

April 6, 2014 “Recognized For All Time” Matthew 27:32-44

In a carefully organized series spanning eleven weeks, it is a fair question to ask, why the story of the crucifixion today? It's not Holy Week. We haven't even gotten passed Palm Sunday....that's next weeks story. Things are out of order here. My answer is the calendar. Our Good Friday service is a community service. We will read the Biblical story of the cross. Thursday night in Holy Week, the night of the betrayal, the night of Jesus' being arrested has its own unique focus....the Lord's Supper. Easter morning is “resurrection morning”. And there you have it. The cross must not be skipped. It is one of the twin focal points of each of the 4 gospel accounts. God saves us from sin by faith in Jesus through the crucifixion and resurrection of Him. So here we are. The calendar permits us this moment in time.

Having said that it may seem doubly strange that I would almost choose to put the spotlight not on Jesus but on a man in the crowd on the Via de la Rosa. The street name makes the point that when it comes to what is seen and heard and smelled Rome is in charge of what is happening in Jerusalem. History has literally carved that city's reputation in the midst of a reality in which it is a conquered city.

Simon of Cyrene, was a Jew. His roots were in Cyrene in north Africa. We know a couple of things that are not in the

text before us. There was a significant Jewish population in Cyrene. Some researchers tell us it may have exceeded the 100,000 mark. They had their own Cyrenian Jewish synagogue in Jerusalem so that when Cyrenians went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and it was the goal of every Jew to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem at least once in his or her life, they would be able to go to synagogue and worship in their own heart language, and celebrate as they would have done at home. Was Simon simply a tourist? We will never know for sure. Mark's gospel does tell us that on that Friday he was on that street, in those crowds, front row seat as it were with his sons Alexander and Rufus.

Along the street comes the procession, the Romans, Jesus and two thieves, each one carrying a cross in its entirety or at least the heavier of the two beams that are going to be used in their crucifixion. There is no vivid description of why it happened as it did in the Biblical accounts. But we have been told in the gospels the crucial detail. Pilate has as part of the trial ritual ordered Jesus to be flogged. In fact He has been whipped within an inch of His life. Tradition and legend provide the detail that is missing. It was part of the punishment that the victim should carry the cross.

As long as there has been Christian faith and testimony there has been the remembrance that Jesus fell

under the burden He carried. He may have fallen as many as three times. This last time He is unable to lift the cross sufficiently to even get back on His feet. No Roman soldier is going to be reduced to carrying the cross of one found guilty by Pilate or at least sentenced to this terrible means of capital punishment. So the order is given by the officer on the horse. Two soldiers move to the edge of the crowd. They grab a Jew to carry the cross for Jesus. Simon has no choice. His innocence is no excuse for release. They get Jesus on his feet and once again the procession moves. Jesus in the lead. Simon of Cyrene behind Him with the cross now his burden. Then the other criminals each managing their load.

All of that is summed up in the handful words, “As they led Jesus away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.” One of things we need to grasp and it does not come easily to many of us, is that ever since, regardless of the times or the circumstances, Christians have wanted to journey to Jerusalem, and walk in the footsteps of Jesus to that place called Calvary in Greek, Golgotha in Aramaic, and whose name means, “the place of the skull”. It’s image is apparently a dome of rock, with what appear to be eye sockets and a cavity that could easily be the nose.

That Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us the story of the crucifixion and mention Simon of Cyrene is significant. Luke's mentioning that detail means it withstood the test of what we would call careful research. A scholar's care reveals the presence of Simon and Jesus in dire need of assistance. That Mark mentions Simon signifies one of two possibilities or both of them. That Peter knew of Simon's existence and his role in carrying the cross, and that Mark himself may have been in the crowd and seen the events unfold. Jesus collapse, the Romans grabbing the man out of the screaming crowd, Jesus being raised to His feet, and Simon bearing Jesus burden of wood. That Matthew also mentions Simon means the 12 or most of them were also in the crowd. Watching. Fearful. Moving along the roadside and through the crowd to be there when sentence is carried out. One thing is beyond question. If Simon of Cyrene carried the cross, it was because Jesus could simply no longer do so.

We assume that because Simon is remembered that there was more to his story than just being a man in the crowd. Certainly he was that. And certainly he was at the front of the crowd to have wound up seized by the soldiers and forced to carry the cross for Jesus. But surely that would have made him the anonymous man who was taken by the soldiers for this task. Again it is part of the tradition of the church that this moment causes Simon of Cyrene to go somewhere he probably

would not have chosen to go...Calvary. He may have wondered what was going on. He may have wanted to see this rabbi Jesus that everyone is talking about. He may have wondered if Jesus was as speculation proclaims, Messiah. But would he have chosen to take his boys to what is essentially an execution? He finds Himself a witness to the death of Jesus. We assume his name is known in the Christian community because this day, carrying that cross, walking behind Jesus, witnessing Calvary was a life changing experience. He is not the first Jew to become Christian. His name is remembered for all time.

And what is at the core of the reality of that remembrance? Nothing less than the crucifixion of Jesus. Not a willing volunteer. One who was apprehended and made to participate. It is amazing how many of us would describe the pain of rebirth in just such terms. I did not want to become a Christian. I wanted to play chess with another boy, a young teen like myself who was sick and bed ridden. But along the way I was apprehended by circumstances in the hands of God. And willingly, less than willingly at some points, in spite of rebellion at others, I wound up confronted by God in the words of the gospel. The path from that being apprehended by God's agents led me from one stage to another, and finally....here. My God. My God! Many of us have something in common with this Simon of Cyrene.

I mentioned to friends that I was meeting with Sherry to plan the music Maundy Thursday's service during this past week. And someone else overhearing the conversation commented that's always a depressing service. I hope not. But there is no getting around that on that night we remember that the bread was broken for the first time by Jesus. And the cup was His cup that was sent round the table that each one might drink from it. And that it happened just hours before His enemies succeeded in arresting Jesus and taking Him before the authorities. It is the beginning of a night filled with activity and trials and beatings and the passing of a sentence that leads to Jesus being led away to be crucified bearing the physical burden of the cross.

And the reason I object to the fact that those details are depressing is that the significance of Jesus according to the gospels is not that He is a good man. I happen to believe He was the best man ever. But the gospel is not about goodness or righteousness. This story including the episode in which Jesus stumbles and falls unable to physically bear the burden of the wood beams, is first and foremost about God's saving you from your sin, me from mine, whatever those sins may be. And that is the best news ever shared, ever received, ever repeated.

I have two friends, life long Christians who continually let slip that they hope they will be received by God into heaven

when the time comes. One of them in particular, a man comments from time to time that he does not think he is good enough to make the cut. Here is the truth of the gospel. He is not. Neither am I. Neither are you. And here is the good news. It is not about being good enough to make the cut. It is about God loving you so much He has drawn you and me to believe...a lot, a little, a bit...but to believe. By His grace you are saved through faith in Jesus.

One of the guys I hope to meet when I get to heaven is Simon of Cyrene. A child of God, saved by grace, through faith no doubt, because suddenly he became a follower of Jesus, walking behind our Lord,....carrying that singular cross.

Let us pray...

O God never let us forget the price of salvation is not the anguish, nor the pain we suffer, but the suffering that was borne in our place by Jesus. Assure us again that your saving love is a free gift. That Jesus is the way, the one way, and in Him we are given life everlasting. Let us taste the awe that truth inspires. And empower us to rejoice. Amen