was roundly condemned even by medical authorities. What if we had had no change of mind about that?

Changing your mind..being renewed..can be an excellent thing. As Paul says: "..be transformed by the renewal of your mind". Consider . . The politician who keeps running for office in order to hold up his personal interests, how beneficial when he changes his mind about the meaning of public service. Or the church member who refuses to support

and participate because he has personal peev⁽⁴⁾es to pursue and to pamper..how wonderful when he changes his mind about the meaning of Christian commitment.

If someone is thinking that subjecting his life to radical change is not the easiest course to follow, he is right. We are attached to the conventional and the power of the habit is strong. It was very ~~hard~~^{hard} for Peter, for example, to leave his old patterns and to follow Jesus. And he was not immediately successful in giving up one for the other.

But even as changing the mind can be an excellent thing, so it can be a terrible thing. For a man is capable of turning toward evil as well as toward good, to the satanic as well as to the Godly. This is a peril we all face. We start out by making a high choice or a low choice. Judas, for example, started out with Jesus but one day made a choice that has become the symbol of the worst choice.

So we can change our minds downward as well as upward. The temptation is always present. We need the grace to keep our mind-change in line with the mind of the Man on the cross.

Renewal came to the soldier at the foot of the cross when he changed his mind and said: "Truly..this was the Son of God".

3. So the experience of the soldier at the foot of the cross shows us the necessity for an open mind, and it demon-

strates that a man can change his mind. Consider now, that ours is a time in history when a change of mind is needed. ⁽⁵⁾

While Christian⁴ thru the centuries have trembled at what men dared to do to Jesus, that was mere child's play compared to what men are capable of doing to each other today. If God wept over a single crucifixion, his tears must be a river in our time.

It would be our misfortune should we close our minds to this time. For while the Holy Spirit implores us, of our own free will the world seems to be ready disintegrate. We as peoples seems to be holding a club over our own heads. And when this club falls and we should strike ourselves, we will cry: "Why has God done this awful thing to us".

But the blow we suffer will be man's judgement upon himself. But we are so habituated to self-exoneration that we will look elsewhere, even to God himself, for the blame. But the guilt belongs to all of us.

There are some things we insist upon, that God has no way of keeping from us. In man's relationship to other men, what we insist on having we shall have.. Racism, poverty, war, disease, hunger.. So man leans on his knowledge corrupted with pride, and on his possessions corrupted with prejudice. And we live in the kind of world we insist on having, we are the kind of people we want to be.

Man insists and God's judgement persists. We shall pay

heavily for pampering our egos, and slaying our best im-
pulses. We must live in fear of each other so long as we ⁶
refuse to love one another. We must live in the dread of a
suddenly mushrooming cloud of death so long as we are un-
willing to live with understanding and good will. And we
may well die clinging to what we dare call our own because
we are unwilling to share our blessings with others.

The key to the future, as uncertain as it is, is Jesus
Christ. Let us look to him with open minds, believing that
new life is at hand and that we can have it. The day may be
far spent but it is still not too late....not yet.

The Man on the cross, who made a new man of the leader of
his execution squad, is our unconventional weapon for our
time. The world is too dangerous for anything but the truth
and too small for anything but brotherhood.

The conference table must replace the battlefield, as it
has in the Mideast, at least for the time being.

Law, justice, and faith must become our guiding lights
rather than greed, pride and prejudice.

Vision and imagination must replace self-will and despair.

It is a long road. But the need for us individually for
a change of mind leading to an altered life is apparent.

When? ? Well, why not now...for now is the acceptable
time for you to throw open the doors of your mind and heart
to Christ, that he may enter in and change you, causing you

to confess with the soldier standing at the foot of the
cross: "Truly this man is the Son of God".

(7)

Before the cross of Jesus
Our lives are judged today
The meaning of our eager strife
Is tested by his way.