

Good Friday – 2022

It seems so random. Simon of Cyrene is pulled out of the crowd for no obvious reason. In that moment, this obscure, historically insignificant man is bearing God's cross. Conscripted; Simon wasn't asked; he was told. Is Simon a disciple? No. By telling us that Simon is forced to carry Christ's cross, the Scriptures aren't telling us that Simon is proving himself to be a faithful follower of the Messiah. By introducing Simon into the story, the Gospel writers are telling us that there are no disciples left. There is no one left who is willing to carry the Lord's very real and very ominous cross. There's only some random guy that the Roman soldiers pull out of the crowd to force him to submit to helping Jesus bear His burden. That is both pathetic and heart-affectingly sad. Jesus is alone. So much love He poured out; so much tenderness and affection and joy and hope and when He is persecuted, He is abandoned. Abandoned by His most ardent followers; abandoned to the whim of evil men; abandoned by God Himself; Jesus is alone.

I do not believe that truth can be manipulated. I believe that people can be manipulated. I believe that truth can fall out of vogue in man's mind, that truth can be maligned and abused and forgotten and distorted and smeared and misrepresented but that truth, itself, stands impervious to attack. Truth is not subject to opinion polls nor does it hire a marketing company to dress up its image. It has been said that there are no absolutes. Typically, the next phrase one hears is that truth is relative. An absolute is something that is universally true; its truthfulness is independent of all other factors or contexts. To say that there are no absolutes is, in fact, an absolute. The devil is often verbose, but that little maxim, used by those who defy God, is a tidy little package. Truth cannot be manipulated. You and I can be.

This night is a night of absolutes. The truth, the veracity of God's Word and what our Lord has done is not dependent on anything. The crucifixion of the Son of God stands alone; sacrosanct. Beautifully and transcendently, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is an event that is full of absolutes. This sacrifice is absolute love. The death of the Son of God upon a Roman cross is an expression of absolute mercy. Absolutes converge at Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Totals collide in the flesh of Christ. All sin is located in the flesh of Him who is completely God and completely Man. The sum total of man's guilt and man's shame and man's death collides with the greater sum of God's love and God's righteousness and God's forgiveness. Our faith is not predicated on anything other than Almighty God's absolute resolution to save us. He does not change. Good Friday does not change. The power of this day is the same for all people at all times and in all places – forever and ever.

And Simon of Cyrene was drawn into it. He is so relatable. Do you think that he would have preferred to stay aloof, detached from the struggle that was playing itself out in front of him? Do you think that Simon had any intention of being identified with the Lord Christ's ignominy, His blood? Did Simon, at that moment, feel privileged to carry the instrument of death, an instrument used only for the most notorious criminals? Did Simon perhaps want to observe what was happening on the Via Dolorosa, but from a safe distance? Count on it. Simon was from North Africa, what is present day Libya. He had come a long way for Passover. Simon hadn't come all that way to assist a condemned man, a man tormented, mocked and abused for His supposed crimes. To carry Christ's cross was, however, *very much* part of God's plan for Simon.

The vertical beam was already in place at Mt. Calvary. Jesus was carrying the cross-beam. The heft of that piece of wood was considerable. In His weakened condition, having been scourged, with all the loss of blood, Jesus simply couldn't. Put Simon in your mind and run these words over that image: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). Those words were no abstraction for Simon. You should know something about Simon. Mark tells us that he had two sons, Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). Why does St. Mark tell us that? Clement, one of the earliest Christian writers, tells us that the first recipients of Mark's Gospel were the believers in Rome. St. Paul's letter to the Romans concludes with Paul asking them to greet various Christians. "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also, his mother who has been a mother to me as well" (Romans 16:13).

It's not hard to fill in the gaps. After the spectacle at Golgotha, after being conscripted by God to carry Christ's cross, Simon is compelled to learn about this man. He hears what Jesus had done. He listens to stories about the miracles, the teaching that flowed from Christ's lips, the majesty of His person, the humility, the courage, the wisdom, the authority of His Word – Simon hears it all. Simon knows his sin. Simon knows what repellant thoughts flooded his mind as he carried the supposed criminal's burden. Simon knew what he deserved from God by virtue of his greed and his lust and his deceit and his pride and his lukewarm apathy. Any Jew who traveled so far knew the Scriptures, knew the Messiah prophesied, knew the innocent substitute who would vicariously bear the punishment we all deserve. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Simon became a believer and passed on the faith to his son, Rufus, who became a pillar at the church in Rome. How many of you have done exactly the same?

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12). Simon learned what it meant to bear the name of Christ. After bearing Jesus' cross unwillingly, Simon learned to bear the name of Christ the King with joy. He taught his son, Rufus, and faith grew in that family. In Rome, no less, where persecution was abundant. Why? Why do men and women give up their lives rather than renounce the Lord of the cross? Why have there been martyrs who love the Lord more than their own lives, who do not shrink from death when some worldly power threatens? You know why.

There is an absolute power and an absolute beauty and an absolute truth that is centered on the crucified Son of God. He is the source of life and light and hope and goodness. We know that reality itself and our future runs through Him. He died to show us who He is. He gave Himself up to the cross in order to pay the immeasurable price that stood against us all. Love, the most absolute and generous and real commodity that you could ever know, love pinned Him to the tree. You have known this love and it animates your heart and mind. God's Spirit, who lives in you, has revealed this to you. Your life has been enlarged; Christ's sacrifice has enlarged your heart and your mind. You see Him aright; as He hangs on the cross, stricken, smitten, and afflicted; you see your God as He truly is, as Simon came to know Him.

His power is hidden beneath His crucified form; but it is there... vibrant, inexhaustible, unassailable. He is at work; as He dies the Lord Christ is at work. As surely as when He hung

the planets, the Son of God was at His creative work. He who fixed the heavens is fixed upon a tree, crucified for you and me. He yields His breath that you might never die. Life is His concern as He dies; your life. All that He must take to save you, He gladly takes. Forgive them, forgive them, forgive them – over and over He implores His Father for this body of believers and all others just like us. Good Friday is a day of absolute victory. The truth cannot be manipulated. We are shielded by His blood. His truth is anchored in our being and we can't be snatched out of the nail-pierced palm of our Savior. God's plan is not random for any of us. We are His and He leads us, in our own unique way, to bear Christ's glorious cross. To Him be glory forever and ever.