

What's in a name?

Think of Bohemia and what comes to mind? A gypsy violinist; a sense of freedom amid exotic excitement. And when you think of the Czech republic? Severe expressions and Lada cars; a sense of humourless, oppressive dullness. Yet the two, Bohemia and the Czech Republic are, more or less, the same.

What comes to mind when you think of Iran? Fire-breathing Ayatollahs denouncing the evils of the West and the stoning of women perhaps. But think of Persia and the senses are overtaken by exotic smells of fragrant perfumes below the bulbous towers of vast oriental palaces where robed sultans walk in the cool of the evening in fountain-filled, walled gardens; one thinks of magic lamps and flying carpets; a thousand and one mysterious nights where snakes are charmed to the warble of reedy pipes; a place where scimitars swipe at thieving hands in noisy bazaars. Yet, Persia was where Iran now is. The change of name came about in 1935.

Persia gave the world tales that stretched across a thousand and one nights, Aladdin and Ali Baba. It also gave the world the idea of Paradise as a walled garden watered by a thousand and one fountains. Under the influence of Persia, the Empire that liberated the people of Judah from oppression and captivity in Babylon, the children of Israel wrote about the time before time when God made a walled garden in the East, through which great rivers flowed. And there he placed his friend, man; and there God walked in the cool of the evening to converse with his friends as sultan and sheik have always done. But suddenly the intimacy has been shattered, the friendship broken, the trust destroyed. The guilty couple who have done the one thing they were told not to do are ejected from the walled garden of Paradise and have to struggle in an alien and hostile world. Paradise stands empty and guarded until a thief, with the audacity of a cat-burglar, sneaks into the garden of Paradise when he dares to ask an impudent question. The mercy of God knows no limits. It is a wonderfully delicate Lukan touch.

Paradise is a delightful notion conjured by Persian genius; and Persia gave the world one of the most cruel and prolonged forms of torture and execution ever devised by the twisted genius of mankind. Simple and economical, it needed only two planks of wood, reusable, and nails or rope. Crucifixion inflicted pain across the body without damaging any major organ and so the excruciating agony could be prolonged at the tormentor's whim. Even now we are not sure what was the actual cause of death; perhaps it differed in each case. Crucifixion allowed each executioner to devise his own subtle niceties to add to the torture. The Romans themselves offered a prelude in the form of a whipping. This was a paradoxical act of mercy: the greater the scourging, the more weak the victim, the less time he would suffer on the cross. It was such a horrific form of judicial killing that Cicero will not speak of it except to say it is too horrible for comment in polite society. Romans, never squeamish, nevertheless would not allow their own such humiliation, however treasonable their actions. In the Empire its use was reserved for slaves and rebels. Other nations were

less particular. Carthage crucified her admirals and generals who had failed her in battle.

Paradise and the cross; linked in their origins and brought together by Luke in a scene which only Luke could devise. When Jesus is born, the first to greet the new-born king are shepherds; notorious villains and no-goods; now at his death his sole supporter is a thief. Early in his Gospel he had a lowly maidservant proclaim the Gospel. In her song of praise she exulted in her Lord who "*casts down the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly*". Throughout the Gospel the poor have been raised: the blind have been given sight, widows have had their dead sons restored to them; lepers are restored to society Now just as the Lord is dying the death of a slave, as the authorities mock him as he hangs in pain believing they have done a Godly deed in ridding the world of a dangerous charlatan; as one of the thieves mocks him too, this impudent crook, himself in the prolonged agony of a slow death by crucifixion, speaks up for him and makes an audacious request. And his cheek is rewarded; he receives the promise of paradise. The whole of Luke's Gospel is summarised in this vignette.

The thief, incidentally, is the only person in the Gospels to call Jesus by name without qualification. There is no title, no descriptive, just the personal name. A name that means, "*Yahweh saves*". There is a great deal in a name.