

The spy

I never wanted to be there, but when the Legate summons you, you have no choice. There he was sitting in his office in the fort, with his scrolls around him and his secretary sitting at a desk in the corner, when in I come. I had been out in the square drilling my men, so I was rather hot, and not in a good temper, as drill had not been as smooth as I like. This rebellious province of Judea is not a place for a soldier to become lax, that's what I keep telling the men. One minute things are looking calm, and the next the locals object to a ruling coming down from Rome and they get all het up and start protesting, so we get sent out to set things right. I thought that I was going to have to get my men ready to leave at a moment's notice, to go and put a few Judeans in their proper place. Then he says,

‘Sit down’,

and indicates a stool for me to sit on. So, I think, what is going on. The Legate is making nice to me. He doesn't beat about the bush this one.

‘I want you to go on a mission for me.’

‘Well, my men are ready.’ I says.

‘No, it will just be you going.’

I sat up and looked him straight in the eyes.

‘What do you mean it will just be me?’

‘I want you to spy on this new Rabbi that everyone is talking about. Rome is worried about him. We need to know all we can before we make a move.’

‘Do you know how dangerous this will be? The Judeans hate Romans. How can I spy on him, and they not know?’

‘You will have to find a way. You have lived here long enough, you know how they dress. I expect you back here in a week. You are to report only to me. You are dismissed.’

There are 5,200 men in this legion, and of all of them, this bright, shiny, new Legate, only months out from Rome has to pick me for this thankless task. I suppose that part of my charm lies in the fact that I have now served over 30 years in the Roman Army, which is his entire lifetime, may I point out! I have seen a few campaigns in my time. I am cynical, which is always a good attribute in someone



who is setting out to find the truth, and it so happens that my woman is a local a Judean, so I speak the language fluently. But still, why me!

So, my orders that day were to find out what the Rabbi was saying, and to assess whether he was a danger to law and order in this part of the Roman Empire, the miserable, rebellious province of Judea. We have had so many problems with this lot. We get problems in all of the provinces, but this lot are really touchy about their God, whom they call Yahweh. In most places they have been not unhappy to allow their local gods to join the Roman pantheon. In places where they are obviously the same as one of our gods, we kindly allow them to join names and share altars. Yahweh considers himself a cut above the others and will not be paired with anyone nor will he allow any other god to share his Temple in Jerusalem. It makes integration into the Roman Empire a difficult thing.

I knew of the Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. As the legate so rightly said, he has been moving around the country preaching, teaching and performing miracles and healings. Everyone is talking about the miracles, my woman certainly is. Anyone who has an ailment is waiting for him to come near enough to where they live, so that they can go to him and be cured. He is very popular because of all this. If he called on the people to rebel, I am sure that they would rise and follow him. The question is, what does he want? Is he likely to call on the people to rise up, take up arms and take on the might of the Roman Empire, which would be a very foolish thing to do. I know from listening to my woman, that these Judeans believe that one day a Messiah will come, a man chosen by Yahweh to lead his people to save them. Is this man that Messiah? Well, it is muggins here who has to go and find out.

So I went home to my woman, Rivka, who lives in the village just outside the Fort. I hope when I retire soon, that I will be able to marry her. The army allows its senior officers to be married, but us plebs pulled from every race and people in the Roman Empire may not marry until we leave the service of the Empire. When I leave I will become a Roman citizen. When I marry, my wife and children will become Roman citizens as well, and I will be given land to live on and settle down, as a thanks for my years of service. So I went back home. I had to tell Rivka what I was going to do, because I needed her help to find the right Judean clothes. She became very worried about what I was going to do, because Rabbi Jesus is so popular. If people knew that I was there to spy on him, then they might turn on me. She offered to go with me as she had always wanted to meet Rabbi Jesus. I thought about it for a while, then decided that people would be less likely to think I was a spy if I was there with Rivka. So we set off together, walking to where the Legate had told me that Rabbi Jesus had last been seen preaching.

He was not where he had last been reported as being seen. He was moving quickly around the country, which was partly what was worrying Rome. We came across him, or rather we came across a large crowd of people, all heading towards a nearby mountain. I pushed through the slow moving people, those with ailments, which meant they didn't move too fast. I got a lot of dirty looks. I am used to those, but I had forgotten that I was now dressed as they all were, in a simple robe with a scarf over my head to cover my hair, which is a bit of a giveaway. We have to keep our hair short to be able to fit our helmets properly. We have to regularly take shears to each other to keep it short. Most people only hack at their hair with a knife when it becomes unbearably long and in the way. Anyway, we managed to get near to the front of the crowd, and there just sitting down on a rock on the lower slopes of the mountain was the famous Rabbi Jesus, that I had come to see and hear.

He looked out at us all, and I could see him sigh, as if he were tired. He then indicated that we should all sit down. All around me people began to look around and sit on rocks. I pulled off my cloak and I made a place for us to sit comfortably with our backs against a rock. Along with everyone else in the place we looked up as a hush came over the crowd and Rabbi Jesus began to speak. I will remember his words for the rest of my life.

He said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

As he was saying all this I was looking round at the reaction of the crowd. Not too far away from Rivka and I were a small group who I recognised as Pharisees. I watched them for a while while Rabbi Jesus was speaking. They are a group who believe that all Jews are equal before Yahweh. They believe that all Jews should keep the law of Moses. According to Rivka they also believe in the resurrection of the dead. I have killed a few men in my time and I have never seen one come back to life. For most of what the Rabbi was saying they were nodding in agreement. They nodded vigorously when he talked about the pure in heart seeing Yahweh. I guess they see keeping the laws of Moses as keeping themselves pure. They seem to be agreeing with what he said, but Rivka has told me that generally they oppose Rabbi Jesus because he keeps deliberately breaking laws which he feels ties the

people too much. They make it too difficult for an ordinary Jew ever to feel that they are worthy before Yahweh. Rabbi Jesus seems to want it to be really simple and easy. I like simple and easy myself!

Standing a distance away from them were a group of Sadducees. They really are a snooty lot. Even I think so and I am not a Jew. They believe that they are so good and so superior because they are the ones who run the Temple in Jerusalem. They are the ones who collect all the Temple taxes, and judging by the quality of their clothing, they aren't afraid to spend some of it on themselves. You should hear Rivka on the subject of people who get above themselves. She believes that all Jews are equal before Yahweh, and all Jews should live as equals. It doesn't matter if the Sadducees are descended from Zadok the First Priest of the first Temple in Jerusalem, they are still children of Abraham, their common ancestor, as she herself is. They really do not like Rabbi Jesus. His power has nothing to do with them, they have no control over him. They mainly just want to make nice to Rome and keep their power, and who is going to blame them? Rivka says Rabbi Jesus is known to be able to better them in an argument, and make them seem petty. Most ordinary people don't like them, so they like it when Rabbi Jesus wins an argument. According to Rivka the only good thing they have done is stop the Roman authorities putting statues of the Emperor in the Temple, to be worshipped. That does not go down well with anyone around here. In fact I would go as far as saying it has united the whole Jewish people, which is a miracle really. Their faces would suggest that Rabbi Jesus comes second only to a Roman in their estimation of the lowest form of life!

I was most interested in watching the reactions of the men sitting close to the feet of Rabbi Jesus. They are his closest disciples, and if anything is going to happen they will be the leaders. They certainly hung on every word, at least until the Rabbi got to 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God'. The look on the face of one of them was certainly one of puzzlement, as if this was completely contrary to what had been said before. I wondered briefly whether the idea of being a peacemaker appealed to him, or whether he was like the zealots who I have had the occasional skirmish with. They really do not like any Roman being in the Judean territory at all. If they can slip a knife in the back of an off duty soldier in a back street, then they will do so. They are a vicious lot. If the Rabbi is preaching peace, maybe he isn't going to cause us trouble. Maybe some of his disciples don't like the idea of peace. That is something to mull over. Maybe some at least of them do want a war, leading at Rabbi Jesus' side. So far all I have seen and heard makes me think he is worried about Yahweh's kingdom, not the power of Rome or of the Temple. I just wish I knew more about Yahweh's kingdom. Is it on earth as well or just in the realm of the gods?

Then some of his words registered in my brain ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy’, and I was thrown back in time 30 years to a village not too far from here, when mercy was not on offer. The nightmare came to me again in flashes, weapons, children, noise, so much crying, women wailing, men shouting and running, a clash of metal on metal and corpses, lots of corpses of just baby boys. We were, for once not doing the killing, we had been sent to follow to see what Herod’s guard was up to. I wish I had never been there. There was no mercy for those innocent children. The soldiers looked as if they would rather be anywhere else, but I know that a man under orders does not question, he just obeys. But this has given me nightmares on and off ever since. I just feel so guilty that we did not step in and stop what was happening.

That scene has haunted me all my life. There are moments when I look at my own sons, born of a Judean mother and themselves considered as Jewish, I can see those bodies still. There was no mercy in the Herodian Guards, no mercy in Herod who sent them and would not have tolerated disobedience. It is ironic then that Herod was shown no mercy by his people. When he died his guards had been ordered to force the people out onto the streets to watch his elaborate funeral cortège pass by. You can force people to watch, you can’t force them to mourn the man in the coffin. They just watched in sullen silence. Too many deaths, too much fear.

But I have got away from the Rabbi and his talk. Everything I heard suggested to me that he was not setting out to start a rebellion. The meek will inherit the earth – I am not sure how. Only those with power inherit where I come from. Blessed are you when people insult you. Not where I come from. Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. No soldier can be pure in heart. We have seen so much done so much for our worldly masters. Our masters in Rome promise us earthly rewards and say their gods will favour us. What if Rabbi Jesus is right though? What if all I know and believe is turned on its head? The power of his words is quite compelling, the power of his presence is quite compelling. But I am here on behalf of Rome not on my own behalf.

I didn’t see anything in his words today to suggest he wants to raise an army and storm the fortress. In fact it would seem he doesn’t really think about us at all. His words suggest to me that he wants a more peaceful way of life living close to Yahweh and that this life will be a way of life that others will despise and even hate. If the faces of the Pharisees, Sadducees and even one of his closest disciples were anything to go by, then this was very unwelcome news for them. He might want peace and Yahweh. But there are some who do not want him around. I guess they think he is trouble for them. I can see that he has the power and authority to cause trouble for us, should he choose. I will have to report back to the Legate with care as the situation does not appear straightforward. I wonder whether I will ever

meet up with him and speak with him face to face? That would be interesting. I would like to learn more about him. He appears to be such a person of contradictions. A man with power he does not want to use! Well, well.