



A RETREAT FOR HOLY WEEK by Father Robbie Low

Five Characters in Search of an Author 2 – VERONICA

Courage comes in all shapes and sizes. Some people talk a good game and never deliver. Others say little or nothing and then astonish you by their sheer grit and determination.

On the Way of Sorrows you might expect the key players to be in the front row. Most of them are not.

So as the gruesome, bloody and tearstained procession winds its way up to the hill of death, the place of the skull, the place where Life will challenge Death and shatter its gloomy portals, the crowd burgeons. Pressing in on every side in the narrow streets of the capital city there is every kind of emotion running riot.

I remember years ago, when serving in the East End of London, we put on a Way of the Cross through the streets and estates. Followed by thousands we ended in the churchyard of St. Dunstan's Stepney. There Jesus and the two thieves were crucified. Amid the hush and awe of the devotees and the faithful a gang of yobs miraculously appeared and started jeering and

abusing the Crucified. It was a spine tingling moment. They thought they were ruining it. They were, in fact, giving it the hallmark of authenticity.

The drama of salvation wends its way through the highs and lows of humanity's fallen state. As the old News of the World banner used to proclaim, 'All human life is here'. The jeerers, who like all cowards and carrion on execution days, will have their say when the victims are safely nailed up, are not absent from the journey but the Tradition records, at this moment, only the remarkable examples of courage and human dignity.

Jesus' progress to the place of sacrifice is hemmed in on every side by the full might, majesty and authority of the Imperium. The soldiers of the Empire form an ironic guard of honour for the beaten and broken body. To approach Jesus in the midst of all this organised terror requires a courage that knows no bounds or a heart that overrules simple human reason or a compassion that has a priority that reflects the *Imago Dei*, the image of God in Man.

Out of this foment, this flood tide of human tribulation, risking the swords' edge and the spear points, comes a solitary woman stepping where no man dare. A man would have been cut down before he had taken a second pace toward Jesus. She moves toward the fallen figure of Christ. Where He has stumbled in the dust, where the 'hands that flung stars into space' and created humanity from the earth are pressed to the stones of the street, this woman comes out of the crowd and kneels and performs a simple ministry of care to the condemned and dying.

We know not whether she was familiar with Jesus, a long distance disciple or a recent hearer, a follower of the week's events or a veteran of the ministry. She may be seeing Jesus for the first time. Tradition does not record her history.

She wipes the face of Jesus. It is the simplest thing. The blood, the sweat, the dust....for a moment they are erased in an act of compassion. Nothing she does will overturn the verdict of the judge. She cannot stop the sombre march of history but she can bear witness to the dignity of Man. She can testify to the sanctity of life. She can show her solidarity with the victim of injustice. She can show the triumph of love over fear, the irreducible beauty of mercy in the midst of a merciless day.

Nor do we even know her name.

We call her Veronica but that is a nickname. It comes from the miracle of the event itself. For, on the very cloth with which she has wiped the Messiah's face, is ever after imprinted the true image of the suffering Saviour. The words for that true image are, in the Latin transliteration of the Greek, 'the Very Ikon'.

Veronica is the bearer of the true likeness of Christ. But the true likeness of Christ is not restricted to the miraculous cloth which she bears. She, 'Veronica', is also the image bearer. For when her heart overrules the logic of human fear and she comes out of the crowd she does nothing less than reflect Christ Himself.

Moved by the singular fate of a fallen man, a man condemned and dying, she risks her own life to come to Him, to let Him know that He is not alone, that He is loved.

Christ Himself looks at Fallen Man with compassion and love and risks all to come to him, show him mercy and let him know that he will not die alone. But He does more. He takes on the very death of Man and breaks it on the Cross by His own dying. He walks, knowingly, into the gates of death, into the place of the condemned and, sacrificing His human life, takes the Divine and insuperable life of God into the deepest dungeons of Hell and wrests the prisoners free.

Veronica is a little image of the Lord of Mercy. Jesus is on her cloth but He is also in her heart. She becomes, in that moment, herself a Very Ikon of Christ. She becomes what we must all become if we are to stand before the Judgement Jesus promises in Matthew Chapter 25. The hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the prisoner, the stripped of all, the stranger, the dying, these are the many faces of Jesus and the strange places we find Him.

For this spiritual exercise kneel before that station and ask for a heart of mercy to minister to Jesus wherever He may be found. And ask for her prayers and that, like her, anonymous but famous, you may become a Very Ikon of Christ.