

Matthew 26:47 – 27:61
 Good Friday

10.04.20

Three Witnesses

As we accompany Jesus on that long, sad journey from his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane to the place called Golgotha, the Place of a Skull, there are many participants and witnesses to what was taking place: the Jewish Council presiding over his first trial, Simon Peter in denial, Pontius Pilate, the crowds clamouring for his death, the soldiers torturing and mocking him, the passers-by on the way to the place of execution - and in particular one called Simon, from Cyrene. And there are the two bandits crucified with him, and those who mocked him, and the soldiers, and then the women who witnessed his burial. So many people who were there that day. And I want to pick out three participants in particular; three witnesses from whom we can learn something about the significance of these extraordinary events.

The first person I want to focus in on is the man named Simon of Cyrene. What do we know of him? Very little other than that he was compelled, we are told, to carry Jesus' cross - most likely the crossbeam that would be attached to the vertical beam of the cross that would already be in place on Golgotha. The only other information we have of Simon comes elsewhere in the New Testament where we are told that he was the father of two men, Rufus and Alexander, who were evidently well known figures in the early church – and how we might speculate as to how these two sons apparently came to faith in the one whose cross their father carried: what a tale might be unearthed there!

Here, however, is what intrigues me about Simon of Cyrene. Earlier on in the Gospel Jesus has told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' 'Taking up the cross' is therefore a kind of a code for becoming a disciple, choosing to follow Jesus, with all the consequences. Simon of Cyrene, however, does not choose to take up the cross of Christ. He is compelled to do so. The crossbeam is laid upon his shoulders – and only later, maybe, judging from his sons, did he make that choice and follow. When I think, therefore, of Simon I am reminded that choosing to take up the cross was a risky business in the early days. It could lead to a clash with the authorities. It could lead to imprisonment and death, as often happened in the early centuries after Christ when the church was at odds with the Roman Empire. But then, of course, things changed. Eventually the church in effect became the empire. It became the official religion of Roman rule and with that came power - and the way of Christ was laid upon people. They were compelled to embrace the Christian religion. The faith was imbibed with their mother's milk and it became the story that gave shape and meaning to society. It became the sign not of resistance to the empire but of membership of it; the sign not of the crucified Christ but of Simon of Cyrene, who simply did as he was told.

Well, there was much that was harmful about that era of the church. The Christian faith never sits well with power. It can never come to terms with being imposed on people for at the heart of the gospel is love and you cannot be forced to love. And so Christianity as the 'official' religion was blighted with corruption and distortion and inquisition and all the rest. But there was much good too. For the figure of the crucified Christ whose cross Simon carried gave new dignity to the downtrodden and the outcast. After all, if God was present with us in a crucified criminal – a means of execution reserved for rebels and slaves – then a new value and worth were ascribed to the lowest of the low. In the cross the high, eternal One stoops down to the very depths, identifying with the very lowest and exalting them, and if that has influenced the course of what we call Christian civilisation – as indeed it has - then thank God for at least that effect of a faith imposed and compelled.

So that is the first witness – Simon of Cyrene. And then we move on in the story and we find Christ on the cross and we read that those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and insulting him. These people mock Christ with his crazy notions of being some divinely sent king. How absurd! And here we go to the other extreme from a Simon Cyrene world where faith is imposed. Here we find ourselves in a world we are more familiar with today, where faith is

ridiculed, or just ignored, for I imagine that as well as those who mocked there would have been others who just shrugged their shoulders and passed on by – ‘another messianic pretender! Another religious nutter. And there is much of that in our current times. Our western culture is doing its best to shake off its Christian heritage and in many ways it is not realising what it is doing and what it is in danger of losing. And for people of faith it can become harder and harder to swim against the tide.

That brings us, however, to the third witnesses that we focus in on in our passage. As Jesus dies and an earthquake rumbles, and as chaos erupts in the interface between heaven and earth, with tombs being opened and the dead raised we read that, ‘... when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’ Now, that confession by those soldiers is not as straightforward as it sounds. You see, the world that this centurion and his fellow soldiers lived in already had a Son of God: it was Caesar, the Emperor. He took that title. And the entire world of this Roman centurion and his fellow-soldiers revolved around that confession that Caesar was the Son of God. But they now confess that Jesus is God’s Son. In other words, in that cry, ‘Truly this was was the Son of God!’ the entire Roman Empire, with all its pretensions to rule the world, with all its vain imaginings that it was the ultimate power - they were unmasked. By this confession, ‘Truly this was the Son of God! the Empire falls. And ironically, therefore, for a Roman soldier to utter such a thing was treason. It would have brought the penalty of execution crashing down upon him. And now, these soldiers, supposedly supervising the execution of this political subversive – well, they are the subversives now. They’d better watch out – they might be next for execution.

So we have the Good Friday witnesses: Simon of Cyrene, with the cross imposed and with all the ambiguity of that; and we have the crowd: mocking, taunting in derision or maybe just apathetic towards the figure on the cross; and then we have the soldiers, finally acknowledging the truth – and in so doing turning their own world upside down. They are the ones – not Simon of Cyrene – who in their confession are ready to take up the risky, costly cross and to follow.

And where are you? Well, like it or not, we join with two of these witness or groups of witnesses’- we can’t help it. We are products of a civilisation that had the Christian religion imposed upon it, for better or for worse, inhabitants of a world that is still lit by the fading glow of a faith that it no longer adheres to. And we are part of a world that increasingly rejects, mocks, or is just plain indifferent to the figure on the cross. The question is, will we join with the soldiers at the foot of the cross? Their confession, ‘Truly, this was the Son of God’, upends everything we ever thought we knew about the world; it subverts the powers that think they rule this world, and it invites us to take up the cross and to follow where it leads us. This is the challenge of Good Friday. Amen.