

Good Friday 2021: "Jesus, Our Simon of Cyrene"
April 2, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A ninety-something saint is part of the heart of our weekly Intercessory Prayer group. During our on-line time together we don't just read a litany of the names of people for whom we're praying; we share what we're praying about, as best we can. I don't remember the particular need we were remembering a few weeks ago, but in the midst of acknowledging it and asking the Lord to relieve the person's suffering, our wise intercessory friend confidently said, "Jesus will be Simon of Cyrene for her."

I was stopped in my tracks. I thought, "No, no, Simon of Cyrene is the one who carries the cross **for** Jesus." But did you notice in St. John's account of the Passion that we just heard, there is no Simon of Cyrene? Jesus carries His own cross. There's no agony in the garden either. Earlier in St. John's Gospel, Jesus says, "No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord." (John 10:18) He willingly, obediently, energetically goes to Calvary. Jesus trusts that this is **how** God's kingdom will come and God's will be done... He would have climbed Calvary for us even if it had been as tall as Everest or Denali or Mauna Loa. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus doesn't need the help of any Simon of Cyrene. He carries His own cross. But we're not strong enough to carry ours single-handedly. We need Jesus' help.... We need Him to be our Simon of Cyrene.

The Way of the Cross is also known as the Via Dolorosa. Those of you who have visited the Holy Land may have walked the Sorrowful Way and seen how it runs through a busy, commercial district in the Old City of Jerusalem. Here's a tip I found on the Tourist Israel website:

The Via Dolorosa can be a challenging place for prayer and contemplation as it passes through busy streets. Each Station of the Cross is marked with a Roman numeral plaque, but they are small and can be easy to miss. It is a good idea to take a map with you.

2,000 years ago, also in the midst of bustling life, Jesus wended His way to death.

On Good Friday more than any other day of the year, we have a laser-like focus on the gift of Jesus' lifeblood shed on the cross to save us from the death sentence of our sins.

The idea isn't to feel as **bad** as possible. A worthier goal is to feel as **grateful** as possible!

As Jesus said about the sinful woman whom He forgave and who then bathed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair,

47 "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." (Luke 7:47)

The lesson learned is, "The one who is forgiven much loves much." Maybe that's why our awe at the forgiveness offered us isn't always as complete as it could be. Maybe we're thinking nothing we've done is that bad anyway. Maybe we've lost sight that when Paul says, "We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), he's reminding us that nobody is "good enough" for Heaven apart from the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Apart from our Jesus, Hell is the only destination programmed into our spiritual GPS.

As we gaze tonight on the rough-hewn cross or on the crucifix behind it, let's hear Christina Rossetti's poem about her lack of appreciation for our Lord's suffering on the cross. She speaks from the perspective of one in the Good Shepherd's flock:

Am I a stone, and not a sheep,
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath Thy cross,
To number drop by drop Thy blood's slow loss,
And yet not weep?

Not so those women loved

Who with exceeding grief lamented Thee;
 Not so fallen Peter, weeping bitterly;
 Not so the thief was moved;

Not so the Sun and Moon
 Which hid their faces in a starless sky,
 A horror of great darkness at broad noon –
 I, only I.

Yet give not o'er,
 But seek Thy sheep, true Shepherd of the flock;
 Greater than Moses, turn and look once more
 And smite a rock.

Smite, crack open, the rock of my heart, hardened to my Lord's suffering. Let's hold close to our hearts the beautiful verses we've heard tonight from the prophet Isaiah:

*⁴Surely he has borne our infirmities
 and carried our diseases...*

*⁵... he was wounded for our transgressions,
 crushed for our iniquities;
 upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
 and by his bruises we are healed.*

(Isaiah 52:4-5)

In addition to being the One who **hangs** on the cross for us, our Lord Jesus Christ is the One who **carries** our cross for us. The crucified and risen Lord is our very own Simon of Cyrene, if we allow Him to be.

O Lord, smite, crack open, the rock of my heart, hardened to the crosses borne by others, unmoved to soften the suffering, prevent the pain, of my brothers and sisters, near and far, at home and in far-flung corners of the globe. There are many modern Via Dolorosa's, many sadly current Sorrowful Ways. On Tuesday, the Sorrowful Way was close to the Great White Way, when a 65-year-old Filipino woman was attacked near Times Square and at least 3 witnesses did nothing to help her. Onlookers at Calvary callously shouted to our Lord, "Help yourself!" Did the men who watched how this woman was

kicked in the stomach, then kicked in the head, tell **her** to help herself? Did they expect someone else to come to her aid? Government officials jumped on board, urging citizens to intervene when they see assaults. Do we really have to be told to do the right thing?? Do we or don't we take the parable of the Good Samaritan to heart? This is truly why we need a Savior. If we need more examples to be convinced, how 'bout very recent events in Atlanta, GA? Boulder, CO? Orange, CA?

It is good and holy for us to stand before the cross on Good Friday, to lay our sin at the feet of our Savior, to present our heart to Him in sorrow and gratitude. It's a natural progression to then go forth into the world in Jesus' name to help others bear their cross. Our ninety-something friend credits our Lord with doing that for her. She is a cancer survivor a few times over. She has had her own personal Calvary, and Jesus has been her Simon of Cyrene. By witnessing to others about the Lord's presence in the midst of great challenges, she has lightened their loads, helped to bear their burdens (cf. Galatians 6:2). All of us who bear the cross of Christ on our brows, ever since our baptismal day, are called to do the same. Let our Lord Jesus help you carry your cross, then be Simon of Cyrene to someone else and help them carry theirs. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

