

8TH SCRIPTURAL STATION - SIMON OF CYRENE CARRIES THE CROSS

by Fr Robbie Low

(Mk. 15 v 21. Mt 27 v 32-33. Lk. 23 v26. Jn 19 v 17)

I am an old man now and it was along time ago. But when I sit in the gathering of the Followers of the Way, with my sons Alexander and Rufus beside me, it all comes flooding back.

We had come on the great Passover pilgrimage, part of the centuries old Jewish settlement in Libya. A journey of a thousand miles. A once in a lifetime trip but we wanted to be there, giving up weeks to struggle down that unforgiving coastal road.

The city was heaving, scarcely a bed to be had for love or money. I was up and about early, as usual, when I heard the clamour a couple of streets away.

Hollering and banging, The shrieks, the imprecations, the wailing.and then the whole grisly procession swinging into view. I couldn't see Him at first. Just the soldiers, muscling their way through the crowd but temporarily stationary. Some dispute about how to proceed apparently. The victim was on the floor, the crossbeam lying on his blood soaked back. A garbled conversation among the troops.....complaining that, He'd been beaten too hard. Couldn't have Him die here. Need to get up on the hill. Well I'm not bloody well humping this up the street.

I had got too close in my curiosity. It's true, I'm a big man. In those days, though I say it myself, well muscled. The Centurion's eyes picked me out. 'You, you big bastard. Over here.'

You never quite get used to it. This was no place to argue with swords and spears and the petty contempt of men.

‘Get your ugly backside over here and pick this up. His Majesty here has fallen down on the job.’

I paused a moment. The eyes of the crushed and wounded man looked up from the dirt, blood running off his temple from some twisted torturing thorn tiara. A stinging lash caught me across the neck and chest.

‘That would be now, scumbag’.

I eased the beam off the body and settled it on my shoulder, helping the bleeding man up with my other hand.

Together, we walked on.

He stumbled, weakened by torture, blood blind, dehydrated, often on His knees only to be lashed back into consciousness and pain.

As we tottered and dragged uphill, I glanced at Him but He stared straight ahead, looking into the crowd as if taking each one of them into His orbit. And I looked at them too. The noise, the racket of the mob. The tears of the distressed. The love of a few. The bafflement of the many. The taunts of the idiots, the contempt of men.

I saw, as I reflect now years on, what He saw. As the pastor said to me when I joined, ‘You, Simon, are the only man who saw humanity as Jesus saw them on His way to die for them all. Remember that, when you look on your fellow man.’ And I suppose that’s the truth. He saw what were the heights and depths of humanity and everything in between.....and still died for them all.

I have tried to remember.

At the time I was trying to survive. I had not come to the Holy City to die, caught up in some unknown political maelstrom.

I wanted to see the Temple. I wanted to praise God.

I wanted to keep the Feast. I wanted to pick up some souvenirs and go safely home and tell my children and, one day, my grandchildren of my pilgrim days.

The mount, the Golgotha, 'Skull Hill', came soon enough. I was dismissed, mercifully, with a parting lash of thanks. Two crosses were already up and two men dangled into space, spatchcocked on the broken trees.

The rest you know.

I was near enough to hear and see it all.

His friends, for the most part hidden, just two or three nearby, mostly the womenfolk. They came to me much later, sought me out, found me in the tavern trying to wash the memory from my mind, the dust of dying from my throat. Told me the story. Shared their hopes of glory and their consequent despair.

I stayed longer than I had intended. Got caught up in the swirling rumour of what you now know as the Miracle of the Third Day.

And, against all reason and logic of mortality – I had, after all, watched Him die – believed increasingly it could be true. His eyes still held me. His demeanour on the Cross. His last words. The strange events in the city. I came to believe.

And now, as the mystery of the Mass unfolds, I find I walk with Him still to Calvary. I feel the groove of pain in my ancient shoulder where He shared His burden of the world with me and let me see humanity in all its wretched glory.

When the Bread of Eternity and the Chalice of Salvation are lifted high, I see Him still, I know Him to be near. And when my turn comes to walk the Calvary road I know who will be with me to bear my final burden, lift me from the dust and lead me from the hill of death out to the Bethany Road onto the crossroads of time and eternity and into the final Ascent.