

# THE MAN WHO CARRIED THE CROSS

## Luke 23v26

Before looking at our text I want to mention one of my heroes. Succat was a 16 year old Briton of noble Roman birth, living on the west coast when his world was turned upside down in the summer of 405 AD. Brutal raiders from over the sea swept in and looted towns and villages in his area, killing many and burning homes. He was then carried off to Ireland where he lived as a slave for six years, looking after sheep and pigs in Country Antrim.

His life in captivity was harsh; any small misdemeanour was met with severe punishment. But during these years he found faith in Christ and he learned to pray. Eventually he managed to escape and return to his homeland. Some of you have worked out who this young man was. Recently I read a novel based on his early life by Stephen Lawhead; it was called '*Patrick*'. After returning home, and still in his twenties, Patrick had a vision. This is what he saw, in his own words:

*"I saw a man coming, as it were, from Ireland. His name was Victoricus, and he carried many letters, and he gave me one of them. I read the heading: 'The Voice of the Irish'. As I began the letter, I imagined in that moment that I heard the voice of those very people who were near the wood of Focult, which is beside the western sea – and they cried out, as with one voice: "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us."*

He understood this to be the call of God to return to Ireland with the gospel. There were many years of training and significant dangers ahead of him, but he became the mighty apostle to Ireland. He confronted powerful Druids, took the gospel to warlords and thousands came to faith and were baptized through his preaching. This past week, centuries later, the Irish have celebrated St. Patrick's Day.

*Sometimes God can use the strangest and most uncomfortable experiences to take hold of us and make something special of our lives. We are going to see this powerfully illustrated again this morning in a man called Simon of Cyrene.*

The action takes place as Jesus is led to be crucified following his Jewish and Roman trials and a terrible pre-execution scourging. The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, has been outmanoeuvred. The Sanhedrin's charge of blasphemy has been dressed up as treason against the emperor, something the Governor could not be seen to ignore. Now, en route to the place of execution, a new character appears. **They seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country.**

This man was, literally, arriving in the big city from the "countryside"; the word in Greek is *agros*, from which we get our term "agriculture". He was from **Cyrene** in North Africa, present day Libya. Cyrene had a large Jewish population and it seems Simon was one of thousands of Diaspora Jews who had travelled to Jerusalem for Passover. Like today, there were more Jews living outside the land than inside. But even Jews who lived at a great distance were required by the Torah to come to

Jerusalem to celebrate the great feasts. It wouldn't be possible every year - apart from the distance it would be very expensive; so this trip was probably a very special one for Simon – something long planned.

But this man's long-planned pilgrimage to Jerusalem was hi-jacked in such a major way that he was never the same again. Like Patrick, something sudden and painful turned his world upside down. So, here's the message from God for us this morning. *Sometimes God uses these experiences to take hold of us and make something special of our lives.*

This man is named. He is **Simon**. (*Shimon*) Only a few people mentioned once in the Gospels are actually named - people like Jairus, Bartimaeus, Zaccheus and Malchus. This usually indicates that they were known to the early church. Almost certainly they had become disciples of Jesus. Their *One to Ones* with Jesus had proved life-changing. So the strong probability is that Simon of Cyrene also became a disciple. That's how we know his name. Some think that "*Simeon called Niger*" who was alongside Saul and Barnabas at Antioch (Acts 13v2) was the same man. If so, then he was black.

We also know the names of his two sons: Mark 15v21 tells us. "*And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.*" It looks like his two sons also became disciples and were known in Rome where Mark's Gospel was first published. The Rufus named by Paul in Romans 16v13 is probably the same man. If so, then Rufus' mother, Simon's wife, had also become a believer and became "*like a mother*" to the apostle Paul. So this incident set in motion a sequence of events affecting Simon, his wife and the next generation - and who knows how many generations after that.

This moment of drama, told in so few words, is full of strange twists and it turned Simon's world inside out.

## **1. From past to present**

Simon had come for the Passover, a religious Feast associated with the past. It celebrated the people's deliverance from slavery in Egypt centuries earlier. Everything about Passover highlighted God's glorious act of redemption. But in the first century AD there was an undercurrent of unrest and anticipation about this Feast because the nation was in bondage again, this time to Rome. Maybe God would bring about another exodus and raise up another Moses?

Suddenly Simon found himself caught up in a brutal Roman public execution. This is not what he had planned. He had been looking forward to a joyful celebration with thousands of pilgrims- trumpets and songs, sacrifices, food and good company.

But Simon had arrived at the crossroads of human history, the death of Jesus. He had travelled to recall an event in the past, but he arrived at the very moment that

Passover, centuries ago, had foreshadowed. Jesus, the Passover lamb, was being sacrificed. God was bringing about a much greater exodus, a greater act of deliverance – but not from Rome. The whole of humanity had sunk into a more deadly slavery to a more deadly empire - the dominion of darkness, where Satan, sin and death were the enforcers.

Simon had arrived at the most important moment in human history. There was no *Tardis*! This was not science fiction or fantasy. This was for real! Simon had been wrenched from the past into the present.

## 2. From spectator to participant

Simon began as a spectator, as a member of the audience. You know how easily this can happen. A large crowd is watching something terrible and yet fascinating. He pushes through to see what it is all about and finds himself at the front of the crowd. A battered, blood soaked man is on the ground with a heavy beam of wood strapped to his back. And at that moment someone takes violent hold of Simon. He is seized by strong arms and thrust into the centre of the action. The hard, war weary eyes of a Roman soldier are fixed on him and a harsh voice instructs him to pick up the beam, and carry it. **They seized Simon... and laid on him the cross to carry it behind Jesus.**

There was no choice in the matter. Anyone could be ordered to do anything at any time by a Roman soldier. One moment Simon had been an anonymous spectator now he was centre stage. He was compelled to carry the cross beam. And this could be very heavy; it weighed something like 30 / 40 pounds. Jesus was weak after his severe scourging and unable to carry it.

As Simon carried the cross he must have felt like *he* was on his way to execution. Many of the spectators must have thought the same. Perhaps they threw their insults and aimed their spittle *at him*. He was in a better place than anyone to understand some words of Jesus: *“If anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross, daily, and follow me.”*

So Simon, who had been one of hundreds of onlookers, suddenly found himself a character in the drama. He wasn't just watching history he was part of it. From now on he would be known as the man who carried the cross for Jesus. He would become an iconic figure. Pictures would be painted, plays enacted, Bible story books illustrated and movies filmed – all depicting what he did.

But even more important than this, it changed him. Something happened in Simon, because he carried the cross. It turned his life around. He would never be an onlooker again. From now on he would always be a participant, always following after Jesus. What about you? What do you want to be, a spectator or a participant?

### 3. From bitterness to wonder

Simon must have begun his task full of resentment and terror; he did *not* want to be doing this. That journey, carrying the cross, must have seemed like an eternity. When would it end? This was a terrible task: the noise, the blood, the weight, the effort, the pain, the fear. It seemed his life had suddenly taken a terrible turn. But later he would see that this had been *the defining moment* of his life. He had been made to do something he didn't want to do but it became the most memorable thing *he would ever do!*

Later he would see that *he* had been alongside Jesus in his sufferings; *he* had relieved Jesus of some of his burden when brutal soldiers were kicking and hostile mobs were baying for blood, and Jesus' disciples were hiding. Simon had been there with Jesus, carrying his cross. He had done something which every generation after would regard with awe. It had been his great privilege to carry Christ's cross. He started by thinking "*Why me?*" as the soldiers grabbed him. He ended by saying the same to God: "*Why me?*" *What have I done to deserve this honour?"*

### 4. From ignorance to understanding

Who was this man he was helping, anyway? Simon began in ignorance of who Jesus was. He knew it was the worst criminals and enemies of the state who were crucified, so this man must be a low life or a fool. You don't mess with the Roman machine. It was probably only after Simon had been pushed aside and he could hear the sound of nails being driven into the victim that he had any chance to ask the crowd: "*Who is this man? What had he done?*"

Much later he would understand just who Jesus was. And much later too he would realize the significance of Jesus' death, and that great prophets like Isaiah had spoken of it. **Isaiah 53v4-12.**

Simon had carried the cross for Jesus but *he had not had to die on it*. But this was one cross *he* could not die on. No one else but Jesus could die that death because he was carrying our sin as he died; he was taking our place, taking the wrath we deserved. No one could share that with Him or do that for him. The Servant, the Lamb of God, had to do that, alone.

*There was no other good enough  
To pay the price of sin;  
He only could unlock the gate  
Of heaven, and let us in.*

**John Wilthew. 2010**