

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

Simon of Cyrene appears in one verse of today's Passion, but he makes a lasting impression. He came from a city located in what is today Libya in northern Africa. In the first century Cyrene had a synagogue, so Simon could have been a Jew approaching Jerusalem that day. Mark's gospel says he had two sons, Alexander and Rufus. We can easily imagine a strong young Simon with two kids just old enough to remember the crucifixion. Luke calls their father "a certain Simon," as if his readers would have no idea who this was, a man without any previous connection to Jesus. Perhaps the crowd piqued Simon's curiosity, and he took the kids up for a closer view. Jesus was doing what condemned criminals were required to do: he carried his own cross, probably the crossbeam because the Romans left the reusable vertical shaft upright at the place of execution.

Jesus had surely grown excessively weak from the scourging, the burden on his shoulders, and the trauma of the day. The soldiers had orders to crucify him, and they may have worried that Jesus would die before he got to Calvary. Moved not by compassion for Jesus but by concern for their jobs, they looked around the crowd for someone strong enough to help.

Luke says the soldiers took the crossbeam from Jesus and laid it on the shoulders of Simon of Cyrene, who must have been shocked and afraid. Tradition holds that Simon later became a Christian. Luke mentions a Simon in Acts of the Apostles together with someone from Cyrene, and he tells of Cyrenians at Pentecost, at the stoning of Stephen, and as Christian missionaries. Perhaps Simon's unexpected role in Jerusalem and the ensuing news of the resurrection converted him into an evangelist, foreshadowed by the large crowd following him following Jesus to Calvary. But at this moment, Simon had to be in shock.

Luke says, "they made [Simon] carry [the cross] behind Jesus." This was not Simon's idea. If he was Jewish, he was not permitted to carry objects on Passover. That could be another reason soldiers had to force him into it. When artists depict Simon, as in the Stations, you often see him carrying the base of the cross while Jesus shoulders the rest, but Luke presents it differently. In fact, Luke adds his own detail: he says Simon carried it "behind Jesus." Luke remembers what Jesus said earlier about a cross. If you want to follow him, if you want to walk behind him, the way you do it is to carry a cross - yours or his.

At times we resemble Simon, bystanders watching someone else's pain in our church, our country or your family. You may see people carrying a cross so poorly that you ridicule them. Like the soldiers, you may think that Jesus isn't leading very well.

Some of us are pressed into service we do not choose. Kids are told to clean up their mess; employees are told to fix someone else's mistakes. At times we help not with charity, but in resentment, anger or fear. We help because someone makes us. Even so, we may discover that after we help, our service makes a lasting impression. We learn something new. We believe in something new - all because somebody made us do what we never wanted to do.

Sunday, April 14, 2019