

March 9, 2003
Forgiveness Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although we know on the authority of Plutarch that every criminal condemned to crucifixion by a Roman court was obliged to carry his own cross to the place of execution, those soldiers charged with crucifying Jesus evidently believed that His weakened state would not permit Him to do so. Consequently, they obliged a "certain passer-by" (says Mark) to carry Jesus' cross to the place of crucifixion. That man was returning to the city "from a field" (say Mark and Luke), perhaps for his midday repast. His name was Simon of Cyrene (Matthew 27:31-32; Mark 15:20-21; Luke 23:26).

A descendent of certain Jews who had settled on the north coast of Africa (in modern Libya) about 300 B.C., Simon doubtless belonged to that synagogue in Jerusalem particularly frequented by Cyrenian Jews who had moved back to the Holy Land (Acts 6:9). These were among the Jews responsible for the stoning of Stephen.

Bearing the cross of Jesus was not Simon's idea. He was "coerced" (says Matthew, using the same verb as in 5:41). We are surely right, however, in thinking that the event proved to be a moment of providential grace for Simon, because he certainly became a Christian. Indeed, about forty years after the event, the evangelist Mark mentioned him as the father of two Christians well known to the Roman church for whom he was writing: "Then they compelled a certain man, Simon, a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross."

Simon's family was cherished by the apostle Paul, who evidently had known them a generation earlier at Jerusalem. Some of them were living in Rome when Mark and Paul wrote. Very early in 58, about seven years before Mark's gospel, Paul sent Rufus and his mother greetings in Rome: "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine" (Romans 16:13).

With respect to Simon's other son, Alexander, we are less certain. In late 1941, however, archeologists excavating the southwestern side of the Kidron Valley in Jerusalem made a stunning discovery. They uncovered a burial cave owned by a family of Cyrenian Jews, the graves in which were all earlier than the destruction of the Holy City in the summer of 70.

Here the archeologists found an ossuary (bone box) with the Greek inscription, "Alexander the son of Simon." Same Simon and same Alexander? One would like to believe so, but the matter is far from certain.

However that may be, Simon of Cyrene himself lives on in the New Testament, intimately associated with the cross of Jesus. Luke's description of the event is especially instructive: "Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus" (opisthen tou Iesou). Luke is the only evangelist to express the matter in this way.

In order to see the significance this expression held for Luke, it is useful to compare the text with other Lukan passages. For example, Luke 9:23: "If anyone desires to come after Me (opiso mou), let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me." And 14:27: "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me (opiso mou) cannot be My disciple." Luke's latter text (particularly if we contrast it with the parallel in Matthew 10:38) shows that the bearing of the cross after Jesus is the true mark of discipleship. That is to say, Simon of Cyrene, bearing the cross and following after Jesus on the way to Golgotha, becomes the symbolizing embodiment of Christian discipleship.

Holy Scripture gives us no reason to think that Simon of Cyrene had been a believer in Christ before that day when Roman soldiers compelled him to assume the weight of the holy cross. That was the very beginning of his discipleship. He became, however, the model of those who follow Jesus to the place of His crucifixion, outside the walls of Jerusalem ("as they came out," says Matthew 27:32; "led Him out," says Mark 15:20). Carrying Jesus' cross, he shared in Jesus' shame. Simon paid heed to that exhortation of the Epistle to the Hebrews which is addressed equally to us all: "Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach" (13:12-13).

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