

We're in the 4th week of 5 weeks contemplating various aspects of the Passion accounts in the Gospels. This week I want to talk about some of the smaller players in the Passion. They're not leaders. They're not disciples. They only appear briefly in the Passion. But we hear about them over and over every year.

Some of them have names. Some are nameless. And the first group I want to mention briefly is the nameless crowd.

One of the questions I sometimes hear is, "Why do the people of Jerusalem turn on Jesus? Why did they shout 'Hosanna' on Palm Sunday, and 'Crucify him' 5 days later on Good Friday?"

One of the standard answers is that they must have been disillusioned. Jesus made a good start—he rode into town, he cast out the money changers in the Temple which we heard about in our Gospel lesson last week. If people were waiting for Jesus to start a revolution, to lead a revolt against the Romans, they might have been excited initially. But then, the explanation goes, they got disillusioned when nothing more happened. And they were fed up enough by Good Friday that they called for Jesus' death.

That scenario is possible. But there's a major flaw. It presumes that all or most of the people who were witnesses to Jesus' triumphal entry on Palm Sunday were also the same group who was present in the courtyard of Pilate's headquarters on Good Friday. But that's actually a pretty big leap.

Jerusalem was a city of about 100,000 people. And it's estimated that at Passover time, another 100,000 or 200,000 visitors would also descend on Jerusalem. So there may have been 200,000 or 300,000 people around Jerusalem during that Passover in 33 AD.

But how many of them were present when Jesus rode into Jerusalem? 5,000? 10,000? 20,000? Even if we take 20,000 as the number, that's only 10% of 200,000. That would mean that 90% of the people were not part of the crowd shouting, "Hosanna." And the same math works on Good Friday. Only 5,000 or 10,000 people would have been able to cram into the courtyard of Pilate's Praetorium.

So the mathematical likelihood is that we had two groups who were either mostly different or completely different on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. We shouldn't assume in either case that it was ALL of the people of Jerusalem crying out either "Hosanna" or "Crucify him."

And we certainly shouldn't scapegoat every Jewish person in Jerusalem based on the actions of a small fraction of them on Good Friday. And that applies even more so to all the other Jews who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire that day. And it applies many, many times over to their descendants throughout history. To blame the Jewish people as a whole, either then, or today, for Jesus' death is a serious mistake. In fact, I would say it's sinful. And Christians have done much harm in history by labeling the Jewish people as "Christ Killers." That is an evil Christians need to repent of.

As I've said before, Jesus died for all of our sins, not just for the sins of the few. Thus we shouldn't scapegoat any group involved in the Passion. And in 2 weeks when we read the Passion from Mark on Palm Sunday, all of us will be the ones shouting, "Crucify him." All of us are responsible, not just the nameless crowd in Jerusalem.

But there are some other minor participants in the Passion that I want to touch on today. The first is Barabbas. Barabbas is interesting because of his name and his description.

Barabbas is described as a *lestes*. That's a word with a range of meanings. It can mean an ordinary robber or bandit. Or it can mean a revolutionary or insurrectionist or terrorist. In fact, 3 of the 4 Gospels come right out and say that Barabbas is guilty of insurrection and murder. That's his description.

And his name is also fascinating. Matthew gives us a first and last name: Jesus Barabbas. Jesus was a very common name. It's the Greek equivalent of the Jewish name Joshua. And Barabbas could mean one of two things. Bar means son of. Abba means father. Rabba, Rabbi means teacher. So Barabbas's name means either the son of the father, or the son of the teacher. Thus it's very ironic.

Pontius Pilate offers to the crowd to release one prisoner as is his custom at the Passover.

And it's a choice between two men.

Jesus Barabbas, the son of the father or the son of the teacher.
Or Jesus of Nazareth, the true son of THE Father, the great teacher of Israel.

The crowd calls for Barabbas.
Pilate releases Barabbas.
And so, Jesus goes to die in Barabbas's place.

The fear is that Jesus will lead an insurrection. But in order to get him, they release a man who actually was involved in real insurrection, along with murder. Though Jesus is not trying to foment political rebellion, he dies on behalf of someone who actually is.

But in a real way, we are all Barabbas. Jesus is the one perfect human who was never guilty of any sin. And yet he dies on our behalf. He dies for the sins of the world. He dies in our place, so that we might share in his life.

Barabbas literally got away with murder. But we get also escape the penalty for our sins. Jesus upon himself takes the sin of the world, which includes our sins. He takes sin to the cross, on our behalf, so that we might find forgiveness and new life.

And so Barabbas is set free. And Jesus makes his way to the cross.

And during the procession to the place of execution, during the procession to Golgotha, we meet another character, briefly. He is Simon of Cyrene.

By this point, Jesus has been brutally flogged. He has probably gone without sleep and without food. And he is being forced to carry a his cross to the execution grounds. And apparently, on that journey, whether it's loss of blood or sheer exhaustion, Jesus is apparently having difficulty bearing the weight of the cross. And so the Roman soldiers do what Roman soldiers are wont to do—they conscript someone in the crowd to carry the crossbeam for Jesus.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us his name: Simon of Cyrene. Cyrene is a sea-coast town in Libya, near the modern Libyan city of Benghazi. It's about a 600 mile walk from Cyrene to Jerusalem. Yet, apparently, Simon has made that trek. That means that he's probably Jewish. He has a Jewish name, and he has apparently come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

So imagine his reaction. Simon is walking into town. He's probably been walking 3 or 4 weeks to get to Jerusalem for this high holy day. If he went by sea it would have possibly been a little quicker, but it still would have been a long journey. And now he's arrived in Jerusalem.

And the first thing he encounters an execution procession. And the Roman soldiers in charge of the procession conscript Simon and compel him to carry the cross.

If I were Simon, I'd probably be pretty miffed. If I had journeyed several weeks to celebrate an important holiday, the LAST thing I'd be happy about is being drafted into carrying a crossbeam for a condemned prisoner.

But something amazing happens. Apparently, Simon has some sort of religious experience as he's carrying the cross for Jesus. It's quite possible Simon of Cyrene became a Christian. It's almost certain that Simon's two sons did. How can I make that claim? Because of a little detail Mark throws in.

Mark is the Gospel most likely written in and for the church in Rome. And Mark adds this detail:

"They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus."¹

Why would Mark mention Simon's sons' names? Probably because Mark's audience would have known who Alexander and Rufus were. It's likely that Alexander and Rufus were part of the Christian church in Rome. In fact, 20 years before Mark, St. Paul writes in Romans, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also."²

¹ Mark 15:21

² Romans 16:13

So it's almost certain that Simon's sons were Christians. And if the Rufus in Romans is the same Rufus mentioned in Mark, then their mother was a Christian also. Thus it quite possible that Simon of Cyrene became a Christian after carrying Jesus' cross.

Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus saying in our Gospel lesson,
"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."³

Simon of Cyrene does take up Jesus' cross, literally. And we are invited by our Lord to do the same thing. To take up our cross and follow. I've said before that taking up your cross is not about stoically accepting something you're stuck with. Instead, it's about sacrificing our own comfort, our own self-centeredness in order to help someone else. I believe that's what happened to Simon. He was in Jerusalem for the religious festival. And I believe, instead, that he had a powerful religious experience helping Jesus, carrying Jesus' cross. And later Simon's sons, and perhaps his wife, would follow in his footsteps. And we are called to do the same.

There's one other minor character I want to mention. That is one of the criminals crucified with Jesus. The criminals on either side of Jesus are mentioned in all 4 Gospels, but Luke tells us something unique about one of them.

Throughout Luke's Gospel, Luke makes it a point to show us that Jesus is the great healer who seeks out the marginalized and the lost. And when Jesus is on the cross he ministers to one more lost soul.

Luke narrates it this way:

"One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'"⁴

This unknown criminal is usually referred to as the "Good Thief." His arms are nailed to his cross, but he reaches out spiritually to Jesus. He is powerless to do anything more for himself. But he turns in faith to Jesus. And he recognizes him as a true king: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And though Jesus' arms are also nailed to his cross, he reaches out in a loving embrace to the Good Thief. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The cross is not an end. It is the gateway to life. It is God's kingdom made present, made knowable, made accessible through the cross, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

³ Mark 8:34

⁴ Luke 23:39-43

They may be minor characters in the Passion accounts. But they have spiritually powerful stories.

Jesus dies in Barabbas's place.
Jesus dies for us as well.

Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus' cross.
Jesus calls us to pick up our own crosses and follow.

The Good Thief reaches out to Jesus in faith.
We are called to do the same

Jesus, remember us...
Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.