

Maundy Thursday or
Good Friday

Just Like A Common Servant

“Like a common servant. Oh, my stomach turned over and the bile rose in my throat. Just... like a common servant.

“He wasn’t like that in the beginning, you know. When he started, he was a proper prophet, shouting and thundering about sins and repenting and the law and snakes and vipers and fire and brimstone and axes. Oh, that I understood. Just like his cousin John he held our feet to the fire, told us where we were wrong, called us back to God, It was wonderful, as if Jeremiah or Amos had risen from the dead and walked with us again, telling us God’s word. He seemed like a real prophet. That’s why I followed him. I dropped everything, just like the others. He was mesmerizing, and what he said made so much sense. You wanted to be a part of it, no matter what. Anyone with a whit of imagination could see the future, see our people cleansed of their torpor and sinfulness, a white and pure hammer in God’s hand to strike the degenerate pagans, send the Romans back to their riverside swamp and leave our land once again pure and stainless for God. My God, how my heart rose into my throat when I heard him.

“But he changed. As time went on, he changed. Oh, he was just as intense; often he prayed the night away, sometimes with us, sometimes away by himself. But he always came back with a fire in his eyes, as if he had been looking into a place we couldn’t know. But that fire changed over the months and years. There came a softer tone; he told us that he increasingly understood the distance between the holiness of God and the weakness of men and women – that, whether blameless or guilty, they were poor vessels for the goodness of God. He said that God knew this, just like a loving parent understood her poor children.

“I suppose that my doubts began and grew as he looked with greater tenderness on the rabble around us. But it was not like that on the day he called me to himself. I remember it well. I had just finished chasing a silver goblet intended as a gift for the high priest from that scoundrel, King Herod. I was working in the shade in front of the shop because of the heat. I looked up from my work, from caressing the lovely silver with its gold ornaments, and there he was, just in front of me. He didn’t say anything at first, just looked at me, through me really, as if he could see to the very heart of my soul. After awhile, he said, ‘Come, follow me, and I will give you your heart’s desire, treasure beyond counting.’ How can I describe it? Something in me broke. I handed the chalice to my father (who looked on wonderingly, in his usual moonstruck way) and followed the man down the street. He had such words of power, ways of seeing things that just made sense. People flocked to him and I knew we could make an army that would throw the Roman dogs out. People gave him money for his work and with an unfathomable look he gave the money to me, made me his treasurer. I was the one who paid the bills, I guess because I knew about money and precious metals and practical, business things.

“He didn’t seem interested in that sort of thing. I will give him credit for that. He left that practical sort of thing in my hands, didn’t seem to care, even when I sometimes gave myself a little commission. I thought he didn’t know, he never changed in his attitude toward me, but now I wonder. Sometimes, when we were alone, just he and I, he would look at me curiously, as if waiting for me to say something. I always played dumb.

“I grew restless as the months went on. He made no move toward using his powers to throw the Romans out. Oh, he had power all right. He could feed thousands with nothing, heal the sick, raise the dead. God obviously heard him. But he seemed indifferent to the Romans. It was the smelly rabble pushing in on him – and us – that took his attention.

“Once, toward the end, my hopes soared. He walked into the Temple market place and just lost it. He had walked through there many times in years past, but something in him snapped that day. He overturned money-changers’ tables and broke open cages of sacrifices. He shouted out imprecations from the prophets and psalms. It was glorious! I was sure he was taking up God’s work of cleansing and annealing fire. But... After awhile, he seemed to catch himself. Tears streamed down his face. His shoulders slumped, and he walked away. Whispers raced through the crowd, beneath the cacophony of the animals, and the Temple guards looked murderously after him.

“At dinner that night was when he shamed himself. I couldn’t believe my eyes. He took off his outer robe and sandals. Dressed virtually in nothing, like a serving wench, he took a bowl of water and a towel. In dead silence he went from one to another and actually washed everyone’s feet! Just like servants do when you come in from the street. Just like the servants had done when we gathered for this meal. It was disgusting. Just like a common servant. But worse was to come. With nary a word, he finished this degrading work and put back on his robe. Then he looked quietly at each one of us – was it only my imagination that he spent more time on me than the others? – and then finally he spoke.

“‘You call me Lord and Teacher, and I am that. But I am also a servant, a common servant, of God and of all God’s creation. If you are to be my followers, you must be and do the same. You must be servants of all, and in serving you will conquer.’

“I could hardly believe my ears! He had lowered himself beyond thinking and now demanded the same of us. My disillusion was complete. Black despair entered my heart, and I left to sell him to the Temple priests. Thirty pieces of silver was what I got, a pretty good price for a failed prophet, I think. I thought they would throw him in jail for a few days and then send him back to the sticks of Galilee. But they didn’t. They did more. You know the story. Everyone knows the story. I was so blind. In my humiliation, I hanged myself from a scrawny tree. The weight of the thirty pieces of silver helped to hold me down.

“So here I am, in this place. I’ve been here for thousands of years. It’s dark and stuffy, with just a little light coming through the cell’s bars. My feet burn, as if they are on fire. And I am so

hungry. I keep thinking of that last piece of bread, the one he gave me just before I left that upper room. He held it as I reached for it, and his eyes held mine. There was a look in them, almost beseeching, as if he knew what I was to do and wanted me to change my mind. I took the bread angrily and stomped out. Later, I passed out when the rope tightened around my neck. I woke up here, in this pestilential jail cell. I am so hungry and my feet burn!

“He’s just outside the cell door, you know. He’s been kneeling on that stone floor for all these thousands of years. He says he won’t go away. He’s almost naked. He won’t even put the towel under his knees for a cushion, and he’s holding a bowl of water. He keeps calling my name: ‘Judas, beloved one, Judas. Open the door and let me in. Judas, beloved one, I have food, and I have water for your throat and for your feet. Judas, let me in.’

“But I can’t, you know. The key to the cell door is on my side. But he’s still acting like a servant, just like a common servant.”