

Keeping A Low Profile

Matthew 27:32-44

Wednesday in Holy Week

30th March 2010

I wonder if you have ever noticed how many “bit” players there are in the Gospels? Relatively insignificant people who wander on to the stage as the life and times of Jesus unfold. Play their part. A cameo appearance. Then wander off. And are never mentioned again. One writer has referred to these bit players as the “little people” of the Gospels.¹

There’s the young boy in the Feeding of the Five Thousand.² Zachaeus hiding in the tree.³ The woman at the well.⁴ The tenth leper who returned to thank Jesus.⁵ The widow of the widow’s mite.⁶ The thieves crucified with Jesus.⁷ The centurion at the foot of the cross.⁸ And so many more.

One such bit player was Simon of Cyrene. A man who just happened to be “coming into the city from the country”⁹ when, suddenly, without warning, he found himself caught up in the greatest cosmic redemption drama of all times. What a dreadful turn of events for this man!

In his commentary on Mark’s Gospel, William Barclay says, “This must have been a grim day for Simon from Cyrene in North Africa. No doubt, he had come from that far-off land for the Passover. No doubt, he had scraped and saved for half a lifetime in order to come. No doubt, he was gratifying the ambition of a lifetime to eat a Passover in Jerusalem. And then this happened to him. A tap on the shoulder with the flat of a Roman spear. At that moment Simon must have bitterly resented it. He must have hated the Romans, and hated this criminal whose cross he was being forced to carry.”¹⁰

Yes, what a dreadful day for Simon. Just a casual bystander, a mere spectator, trying – like so many others – to see what was going on while keeping a low profile. Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, he was called out of the anonymity of the crowd and driven mercilessly into the harsh gaze of public view.

Oh, can’t we so keenly share Simon’s pain and embarrassment at this turn of events? Don’t we remember only too well those occasions when we have been called out of the crowd and subjected to unwanted attention? That time when, as a child in class, we tried our hardest to hide behind the person in front because we had not done our homework – yet the teacher singled us out and mocked us as our ignorance became painfully obvious. Or, there was the time when we went to that show to relax and enjoy ourselves and, out of the hundreds of people there, we were somehow called up on stage and had to do that stupid dance. Or, maybe it was at that meeting, when there was a call for volunteers and we kept our heads down, staring at the table, praying that the Lord would

cover us with a cloak of invisibility, and yet the chairperson pointed the finger of service at us and we knew we couldn’t refuse. Oh, yes, how well we know that experience of being called out of the crowd. Like Simon of Cyrene, we despise and detest it.

And yet, for all that Simon was an unwilling participant in the initial stages of his involvement with Jesus, there is strong evidence to suggest that something happened to him there on Golgotha, that his heart was touched by the plight of Jesus and that they were bound together from that point onward by their common suffering. The clue to what happened afterwards lies in that comment, that afterthought almost, in which Mark casually mentions that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus.¹¹ Why would he say this? Except for the fact that, when Mark was writing his Gospel some 30 years after the death of Jesus, these two men, Simon’s sons, Alexander and Rufus, had by then become very well known in the Christian community. Could it have been because Simon, by unwillingly carrying the cross of Jesus, became a follower of the Man from Nazareth and, consequently, brought his sons up in the Christian faith?¹² Could it be the supreme irony that what was initially a coercive act issued ultimately in a voluntary commitment?

Is there in this story, I wonder, a parable of human suffering? A parable of what can often happen today, when people are suddenly called out of the crowd, through no choice of their own, to carry the cross of Jesus. It might be a cross of illness or disease or injustice or inhumanity. A cross that is without warning, placed upon their shoulders as they journey along the pilgrim way. That just might be the case where any of us are concerned. Who knows when we might be singled out and forced into a set of circumstances beyond our choosing? And we feel the unavoidability and inescapability of a burden of sacrifice and self-denial that comes to weigh so heavily upon us.

Or maybe there is a parable of Christian discipleship here. A parable of the way in which many embrace the Christian cause today. Rather than hold up their hands and say, “Here am I, Lord, send me”, they merge inconspicuously into the background of their Christian communities, keeping a low profile, hoping no-one will notice them. But then, suddenly, someone taps them on the shoulder and says, “Come and help with this ... No, don’t even bother to say you can’t do it ... Nor try to plead busyness because everyone’s busy ... And you can forget that false humility ploy... This is something you have to do for none other than Christ needs your help to do it.”

Ironically, once people respond to that call, once they come out from the background, so often they feel it was what they wanted to do all along but just didn't realise it. Somehow they came to discover it was part of the meaning and mission of their life. And, in doing what they initially resisted, they found, to their surprise, a strength beyond their own strength to do it. And, even more, they discovered a fullness, a richness, a satisfaction in life they had never before experienced.

Today, some of us may well be keeping a low profile and guarding our anonymity in the crowd surrounding Jesus. Standing in the shadows, just like Simon of Cyrene did so long ago. But then, there's a tap on the shoulder and a voice comes out of nowhere, saying to us, "Help this man carry his cross."

When we hear that summons... what then?

© George A. Turner
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ "I'm talking about the people who rate scarcely a couple of verses of Scripture, those little people, often unnamed, whose lives we know mostly by their reflection in the light of the life of Jesus." William Willimon, "Carrying the Cross of Jesus", *Pulpit Resource*, April-June 2000, p.12

² John 6:9

³ Luke 19:1-10

⁴ John 4:1ff

⁵ Luke 17:11-19

⁶ Mark 12:41-44

⁷ Matthew 27:38

⁸ Matthew 27:54

⁹ Mark 15:21

¹⁰ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, St. Andrew's Press, Edinburgh, 1955, p.379f

¹¹ Mark 15:21b

¹² Barclay points out that there is a man called Simeon listed among those in Acts 13: who sent Paul and Barnabas out on their historic mission. Simeon is another form of Simon, says Barclay, and he is identified as "Simeon that was called Niger" or as the Good News Bible terms it "Simon the Black". This could therefore be the same man since Simon of Cyrene, coming from North Africa, would have been black. Barclay also notes the mention made of a man called Rufus in Romans 16:13 "Salute Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine." Ibid. p379f