

**Mark 15:21** (cf Matt 27:32: Luke 23:36)

Lenten devotion

Bethlehem, Adelaide

13 March 2024

*They compelled a passer-by, who was coming from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.*

### **Bearer of the Cross**

Mark, Matthew and Luke all record in just a couple of lines this short episode about a man who was compelled to carry the cross for Jesus on the way to Golgotha. The biblical texts don't tell us why this hapless person was pressed into service, but it is always assumed that Jesus slumped and perhaps fell under the weight of the cross. If you have ever participated in the Lenten reflection called the Stations of the Cross you will know that one of Stations focuses on this episode in which Simon carries the cross for Jesus. Let us focus our thoughts this evening on three things:

First, Simon of Cyrene – who was he?

Secondly, Simon of Cyrene as bearer of the cross.

Thirdly, a question. What did bearing the cross mean for Simon, and what does it mean for us?

Some years ago when I was teaching at ALC, the Seminary, we held our Lenten retreat at St Paul's Monastery up at Glen Osmond. There is a beautiful garden there with 14 marble statues of the Stations of the Cross. As part of our meditation that day, we did a form of the stations prepared by a Lutheran pastor in the US. Station Five is traditionally the one about Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross for Jesus. The marble statue is quite striking, but actually there is something wrong with it. It has Simon at Jesus' side, slightly ahead, with Jesus resting one hand on Simon's arm. But Luke tells us, quite deliberately, that he carried the cross *behind* Jesus. That's important, as we shall see.

You will find in more recent art and in Bible movies that Simon is often depicted as a black African. For some years now it has been fashionable to do that, especially in the States. Sidney Poitier played a black Simon in the 60s movie, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Historically that was possible, but was it likely? Well, Cyrene, which now lies in ruins, was certainly in Africa, on the NE coast of Libya. But unlike the Ethiopian of Acts ch 8, it is not likely that Simon was a black

African. The traditional people of that area were Berbers, but they didn't live in Cyrene, and in any case Simon is a Jewish name. Cyrene was a Greek or Hellenistic city built and inhabited by Greek colonists. In NT times it was still Hellenistic, but the Romans were in control. We know that there was quite a sizeable Jewish community there, with their own synagogue. We also know from Acts 2 that Cyrenian Jews were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

So what do we make of all this? Simon was most likely a devout Greek-speaking Jew in Jerusalem for Passover. We are told, somewhat enigmatically, that he was coming *ap' agrou* – from the field or from the country. Perhaps that means he was a farmer or rural worker. No doubt the he looked fit and strong, and that's why the Romans pressed him into service, hapless bystander that he was. Simon had no choice in all this – you don't argue with Roman soldiers. They just seized him, as the three Evangelists tell us, and laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. Crucifixion was the most shameful of deaths, reserved for the worst of criminals. So besides the heavy work of carrying the cross, Simon would have felt utterly humiliated, with no redress, no way of explaining to the jeering crowd that he was no criminal, just a hapless by-stander that got commandeered by Roman soldiers.

Mark in fact has a further piece of information that is quite important. He mentions that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. What does this tell us? It almost certainly means that Alexander and Rufus were well known members of the Christian community that was Mark's audience. Interestingly, in the tradition of the Coptic Church it is believed that Mark (John Mark) was a native of Cyrene and that he became the first bishop of the Christian community that was established there soon after Pentecost. So how did the two brothers become Christians? Answer: we don't know. But of course it is quite possible – and what we would like to believe – that their father Simon the accidental bearer of Jesus' cross became a cross-bearer in the other sense. Could it be that by following Jesus that day, prodded and pushed by Roman soldiers, Simon became a follower of Jesus, a disciple? Was the Cyrenian who bore the cross for Jesus also one of the Cyrenians in the crowd who 52 days later heard Peter boldly proclaim Jesus as the Christ, crucified and risen so that people may repent, be forgiven their sins, and receive the life-giving gift of the Spirit? Simon was Jesus' last helper, the cross-bearer, and through that experience did he also learn to be a disciple – one who takes up the cross daily and follows Jesus?

It is very possible, but we don't know for sure, and that's the reason for the question mark. But that question mark is also for you and for me. The question

for us is what does it mean to follow Jesus on the way, to take up the cross daily and follow him? Sometimes when Christians are going through a rough patch, like illness or feeling poorly, or things going horribly wrong in life, they may say, 'O well, this is the cross I have to bear.' That's okay I guess, but strictly speaking taking up the cross is suffering for the name of Jesus Christ: because we bear the name 'Christian' we are called to suffer shame, rejection, persecution, and even death for the name of Christ. We would like our suffering to be for a noble cause, but sometimes what we have to suffer is so awful and so shameful and so unspeakable and simply doesn't make any sense. It happens to Christians individually. And it happens to us collectively. All around the world Christians are bearing a deep and terrible shame because some few who were supposed to serve the flock as faithful shepherds have despoiled the most vulnerable of the lambs. That's a heavy cross and it weighs on all of us.

And there is more about this bearing of the cross: Christ took up the cross and laid down his life for our redemption, to save us from sin, death and the powers of evil. He did this for us. Because in great love he did this for us, we also are to be willing to bear the cross, that is, to sacrifice, to give of ourselves for others. That is what we are called to do daily – often in little ways, but sometimes we are called to carry very heavy crosses. Now is Lent, and the right time for us to reflect on our lives. Have our lives become a little too selfish and self-indulgent? What we can do, for Christ's sake, to reach out to other people? How can we show in our lives the love of God in Christ that has been poured into our hearts through the working of the Spirit?

Time to conclude. Simon helped Jesus carry the cross, but Jesus the Christ alone is the one who died on it for our redemption. There is only one Redeemer, but that doesn't mean our suffering means nothing. On the contrary, in Christ our suffering and bearing of the cross can and ought to have a redemptive character that draws attention not to one's self, but to him who **'... died for all, that those who live might not live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised [to life]'** (2 Cor 5:15).