17. The first witness of the glorious death

The centurion cried out: “Truly this man was the Son of God!” The friends of the Crucified Man perhaps did not understand his Latin or his Greek. Of his soldiers, frightened by the earthquake and the darkness, only a few had looked at him with a questioning, perhaps scornful gaze, thinking he was crazy. But no one gave real importance to the matter, to him, to what he was living through, and he too hurried to pretend that it was nothing and to carry on with the execution of the three malefactors.

Now the order to report immediately to Pilate deep down gave him a good distraction, brought him back to reality. Maybe there was some hope of forgetting everything and going back to life as before, in the expectation of finally returning to Rome, of leaving behind that country that was so complicated, those Jews always rebelling against Caesar because of their religious convictions, and of enjoying his pension in some small town in the countryside of Lazio or Tuscany.

But the moment he arrived before Pilate, he sees that outside there is a rich, well-dressed Hebrew and he understands that obviously the Procurator could not call on him on that very night without the motive being precisely that condemned man who he had seen die.

Pilate welcomes him, different than usual himself. He sees that the procurator was waiting for him with worry, that he wants to ask him something that deep down interests him more than the usual reports on a completed mission. He asks him if Jesus of Nazareth is already dead, if he really died so quickly.

The centurion then becomes the first person in the history of Christianity to give the announcement of the death of Christ to a pagan.
And here, this man feels compelled to give not just the objective information: “Yes, he died around the ninth hour, before the other two condemned men. We verified by piercing his chest and water and blood came out. He was bled totally dry.”
He realizes he cannot talk this way about the death he saw. Pilate senses his hesitation, as if he were someone who had to communicate to a father the tragic death of his son.

Pilate scrutinizes him, and he is taken by that same sense of fear that came upon him while trying Jesus. For this reason he does not lose his patience. He remains there before the unusual attitude of his centurion, without speaking, fixing his eyes on him, almost with embarrassment. The authority is no longer his: the other had an experience greater than his, or rather the same one that he had had that morning when he saw Jesus coming back from the flagellation, so badly beaten even if so great, so authoritative.

The centurion forgets who he has before him: in his heart he only sees Jesus and, as if he were speaking to himself, he describes the scene, the final words, that endless breathing out, that reclining of the head, that terrible silence, that disappearance of everything and everyone from his perception of the world, that

remaining of no one but Jesus, and before Pilate too he finds himself repeating what he had said, what he had immediately confessed: “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

Pilate retreats, as if feeling a violent blow. He turns to the other side, toward the wall. The centurion is silent, but strangely feels a great peace in himself. That disgust is gone, that empty sadness that he felt before, that fog with no horizon. Because when he spoke about Jesus, about his death, about his breathing out, he felt as if what he had seen and recognized at three in the afternoon *remained*, was there, was in him, was a reality that was not finished, that remained given. It was as if he felt that breath blow over himself, that last breath that was for him a beginning without end. He did not know how, nor why, nor how at all, but suddenly there sprang up in his heart the certainty that that Man was alive, that he had not attended upon a simple death, but the birth of a new reality, completely tied to that Man, consisting entirely in Him. A new reality that had already begun in him, in his heart, and hence which he could not deny. The Nazarene was already living in him, he felt him already alive in him, as if that living breath that had come out of the dying body had entered into him. In fact, it struck him that, in that moment, the mother of Jesus had remained there, on her feet, without tormenting herself like a Hebrew woman would have to do at the death of a son, and what a death! She had remained there to look steadily upon her Son, as if she saw something beyond his death, beyond the torture, beyond the evil that had reached its climax.

Pilate dismissed him without comment. He only told him to allow the rich Hebrew man who stood at the door to take the body of the condemned man and bury it where he wanted. He even ordered him to accompany him in this whole operation to avert every possibility of irregularity, which the centurion welcomed with secret feeling of emotion at the thought of being able to see the Nazarene again.