

It was His eyes that convinced me.

He had eyes which saw everything, knew everything, knew everyone. Otherworldly eyes.

A man who fully knew the past and fully knows the future. Eyes like bottomless pools, full of love, wisdom and compassion, but also sparking with steely strength.

Such eyes as I had never seen before.

He grew ever closer, slowly riding astride a young donkey on up to where I knelt along the side of this foul, dust-choked road outside Jerusalem. I painfully pulled myself up with my cane.

From side to side He looked upon us, a throng of people singing his praises, almost drunk with celebration.

I will return to this scene, but first I must tell you that I am a skeptic – no, worse – a scoffer. Too many broken promises in a life with too many years of hearing lies, including the ones I tell myself.

We had been hearing a groundswell of amazing stories about this strange man. Accounts of His healing the sick and injured, bringing sight to the blind, turning water into wine and other miracles that defied reason and logic. Multiple witnesses said He even brought a dead man back to life just a few days before.

Was He really the one who the prophet Zechariah had foretold would come to us? The Messiah who would be King of the Jews and proclaim peace to the nations?

How can He be? We imagined the promised One would be a mighty warrior, on a magnificent horse and in front of a legion of soldiers sent to deliver us from the domination of the hated Romans. But this man comes to us on a humble donkey and in every way appears to carry Himself as a man of peace.

My name is Naphtali. I was named for one of the twelve tribes of Israel which dwelled in Galilee more than a thousand years before this day. In our tongue the meaning of Naphtali is “to struggle” and no one has been more aptly named, for my life has been nothing but struggle.

I am now an old man and a beggar, broken in body and spirit, kneeling along roadsides just like this one, pleading for whatever scraps of food or coins that passersby are willing to toss in my cup.

It was not always this way.

As a young man I could run like a colt. I was full of strength and self-assurance. I learned the trade of stone masonry and spent my best years as a broad-shouldered builder of houses.

However, there were always struggles and conflict within me, a darker side of profligate youth and then years of self-indulgent behavior from which I could never pull myself up.

Time and years of the wear of hard labor bowed my spine and tore at my joints, finally bringing me to my knees. And the war within me took its toll as well, years of never-sincere promises to myself I made to live a life of greater virtue. There was a man I wanted to be, but could never remotely come close to. Selfishness and sundered relationships were always part of this tortured journey.

And, I also have been possessed of an inner rage I carry at the injustices of the class structure within our Israelite society. The rich and privileged ones, including the chief priests and elders, never tire of exhorting us to work hard, pay our taxes and conduct lives of discipline and restraint. But their own behavior makes a mockery of their message.

And, like the rest of my fellow working class Jews, I am bitter as well at living under the yoke of the foreigner Romans, an abomination on our land.

So now I am a beggar. And this is what my life has been reduced to – depending on the scant generosity of strangers to stay alive – and for what?

All our eternal questions haunt me now in old age: Where did I come from? Where am I going? As I get ever nearer to death, I constantly wonder: Did my life have any meaning?

Does any part of what I say perhaps remind you of any of your own personal struggles?

And now, back to the present, where this man deliberately stops his donkey right beside me as I struggle to my feet, and our eyes lock.

Those amazing eyes slowly wash over me. He says nothing to me, and He doesn't need to.

I suddenly I find myself in the presence of a man for all the ages. Time stands still.

I am struck with an immediate sense He knows my whole life's story far better than I know it, and that His promise of eternal life includes even a wretched soul like me – if I dare to believe. My skepticism melts away.

And his eyes convince me – this man is truly the Son of God.

This man whom we are told says the meek shall inherit the earth, and who says blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, means exactly what He says.

And He rides on, and I will never be the same. Whatever befalls me now, I have found conviction that God has not abandoned me, and there is redemption in my future.

And yet, a small unease begins in me. I can't put my finger on it, but something is amiss.

With all this crowd's adoring shouts and jubilation, the way this man looks at them and carries himself so quietly and resolutely, brings me back to a newfound conviction that He really does somehow see the future.

And I get a strange sense that He knows these moments are meant to evaporate and that a very unsettled and even ominous future is about to unfold.

And for that future I am left to wait and wonder.