

February 21, 2016

THE CROSS

Matthew 27:32

Usually a man condemned to be crucified was forced to carry his own cross to the site where he would experience the torture of being nailed to it with large spikes, and then elevated into position for all to see... to watch... to watch him suffer... watch him die. He carried his own cross in order to identify him as the criminal, the one deserving this punishment, the guilty one. But Jesus had been awake for at least 24 hours. He had been dragged from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, made to stand before the Sanhedrin for hours, then dragged before Pilate. Then, Roman soldiers had flogged Jesus to within a few inches of His Life.

Jesus was probably exhausted. He could faint at any moment. It seems only natural to imagine that the walk to Golgotha was just too much for Him, and we can easily picture Him collapsing under the weight of His Cross. Did He actually fall? Is that why Simon was conscripted to carry the cross? None of the Gospels say Jesus fell on the way out of the City. Not even once. But we can't help but fill in the gaps of the story and suggest His falling under the weight of the wood as the reason Simon was tagged to fulfill this task.

Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan Order developed the legend of Jesus' having fallen three times before Simon was forced to carry the Cross. And they developed the devotional exercise of praying *the Stations of the Cross* during the Season of Lent and Passion week, and, especially, on Good Friday. Whether or not Jesus fell before Simon began to carry the Cross... Simon *did* begin to carry the Cross! And it must have had an extremely profound effect on him.

I say so because scholars presume that, because Mark's telling of the story at this point mentions the little fact that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21), they must have been fairly well known among the brothers and sisters of the early Christian community, and were Christians themselves; therefore, Simon must have become a follower. You are creatively compelled to imagine their father, back in Cyrene, a city in North Africa in what is now Libya, telling them about Jesus, and that he, their father, had helped Him carry His Cross. No dialogue between Jesus and Simon is given in the Gospels, but, often the cinematic portrayals of this scene show Simon receiving a sort of penetrating look from Jesus that compels such sympathy and mercy that he *wants* to do whatever he can to help the condemned man. It's as if, without speaking a word, Jesus assures Simon that it would be okay, that this was God's plan, that Jesus needed this small, final token of gracious and loving assistance, and so, sometimes, Simon is depicted as taking up the Cross as a privilege, and honor.

Simon was a pilgrim. Scholars depict him as coming to Jerusalem to experience the Passover. He is entering the Holy City in a spirit of devotion, a spirit of faith. The sun had just risen on the new day, and the first thing he wanted to do was go to the Temple to pray. But this procession of criminals moving down the street (and it was probably downhill most of the way) interrupted his peace and upset his state of mind. He was offended by this unclean and unfaithful activity, even though he probably would have recognized the Elders of the Sanhedrin walking close behind by their clothing. And rather than stand as a spectator and watch, he may even have tried to blend into the background and face the wall in order not to see.

But...he was noticed. For whatever reason, the soldiers chose him to bear the cross the rest of the way. Initially, he probably felt a strong sense of revulsion. No one would *want* to carry the cross of a criminal. No one would want to be identified with this man's guilt, His condemnation. It might even seem as if *he* was the one who would be crucified!

He didn't know the man. But...you can't say no to a Roman soldier. He reluctantly entered the cause he deplored. The cross was now in his hands. Was there blood on it? Had blood soaked through the Robe of Christ and smeared the wood a bit? Had blood trickled down from Jesus' head where the thorns had pierced His scalp? Suddenly, Simon had blood on his hands, and he began to wonder. Who *is* this Man? Why has He been flogged? Why was He wearing a Crown of thorns? Why was He being crucified? All these questions flashed through his mind in an instant. And then he looked at the Man for whom he would carry a cross.

Had he heard about Jesus? Would he have known/guessed it was Him? Had the people he'd met on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem spoken about a savior? Maybe he had at least overheard people talking. Maybe, even, just then. Jesus, brutalized and exhausted, looked at him. Perhaps the expression in His eyes showed pity on Simon. Perhaps, without a word, Jesus gave him a look that not only said, "I'm sorry you have to do this," but, "Bless you for helping Me!"

He carried the Cross out of the City. At Golgotha, the Romans had him drop it near where it would be raised. Then, they probably pushed him out of their way. What did he do then? I imagine him stunned to have been drawn into the action. All he could do was stand there at first. His pilgrimage had been spoiled. His clothes had bloodstains. There was blood on his hands. He became absorbed into the crowd. He looked on. The Romans were taking out the nails. One had a hammer in his hand.

He couldn't bear to watch, but he couldn't look away.

The Cross is remembered more seriously these days in Lent. Everywhere there are Christians, there are crosses. They remind us of our Savior, of His suffering, of His Death. For most people, the crosses they see are little more than symbols of their faith. But, think seriously...what *does* the Cross mean to you? What does it *do* for you? Is it on a necklace that you wear to identify you as a believer?

Roman Catholics have crucifixes – that's a Cross with Christ still on it. Protestants don't leave Him there. Our crosses are empty because Jesus was not left there. Our focus is more on the Resurrection than on the Suffering of Jesus. Yes, the story doesn't end with the suffering. But...we must never forget it.

Jesus suffered for our sins. He was raised for our Redemption... But His Crucifixion, His Death opens the gates of the prison of sin.

The Cross makes a difference!

"The Word of the Cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God!" (First Corinthians 1:18)