



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

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In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

It wasn't easy for Simon of Cyrene to get to Jerusalem. He had traveled from what is now Libya in North Africa, either by ship across the Mediterranean Sea or by a long journey overland through Egypt. Simon made a concerted effort to be there because he wanted to be among the thousands of pilgrims in the city to celebrate the Passover. When he got there, he was part of the crowd in the streets as Roman soldiers led Jesus and two others, carrying their own crosses, toward their execution. Jesus had been beaten and tortured nearly to death. He kept falling to his knees as he tried to hold up the massive wooden crossbeam.

The soldiers spotted this pilgrim from North Africa. They said something like, 'You! Take that beam off his shoulders and carry it for him.' Simon probably knew the law that a Roman soldier could compel you at any time to carry his pack or another burden for a Roman mile, being 1,000 paces. And suddenly, Simon went from being a spectator to a participant in Jesus' story of crucifixion.

It's easy to be a spectator. It's not always easy to be a participant. Episcopal worship is designed such that we are all participants, not merely spectators. Those outside the tradition often talk about our Episcopal calisthenics. Each motion that we make is very intentional. We stand to sing and praise, we sit to be instructed, we kneel to confess and pray. Everything is designed to bring our full bodies into worship. We all have a part in reenacting and reimagining God's story. Each time we do so, we become more and more a part of the story. And the story becomes part of us.

While we are eager to share in Christ's resurrection, none of us wants to be a participant in his crucifixion. But they go hand in hand. To be a participant in the new life and new hope given by Jesus at Easter, we must first join him as he suffers and cries out on Good Friday. As Jesus told his disciples, we must take up his cross and follow him.

For Simon, that was not a metaphor. He is the only human who knew what it was like to literally take up Jesus' cross. Imagine carrying this long, heavy wooden beam, weighing anywhere from 60 to 80 pounds. with all eyes of the Roman soldiers and the crowds staring at you. Simon felt the weight of the beam and its splinters wedged into his shoulders.

Unlike the way we often picture this scene, we believe that Jesus, then Simon, would have carried only the long horizontal beam of the cross. The vertical post or stake would already be in place on the hill. The horizontal beam, or crossbeam, is the one in which Jesus's arms will be nailed. The crossbeam inspired Bishop Charles Henry Brent to write a beautiful prayer that is one of our collects for mission in Morning Prayer:

‘Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So, clothe us in your Spirit, that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who don’t know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name.’

While the vertical post can be seen as a symbol of the mystery of how Jesus connects God and humanity, Diana Butler-Bass sees it as the stake of empire, the sinful choice of a broken world toward violence and death. The horizontal beam is in sharp contrast. It represents Jesus’ all-encompassing embrace of people everywhere. Diana puts it this way: ‘When we open our arms, our hearts are exposed. Outstretched arms are liberation, the loving victory of God.’ That is the beam that Simon carried. It is the beam that invites all of us into this embrace and to share it with all around us. Even a pilgrim from Libya who was just passing by. Even you and me.

Returning to Simon, imagine seeing Jesus with blood trickling down his forehead, still falling to his knees, doing his best to keep up with you as you carry his cross. Simon could both feel and see the pain of Jesus. Notice in the Passion Gospel of Matthew, Jesus doesn’t say much. Matthew paints a stark portrayal of Jesus as the silent, suffering servant. Without a lot of words and often in agony, he keeps putting one foot in front of another as he pours out his heart for all humanity. *We could* see his path to the cross as our ticket to eternal bliss in heaven. It is so much more than that. Good Friday is a day of revolution. It is a revolution in which Jesus dies at the hands of oppression, then rises to new life to bring heaven to earth, not only in an after-life, but in the here and now. And Jesus invites us to join him as full, active participants in his saving work of bringing peace, justice, and hope.

Simon doesn’t say any words. He also puts one foot in front of another and helps Jesus bear his burden. Simon teaches us what it means for us to take up Jesus’ cross and follow him. We suffer alongside him. We join him in suffering on behalf of others.

We don’t know much about Simon’s life after he carried Jesus’s cross. In the Gospel of Mark, he is referred to as the father of Alexander and Rufus, who were apparently known to the early church community to which Mark was writing. Simon appears to have become a follower of Jesus, who inspired his sons to follow in his footsteps. This encounter stayed with Simon and shaped him. Bob Kaylor writes: ‘When we feel the weight of his cross, when we touch his broken body and taste his poured-out blood, we experience a transformation that compels us to bear the burdens of others as he bore our own.’

What does Simon inspire us to do? We can look around for what burdens we can bear, big and little ways to alleviate the suffering around us, and joining Jesus in bringing heaven to earth. The more we follow Simon’s example to take up Jesus’ cross and follow him, the more our walk with Jesus becomes not only a way of life, but a way of love. It is the way we go from being spectators to being participants, from being passersby to being cross-bearers. *Amen.*