

Three Men and a Cross

In the name of him who on the cross suffered the righteous wrath of God in our place, dear friends in Christ: In our evening devotions this Lententide, we've been taking a look at some of the main characters in the story of our Lord's passion. We considered first two friends and disciples: Judas who betrayed Jesus, and Peter who denied him. And then in the last several weeks we examined the three men before whom Jesus stood trial: Caiaphas the high priest who wanted Jesus condemned, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate who wanted to set Jesus free – and failed, and last week Herod Antipas, a worldly and frivolous would-be king who was never interested in what Jesus had to say; he only wanted to see him perform miracles.

Tonight we're going to take a look at two men who are connected not so much directly to Jesus, but rather to his cross. They are the notorious criminal Barabbas, who was very likely the originally intended victim of the cross upon which Jesus suffered and died; and Simon of Cyrene, the man who carried this cross to Golgotha. And in these two we see something different. In the others we've examined thus far, we've seen sins of which we are guilty. Like Judas, we've all betrayed Jesus. With Peter we've all denied him. With Caiaphas we've allowed pragmatism to trump our moral code, doing wrong while telling ourselves it's for a good cause. With Pilate we've set out to do what's right, and then allowed self-serving interests to lead us astray. And like Herod we have on occasion permitted our love of sin to silence the clear word of God's Law in our hearts and minds. Up until now our goal has been to see that there is the sin of these men in each of us, so that seeing it, we may repent. But with the two we're looking at this evening, it's not so much that we should see them in us but rather we are to see ourselves in them.

We begin with Barabbas, and the first thing that strikes us is his unusual name. It consists of two parts: Bar, which is the common Aramaic prefix that means "son of", and Abbas, which means "father". So it's "son of father". Since it's highly unlikely that anyone would name their son "father" (that would be confusing, wouldn't it?) it's far more likely that his father's name was unknown to the mother. This in turn suggests that she was a woman of doubtful virtue; probably a prostitute. And she must not have loved her son very much that she would give him a name that basically announced to the world that he was a bastard child. There is anger and resentment in that name directed against the unknown father – perhaps to all men in general – but sadly borne by the unfortunate son. And all this helps to paint a portrait of a rough boy, growing up on the streets, learning to be violent and tough, without a father's hand to guide or a mother's love and care in which to find comfort. The name Barabbas says it all: unwanted, unloved, undisciplined, cast adrift, left to fend for himself.

We're told that he was in Roman custody and condemned to die for participating in some kind of rebellion or riot in the city – an incident in which one or more people died, because he had also been accused and convicted of murder. We can surmise that he was tried and condemned late the day before, and that he was scheduled for execution Friday morning along with the other two men who were crucified with Jesus. The Romans didn't allow a lot of time for appeal processes. So he spent Thursday night fully expecting that it would be his last on this earth. I don't imagine that he slept well knowing that the only thing he had to look forward to was to being crucified in the morning.

We can infer a little more about his character and reputation from the fact that Pilate puts his name forward as one of two he will consider for pardon and release. It was a concession the governor made once every year at Passover, that one condemned prisoner chosen by the crowd would be set free. And I've mentioned before that among the Jews there was a faction called the Zealots. They were anti-Roman "freedom fighters", analogous to the PLO and Hamas in Palestine or the IRA in Ireland. In general, the Jews approved of the goals of the Zealots. No one except traitors and collaborators like tax collectors liked the Roman occupation. But as much as people sympathized with the Zealots' goals, it was harder to approve of their methods. They were, in a word, terrorists. And Roman backlashes against their raids and tactics often resulted in the killing of innocents and the destruction of property. Still, in general, the Jewish population would have seen the Zealots as heroic defenders of the Holy Land. If one of them had been caught and condemned by the Romans, the crowd would likely have rallied behind him and called for his release.

The point is that Barabbas is not one of these Zealots. If he had been, Pilate would never have put him forward as an alternative to Jesus. Quite the contrary, Pilate knows that Barabbas is a man uniformly hated and feared by the citizens of Jerusalem. That's why he thinks it's a safe bet to offer him against Jesus. He is certain that given the choice, the crowd will have to call for Jesus' release – which is what Pilate wants. What Pilate had not counted on was the crowd's loyalty to the high priest. He thought he could divide the religious leaders from the people by using their fear and loathing of Barabbas. But he was wrong.

And thus, in God's wisdom and mysterious economy, Barabbas, son of father, a rebel, a murderer, a man universally despised and unloved even by his own parents is pardoned and set free, while the innocent, only-begotten, and dearly loved Son of the Father is condemned to die in his place. The thing to see is that Barabbas stands for all of us. By nature we are children of the devil, unloved, rebels against God, full of murderous hatred for our fellow man, worthy only of death; and yet God in his mercy sends us his Son who is our Great High Priest. He transfers the guilt of our sin to himself in order that we may be pardoned and set free, while he endures the punishment and death that should have been ours. Barabbas is every sinner who ever lived. He's you and he's me. We have no idea what became of him, whether he eventually came to faith in the man who took his cross, or if he simply shrugged it off lightly thinking "today I got lucky" and continued his life of crime. But mentally placing ourselves in his sandals, may we always appreciate what the Lord Jesus did for us knowing that the cross that should have been ours was taken by him.

It was common practice for the condemned to carry their crosses to the site of crucifixion – part of the pageantry meant to impress upon conquered peoples the fear of opposing Roman domination. But Jesus had been too badly beaten to do it on his own. Every prisoner to be crucified was flagellated: whipped with a multi-tailed scourge designed to rip the skin off the back from the nape of the neck to the top of the ankles; but Jesus had received a prior beating – one that Pilate hoped would mollify the crowd. This would have been done with a heavy whip or with wooden rods designed not so much to tear the flesh but to deeply bruise the muscle tissues. We also know that Jesus was beaten separately by the Temple guards and the Roman soldiers in the Praetorian in addition to these two formal whippings. The result of all this brutality was that Jesus was physically incapable of carrying the heavy wooden transom all the way to Golgotha.

So, at some point in the journey along the Via Dolorosa (the way of sorrow) the soldiers in the execution detail compelled a stranger named Simon to carry the cross for Jesus. This, incidentally, was a power every Roman soldier stationed in the provinces had: the authority to

order any non-Roman citizen to carry a load up to one mile. Simon just happened to be the one picked for the job.

He was coming in from the country. It means he was coming into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover – apparently just arriving at the city gate as the crucifixion detail was heading out. So see things from his point of view: he's been traveling for days from Cyrene, a city on the North African coast near what is today Benghazi in Libya. It was a Greek city that had a fairly good sized Jewish community. Simon is one of them. And he's been eagerly anticipating arriving at Jerusalem for the feast. This morning he rose early. After traveling a few miles he sees the holy city in the distance. He stops to give thanks to God for bringing him safely here, and then presses on closing up the final distance. And just as he reaches the gate, he's met with this grotesque sight: a procession of death, and Jesus, beaten and bloody, collapsed under the weight of his cross. He averts his eyes from the horror and tries to step around and slip by so that he can get into the city. He's here to celebrate God's great deliverance of his people from bondage. He has arrangements to make. He's got things to do. And one of the Roman soldiers points a finger at him and says, "Hey, you. Pick that up."

There is no point in protesting. To refuse this right of a Roman soldier is a crime that carries a stiff penalty. So, reluctantly, he sets down his own baggage, reaches down, and hefts the wooden beam up to his shoulder. Immediately he notices blood on his hands – looks and sees it's on his clothes as well. And there's a wondrous irony in this. He's here to celebrate the deliverance of God's people by the blood of the paschal lambs – and now he has on himself the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

In Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, Simon comes across as a rather heroic figure, at one point demanding that the soldiers stop abusing Jesus so viciously and then practically carrying Jesus and the cross to Golgotha. Near the end he tells Jesus "Almost there", as if this is good news. It is if all you have to do is carry a cross; but not if you're the one who's going to be nailed to it. And this is where we should see ourselves in Simon. As we follow behind Christ, there are times that the Lord in his wisdom gives us a cross to bear. They come without our choosing. They are painful and difficult to carry. But they are never meant for our punishment. They are meant for our good – that we might learn patience and humility and faith in times of trial. And of this we can be certain: they are only temporary. All we have to do is carry them for a time. The Lord who assigns us our crosses has also designated the time and place for us to set them down. The price of our sin is always laid on Jesus and on him alone.

We have a better idea of what became of Simon of Cyrene. We're told that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus – names that would not appear in the text unless they were fairly well known to first generation Christians. Tradition records that they missionaries. If so, it's likely they were evangelized themselves by Simon who came to Jerusalem to celebrate God's salvation – and found God's greater salvation in Jesus whose cross he carried.

May we who have also been blessed to find this great salvation carry our crosses in humble faith and patient hope – following our Lord in life, through death, and unto life eternal. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!