

Week 6: “Simon, who was on his way” (Luke 23:26)

Each of the Synoptic Gospels tells us about the role played by Simon of Cyrene in carrying the cross for Jesus on Good Friday. As the soldiers led Jesus away for crucifixion, they forced or compelled a stranger named Simon, who was coming into Jerusalem, to carry the cross behind Jesus. Mark’s gospel also adds that Simon was “the father of Alexander and Rufus,” suggesting that these two persons were well-known to early readers of Mark. This much is clear in the three gospels. However, New Testament scholars have long wondered if Rufus might not have also been the same person mentioned by Paul at the end of his letter to the church in Rome, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too” (Rom. 16:13). Additionally, Acts reads “Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen...and Saul” (Acts 13:1). Since the name “Simon” is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew name, “Simeon,” it has also been suggested that “Simeon called Niger” may have also been the “Simon” who was compelled to carry the cross of Christ. Of course, we do not know. Simon of Cyrene remains anonymous to us. Nevertheless these brief suggestive thoughts about the biblical witness allow us to contemplate the tremendous mystery of God in choosing Simon to carry the cross for Jesus on the way to Golgotha.

Cyrene was a city (in modern day Libya) with a thriving Jewish community, and it was from this place that Simon was “passing by on his way in from the country,” when “they forced him to carry the cross” (Mk. 15:21). It is thought that Simon was a Jewish black African who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. Perhaps Simon had saved and sacrificed to travel to Jerusalem, or perhaps he was a wealthy man who looked forward to the Passover meal. Either way, he was suddenly forced by soldiers to carry the cross of a complete stranger who had been condemned to death. Imagine his surprise, anger even, at having been forced to do such a task.

Simon’s appearance in the Passion narrative is brief, but we may speculate that perhaps something happened to him on that day that changed his journey and path forever. He was the last person to help Jesus, who had been abandoned by all who might have helped him. Perhaps he spoke to Jesus, or Jesus spoke to him. We do not know. After arriving at Golgotha, Simon disappears from the gospel narrative. Yet the passages from Acts and Romans above should cause us to pause and wonder, “What if Simon, “Simeon called Niger,” father of Alexander and Rufus, had witnessed the crucifixion, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, come to

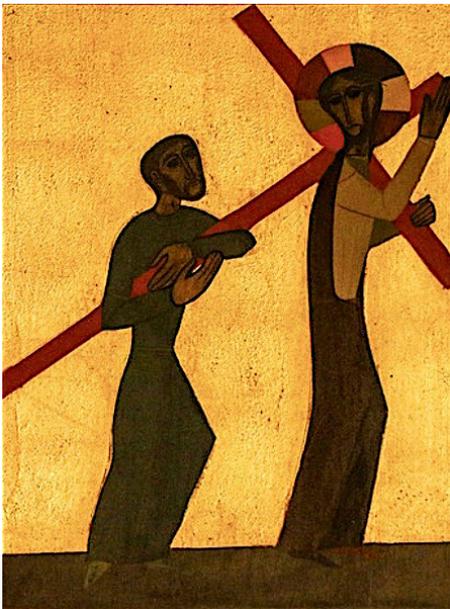


believe? Counted among those from Cyrene mentioned in Acts, what if Simon had become part of that early Christian community in Antioch, where the followers of Jesus were first called “Christians”? We do not know.

The first image we encounter this week is of Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus bear the cross by Fr. Angelbert Vang, S.J. Fr. Vang was a Cameroonian Jesuit and artist who was assassinated in 1999 for his interfaith work among Jews, Muslims and Christians. The image shown here is from the fifth station of the *Stations of the Cross* at Hekima University College in Nairobi, Kenya. Both

Simon and Christ are shown wearing African masks. The eyes of Christ are closed suggesting his hiddenness in suffering, while Simon's eyes are open suggesting perhaps questions about who this man Jesus is, as well as possibly the stirrings of faith or a desire to know more about the cross he was compelled to carry. As Simon shares in the suffering of Christ, the two appear to become one body carrying the cross, suggesting the incarnational nature of sharing in Christ's cross and suffering. A man forced to carry the cross had become one with Christ in his suffering.

The second image is from the fifth station of the *Stations of the Cross* at the Franciscan Monastery in Washington, D.C. In this work, Simon both carries the cross while looking to Christ, who gestures forward. Simon looks to Christ and Christ looks back to Simon as if to encourage him onward. Encountered by the cross we come to know the grace of walking behind Jesus. The artist attribution for this painting remains anonymous to me and there is meaning for me in this because Simon of Cyrene remains anonymous to us all. In this way, Simon represents humanity, which continues to be encountered by Christ and his cross, sharing in, incarnating, and becoming one with Christ in the world.



In carrying the cross, Simon became like Jesus. He shared in suffering the weight of the cross that saved all of humanity from its sin. Simon of Cyrene, a black Jewish man from Africa, offers us something profound to think about. There is no escaping that Simon did not intend to carry the cross; rather, he had been forced into it. Yet that is often the way of Jesus in our lives. He comes to us unbidden asking for our help, as he did to Saul on the Road to Damascus, forever changing him into Paul, and making a disciple and apostle out of an oppressor and persecutor.

One of the themes of this series is Martin Luther's "masks of God" (*larvae Dei*), which he used throughout his lifetime to point to the biblical principle that human beings cannot look upon God in God's naked glory and transcendence. For Luther, God is always revealed through a means, a mask that hides God's majesty. Luther argued that the gospels show us God hidden under the mask of suffering, revealed in the cross of Christ Jesus.

This is an image we know well through Luther's sacramental theology, that the body and blood are hidden under the bread and the wine of the Eucharist. In *Lectures on Genesis* (1535), Luther wrote, "those who want to reach God apart from these coverings (masks) exert themselves to ascend to heaven without a ladder (that is, without the Word)." In other words, human beings can only encounter God as God is revealed through the Word. The cross of Christ is the clearest place where we see the suffering love of God for all people.

Each of us are encountered by Christ and his cross on our journeys. Jesus experienced the poverty of not being able to carry his cross by himself. He was made dependent upon the hands and the strength of another, a stranger who helped him. Jesus knows our inability to carry our burdens alone. We wear the mask of God when, like Simon, we carry the cross, suffering with and for others on their journeys. May we find blessing in being the anonymous stranger helping another to bear their burdens with the grace and love of the cross. Amen.