

Longinus the Centurion

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On Friday of this week we remember the martyred saint Longinus the Centurion, who stood at the foot of the cross and pierced the side of Our Lord with a spear. He was moved, as he stood there, to make a powerful confession of faith. He declared, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

If we think for a moment about what took place during the hours before Longinus uttered his memorable words, we'll have to dwell on some ugly scenes. Soldiers like Longinus were responsible for many of the terrible things done to Our Lord during those hours. Jesus was mocked, scourged, ridiculed and crowned by having sharp thorns put roughly on his head. The soldiers were more than willing to cast lots for His clothing, and to hear without anything but agreement the mocking of passersby as He endured agony on the cross.

Longinus belonged to the Roman Empire's fighting elite. He was trained to value power, and to believe in ruthless suppression of any who were perceived to be Rome's enemies. He would have been unlikely to have compassion for, or interest in, an itinerant preacher who had stirred up the populace in an alarming way. He could watch without emotion as that preacher was put to death in the slow, incredibly painful way reserved for criminals who were not citizens of Rome.

Longinus, according to most sources, was the officer in command at the Lord's crucifixion. It was his job to make sure that those on the crosses were definitely dead. This is why it is surprising to find, in some modern books that claim to "demythologize" the Christian Gospel, the bald assertion that there were no eyewitnesses to the Crucifixion. These books then claim that without eyewitnesses we have no certainty that Jesus Christ actually died and rose again.

Yet the Gospel of John, in 19: 31-35 tells us in detail how the soldiers dealt with the crucified bodies that day, and in verses 26-27 it tells us how Jesus gave His Mother into John's care. So there were a number of witnesses, a fact which is one of the foundations of our faith.

Longinus was one witness who was overcome by what he experienced when Jesus died. He was awestruck at seeing the earth shake and the rocks split, and he knew that Jesus was the Son of God, as He had claimed to be. The rest of his life, after he accepted baptism, was spent as a follower of Christ who witnessed to others. He died a martyr at the hands of Pilate's soldiers, who pursued him and reluctantly followed their orders to kill him.

Troparion - Tone 1

Longinus, you beheld the King of Glory
who was nailed to the Cross, yet shone on those in darkness.
You were enlightened by His rays and became a martyr and save those who cry:
Glory to Him who gave you strength!
Glory to Him who granted you a crown!
Glory to Him who through you grants healing to all!

Just a bored centurion who had to make sure the Jewish troublemaker on the cross was really dead—those ordinary words describe Longinus. Yet he was changed, to become a great witness to the Resurrection. That is what God can do, and all the "demythologizing" books in the world can't undo it.