

## **Today, you will be with me in Paradise**

How might you feel if your earliest memory were seeing a soldier shove your mother out of his way. What kind of emotions would be nurtured if you had watched your father being beaten to death simply because he broke a curfew by popping outside his house to relieve himself. What kind of a person might you become if you lived in a community that was bullied by a hostile occupying force. There are plenty examples of these instances in our world today, and I think we can safely assume that the same was true in ancient Palestine.

Imagine growing up on the hills of Nazareth, with views of the great international trade routes. Seeing all manner of people trampling through the promised land. Imagine paying exorbitant tax rates, paying money to watch it disappear out of your impoverished community, and into the hands of those travelling through your land. Imagine how it feels when, on top of all the injury and insult, the law requires that any soldier on one of these routes can grab hold of you and demand you to carry his hundred pound backpack for a mile.

It would certainly not be very difficult to find others in your community who were deeply frustrated, mortally embittered, and angry right down to the bone. You would be able to find those who counselled simple trust in Yahweh, the God of your descendents, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob might – with the belief that his true authority would again be made known, that the kingship – that a Messiah would come and put the world to rights. Equally, there would be those who thought – sorry, we need action now because the injustice suffered by God's people is an offence. And they would form resistance movements. Now, if you are one of the many many Jews who had suffered horrifically at the hands of Rome, then it might be very tempting to go off and join the resistance.

Imagine, having waited for years to Yahweh to act, and all the time you have watched things go from bad to worse. Imagine with a history of being on the receiving end of Roman abuse, how you might feel that the only thing for good Jew to do is to go off, give up your life, and commit to the resistance movement. If you are a good Jew, knowing your Scriptures well, you would probably have an awful time wrestling with your conscience. But you may feel utterly compelled to believe that the only way of being faithful to God is to resort to such extreme action. You would have seen such horrors of injustice that you might say to yourself, 'the line must be drawn here, this far – no further'. You might say that the time for half measures and peaceful protest is over. It is time to take up arms.

This would be an enormous commitment. It would probably mean that you would lose your life – it would mean that if you were caught, you would be crucified. But your commitment to justice for your people might be so great that you almost reluctantly join one of these movements. You would go out into the hills, and make your living from the wealthy travellers passing through your land. And all the time you would be drumming up support, strengthening your arsenal and your resources. But the time comes, and you march on Jerusalem, hoping to recruit as you go.

Your leader is a godly man, his nickname is Sonf-of-the-Father, he is an inspiring leader and a great warrior. So you enter the holy city, to expel the Romans. And you believe that as you enter with your comrades, that others will be inspired and join the fight. But the Romans get wind of it, and surround you. And before your campaign has got off the ground, some of your friends have been killed, and you have been arrested. So you know the fate that awaits you. There is only one fate for those inciting rebellion against Rome. And so it is no surprise for you to find yourself carrying your cross through the streets with jeers from the soldiers but pity from the Jews.

But your leader is not with you. Barabbas has been set free, and in his stead is a prophet who is clearly no friend of Rome, but has been preaching a message of peace. You're not entirely sure why he has the death sentence, but the cross that was reserved for your leader, has been replaced by the first real prophet since ancient times.

Your friend is lifted onto a cross on the far side of him. And you hear your friend mocking this innocent guy, who you know does not have the right to be there. You realise that the course of action you took was no option

"Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle in England as I trust by God's grace shall never be put out."

The two thieves represent two different ways of being Israel.