

Symbol of love

I was grown now and I was strong or so many people had told me. They would pat me and say "you're tall and strong now, we'll make something of you in a year or two". Then they would smile at me.

I lay on the grass with the sun on my back and as I enjoyed the breeze I was aware of voices getting both closer and louder. I had heard them before, they were familiar. The men had gathered to talk and debate here many times. The breeze was dying and I was still. I was aware of the man the others called "master". He had a voice that was gentle but his words were strong. I loved to lie unnoticed, listening to their stories but today was different. I sensed sadness and fear from those gathered around the man, but he was calm and serene. Today they spoke in whispers and the woman, Mary Magdalene, who was often with them was crying.

The sun had gone now and I was fully grown so my time had come to leave my home on the hillside and go to Nazareth. I was taken to be part of a carpenter's work shop, which was wonderful as the smell of the wood reminded me of home. I would stand quietly and listen to the men talk of day to day matters and of the man they called "Jesus the Nazarene". They said he was the son of a carpenter and that made them feel proud. I knew that this man they called Jesus must have been the storyteller on the hillside. I missed the changing seasons and my home on the hill but time was moving on and I had to change too.

The Nazarene and I were fated to meet again. I barely recognised him. His head was crowned with thorns and his flesh was ripped from his back. His body was that of a broken man and yet the serenity and inner peace I witnessed on the hillside still shone.

The manic crowds were jeering, women were weeping and for the first time I could not see his followers, yet I sensed that he was not alone. He was shouldering the sins of the world - his burden was heavy but I could not lighten his load.

He fell to his knees and I fell too. His mother was watching. How could she bear this? His stories came flooding back to me - his strength came from his father he used to say. His love was eternal and he would one day sit at his right hand.

The soldiers were becoming frustrated by his slow pace, so from the crowd they brought forward a man, Simon the Cyrenean. He was strong and I felt uplifted as he shouldered the Nazarene's burden. Then a woman pushed forward - her name was Veronica. Coming towards him she held a

linen cloth to his face and wiped off his sweat and blood. The cloth was wet and I could clearly see his image left behind. This man would be remembered.

He stumbled again and as he fell I could feel the physical strength ebb from him but his spirit was strong. This was no ordinary man. The soldiers whipped him to his feet and I was so close that his blood felt warm on me. As the procession moved forward, cries of pain and sorrow could be heard from the weeping women, over the jeers and venom of the crowd.

Then he fell for a third time.

The others in this sordid procession were criminals, thieves and murderers. What had this man done to come to such an end? Pilot had freed the murderer Barabas and washed his hands of this man. How could this be?

I recognised the place where we finished, where our journey ended. We had reached Golgotha, the place of the skull. I fell to the ground while the soldiers tore at the clothes of this remarkable man. If he could bare this then so could I. The sound of the hammer striking the nails echoed, as it ripped through his hands and feet. A parchment was nailed above his head which read "the King of the Jews". His tormenters mockingly offered him a sponge dipped in vinegar to quench his thirst. It was the third hour. Then an amazing thing happened, an event I was to witness: crucified on either side of him were two thieves and to the repentant one this dying man spoke gently and said "today you will walk with me in paradise". His words seemed unbelievable, but I could see in the thief's eyes that he had faith in this man's promise.

At the sixth hour the sky turned black. I had never seen this before; in all my days on the hillside the world had never felt so still and bleak. The sun remained dark until the ninth hour. His body was wet with sweat and blood. I felt him draw his last breath and heard him cry out "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit".

His head fell to the side. He was dead. His mother wept.

Now that it was evening, Joseph of Arimathia came to take the body. They wrapped him in a linen cloth and he was gone.

For the first time I was cold and without him close, I was alone.

I stood on the hillside and knew that tomorrow the soldiers would come and take me down.

I knew that the man I carried would never be forgotten.

As the cross on which he died I was to become a symbol of his love.