



A RETREAT FOR HOLY WEEK by Father Robbie Low

### **Five Characters in Search of an Author** **3 – SIMON OF CYRENE**

The sacrificial nature of the death of Jesus is fundamental to Christian understanding of salvation. Jesus is the final Passover. He is the Lamb of God whose blood shed for us turns away the Angel of Death. His body offered to us is the beginning of our heaven bound journey. The mystery of the Mass is hidden in that sacrifice and through it the pilgrimage, that takes us from the Last Supper through the Calvary and into the miracle of the Third Day, is explored, explained, exhibited and realised both in time and in eternity.

It follows therefore that we should not be surprised when heresy and error coalesce around denial of that central fact. The Gnostic writer Basileides could not conceive of a God who could be crucified and, in his writings, wafted the spiritual aeon (otherwise masquerading as Jesus) heavenward, avoiding the ghastly business of Golgotha. His rewrite was enthusiastically taken up by Mohammed who, in the Koran, makes it clear that Jesus was not crucified. (Indeed you can find volumes entitled 'CRUCIFUNCTION'). This error leaked into the Protestant error, not as a denial of the crucifixion, but as a rejection of the altar of sacrifice and the Real Presence.

For Islam there is a narrative that runs like this. Jesus, the prophet of Allah, was not crucified. Indeed, rather like the modern masters of terror who strap young volunteers in suicide belts and watch them walk to their deaths, Jesus was at pains to find a substitute among his disciples. To this volunteer Jesus promised Paradise. The pantomime ensued. Jesus hid. The Sub suffered. Jesus, when good and ready, went to Heaven.

The remaining disciples then divided into three. One group called Jesus God. A second called Him Son of God (these were the Nestorians from whose heterodoxy much of Islam is derived by Mohammed's travels among them). The third group said Jesus was a Prophet. These were the true Muslims, the ones who got it right. They were – evidence entirely absent – murdered by the first two groups and their story and therefore the true Gospel did not emerge until, you guessed it, Mohammed who was thus able to correct seven centuries of Christian error.

Why am I telling you all this? Well we are in a centuries' long dialogue with Islam and it helps to know where they are coming from. More particularly you will not be surprised to know that the main candidate for substitute on the Cross for Jesus was Simon of Cyrene. Even the Christian Gospels put him right there in the ideal spot.

What do we know of Simon and why is he important?

He is a Jew from Cyrene, the Libyan outpost where thousands of Jews had been forcibly resettled in the third century before Christ. It would later become an important Christian centre as well as a place to which defeated Jews would flee in the wake of Jerusalem's fall. Cyrenians had their own

synagogue in Jerusalem to which they would pilgrimage on major feasts like Passover.

We do not know why Simon was watching the tragic procession along the Via Dolorosa. The curiosity of crowds may have been enough. Perhaps he had heard of Jesus. We don't know. His vocation is sudden and unexpected. Jesus is unable to carry the crossbeam to Skull Hill. He has been tortured and whipped to within an inch of His life. The flagel is leather thongs studded with metal that tears the flesh off the victim's back. It is a perverse mercy that will hugely reduce the condemned man's suffering on the Cross by exhausting his power of resistance to the suffocating weight on his drowning lungs.

Jesus stumbles. He falls into the dust, the very dust from which He, as the Eternal Word, had created and raised up Adam and all his sons and given them life and breath. Simon, 'just in from the country' is pulled out of the crowd for this unique vocation. He will do what Jesus has exhorted every disciple of His to do ever since. He will carry the Cross.

We may assume that he was a likely looking man for the job. The Romans wanted to get up there and get on with it. It would have been no good dragged a weedy specimen of humanity out of the crowd to perform the task. Simon presumably appeared 'up to it'. Suddenly from spectator he becomes participant in the unfolding and terrible drama of the Friday we dare to call 'Good' and which Christian discipline marks thereafter as the 'fast day' of the universal community.

What else do we know of this stranger dragged briefly to the centre stage of the world's history?

We know that he is devout. He is serious about his faith or he would not have been in Jerusalem for Passover. The road from Cyrene is not a short or easy trek. We know also that he had at least two sons, Rufus and Alexander. They are noted among the significant players in the early Christian community in Rome. We may deduce that, somewhere along the line, the family became converts. There is clear evidence that Cyrene itself became an important centre of Christianity from its earliest days and we know that many Jews fleeing from the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 ended up in Cyrene.

Whether Simon and his lads were among the Cyrenians who preached to the Greeks at Antioch in Acts Chapter 11 we cannot be certain but it would seem highly likely. Among those greeted by Paul in his letter to the church in Rome is one Rufus. It is possible this is Simon's son. If it is then there is an even more touching moment in terms of the Cyrenian's family life because Paul says this. *'Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, .....and his mother who has been a mother to me too.'* This is an amazing line. Paul's loving friendship with a married woman is very moving.

So we have a picture of a real family man, tough, not young, devout. A man who is converted and whose whole family come with him and become both missionaries and, in their loving supportive home, a place of sanctuary, love and renewal for the Church's greatest missionary and the nascent community of Faith. This is a remarkable and beautiful picture and to understand its origin we must return briefly to the road up to Golgotha.

On that fateful morning in the city of Jerusalem, the ancient capital of Davidic kingship, the seat of the Temple, the hope of a liberated Israel and Messianic restoration, the streets will have been crowded by hundreds ,

possibly thousands, of curious pilgrims and natives all hoping for a glimpse of the end of this extraordinary story. A week ago the crowd had welcomed Jesus in triumph. Now they gather to witness the end of the insurgency at the hands of imperial power.

Everyone else has a view of Jesus. It may be good or obscure. It may be momentary or extended. They will all have a view of Jesus. That is how the world was on Good Friday. It has been no different in the two millennia since. The world has a view of Jesus and each individual has to respond.

One man alone has Jesus' view of the world. That man is Simon of Cyrene. As he carries the Cross of Christ and follows in the footsteps of Jesus, he alone will see humanity in all its glorious brokenness. He will see the faces of the crowd – the anguished, the sorrowful, the confused, the spiteful. He will see the mockers and the encouragers. He will witness the cruel and the compassionate. He will hear the whispers of prayer and the wails of regret. He will hear the catcalls and the criticism, the mockery and the malice. He will see the disappointment in the eyes of those who had hoped. He will sense the love of those who are about to lose everything. He will find himself in the cauldron of humanity's confusion, a witness to its worst and a witness to its wonderful likeness of the image of God.

Simon of Cyrene sees the world as Jesus sees it. No wonder he converts and spends his life spreading the Gospel. No wonder he becomes the patron of the outcast and those who can find no home in this world. He reflects, in the rest of his earthly life, the compassionate heart of Jesus. He becomes the archetypal disciple, the Cross bearer.

So, for your second spiritual exercise I want you to walk, with Simon of Cyrene, the Via Dolorosa bearing the Cross of Jesus. I want you to hear and see the crowd and gaze into the faces of that sea of humanity for which Christ died. And then I want you to take what you see and experience into your heart and carry it with you wherever you go.

Then you will truly know why each soul is important to God, why, like Simon and his family, we evangelise and why Jesus chose to die for you.

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