

Matthew 27:32 3/11/09 (Triumphant Entry #5) SIMON OF CYRENE

Rev. Joel F. Hoyer, Grace Lutheran Church, Coopersville, MI

Folks, I continue to be amazed at this painting and the thoughts it provokes in me as we walk through this Lenten season together.

**Slide:** Triumphant Entry



Of course in each service I'm isolating one particular figure to focus on and to research, and we'll get to that tonight, but at the same time I find it interesting to just sit and take in the whole painting and think about how this procession, this Triumphant Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, was received by the various people who might have been there to observe it. When we just read the account we tend to get lost in the "Hosannas" and lose the big picture. Of course the BIG picture is that this procession would give way to another procession five days later. And I think it's logical to assume that many of the same figures would also be observing that procession. But what a different view that would be!

Tonight we're going to talk about one of those characters, the one who was chosen to get the closest view of all of that second procession. His name was Simon, which was a typical Jewish name of the time. In fact there two Simons among the twelve disciples. He was a Jewish man, but the Bible says he was from Cyrene,

**Slide:** Map with Cyrene

which today is modern day Tripoli in Libya, kind of in the center of the Mediterranean Sea. There was a significant group of Jews settled in that area and it was not unusual for them to journey back to Jerusalem from time to time, particularly during high festival days like the Passover celebration that was coming that weekend, (the celebration of their deliverance from bondage in Egypt) or Pentecost to follow ( the celebration of the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai). For instance, on that very next Pentecost,

**Slide:** Pentecost picture

when the Holy Spirit came down on the disciples like tongues of fire and allowed them to speak about the resurrected Jesus in different languages, one of the groups mentioned were residents of

**Slide:** "...how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2:8-11 NIV)

"Parts of Libya near Cyrene". I think we have every reason to expect that the Simon mentioned in the text was one of those residents, and I also think we have every reason to assume that he might have been in Jerusalem for the Triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The journey from Cyrene to Jerusalem was some 700 miles by sea and closer to 900 on land. You wouldn't just slip over for a weekend. You'd stay and take it in...

**Slide:** Triumphant Entry

In this picture, we're going to place him right here to our left of Jesus.

**Slide:** Highlight Simon, then bring up his pic

The picture shows him in full enjoyment of this event. I suppose it could have been at the strange sight of this "Son of David," this Kingly figure, coming into town so humbly, no golden chariot, just a lowly donkey... Or in might have been in full support of this welcome, thinking

that finally the long-awaited Messiah had come to His people. I think of the man Simeon, who met Jesus in Jerusalem when Jesus was a baby and Mary and Joseph were taking Him to the temple to “present Him to the Lord.”

**Slide:** Presentation in the Temple pic

Simeon took Jesus in His arms and praised God saying:

**Slide:** “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32 NIV)

The Bible describes Simeon as “righteous and devout” and that “he was waiting for the consolation of Israel... and the Lord’s Christ,” the promised Savior. And He was given eyes to see Him when He came, even though He came as a baby in the arms of a peasant family.

So perhaps our Simon of this text had eyes like that and His smile was relief and joy like that...

**Slide:** Simon pic

as someone seeing the Savior at last. His smile certainly looks similar to that of the disciples parading after Jesus in the painting. If so, he may have seen Jesus for Who He was and recognized Him as the Christ, as the King of the Jews, but still not understood how Christ was going to bring His mission in the world to fulfillment. In any case, Simon was about to get a very rude awakening and an up-close and personal view of what Jesus came to do.

We don’t have a lot of information on Simon, just this simple line from Matthew and similar statements from Mark and Luke. Let’s take a look.

**Slide:**

“As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.” (Matt 27:32 NIV)

“A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.” (Mark 15:21 NIV)

“As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.” (Luke 23:26 NIV)

So from Matthew we know that there was a man named Simon. He was from Cyrene and he was forced to carry Jesus’ cross.

From Mark we find out the very interesting detail (and we’ll come back to this) that Simon was the Father of Alexander and Rufus and that he must have found lodging in a country home outside of the city. It was 9 a.m. and Simon was just coming in to the city – perhaps to worship at the temple. The method, if not the focus, of his worship was about to be drastically changed.

From Luke we learn that the Roman soldiers didn’t give him a chance to say “yea” or “nay”. They simply picked him out of the crowd, “seized him” and “put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.” The Roman soldiers were like that. In fact, it was a basic law of the Roman empire that a Roman soldier could force people to carry something for him for one Roman mile, or a thousand paces. That’s where we get the phrase, “Go the extra mile.” Jesus referenced that hated rule and said “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” (Matt 5:41 NIV)

So there it is. A little extra detail, but in essence, just that simple statement: “They forced him to carry the cross.” We know from John’s Gospel, that Jesus started out carrying the cross Himself, but after his agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, after his betrayal and forsaking by His disciples, after an all-night trial, after being beaten and abused and scourged with the 39 lashes, it was obvious even to the hardened Roman soldiers, that He wasn’t going to be able to make it all the way to the site of the crucifixion. It wasn’t mercy that led them to grab Simon. It was just practical. They didn’t want to have to waste time, and they certainly weren’t going to carry the cross themselves.

As for Simon, he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time – Or was he? Folks, can you imagine what it must have been like to go from the full and absolute joy of the celebration of the triumphant entry

**Slide:** Simon

to the absolute fear, confusion and doubt of carrying the actual cross of Christ? You would never forget it. No one, and certainly no Jew, would have embraced that task willingly. The cross was a hated instrument of Roman torture. That cross had probably been used before and had the blood of the dead seeped into it. It certainly was stained with Jesus’ blood. It was “unclean” and would have made him “unclean” and unable to go into the temple for worship. But of course, he had no choice. At the time it must have been the worst moment of his life. But **in time**, when he came to know the rest of the story, I would imagine it became the most worshipful moment of his life – when he found out there was a different kind of “clean” that Jesus had come to bring. The Apostle Paul puts it this way:

**Slide:** “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” (Gal 3:13 NIV)

We know why Jesus went to the cursed cross. We know why he didn’t use his supernatural power as God to let him carry it lightly as a feather. We know why He chose to experience all of His suffering fully as a human being, as one of us - because He was fully assuming the responsibility and punishment for all of our sins. That’s the wonderful Gospel message and the Amazing grace of God that keeps us coming here to His house – to hear that His blood cleanses us from every sin, to see how much we matter to Him.

Folks, I firmly believe that Simon came to see it all. Maybe not in the moment, but in the days and weeks to come, as Jesus rose and showed Himself alive to hundreds of people over 40 days, after He ascended victoriously into heaven and after Peter’s sermon at Pentecost when all the people were “cut to the heart” and said to Peter and the other disciples, “What shall we do?” The Bible says:

**Slide:** “Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” (Acts 2:38-41 NIV)

I expect that Simon was one of those three thousand – along with his family. Mark mentions to his audience that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus. That means that were well known to the Christian community. Paul later writes to the Romans to “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.” (Rom 16:13 NIV) Obviously

Rufus had become a leader of the Christian Church in Rome. And obviously before that, Simon had told his family and told his children again and again of his experience – of his great privilege to for a time, bear the cross of Christ. The Bible says, “Fathers teach your children.” And he did. So should we.

Folks, remember when Jesus told all of us as his disciples, as his followers?:

**Slide:** “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matt 16:24 NIV)

I wonder what the disciples thought at the time He said that – long before he would be crucified. What did it mean? And then what did they think later? We don’t have time tonight to go on to talk about all that it means to suffer for Christ and bear a cross for Him, I’ve promised to keep these evenings brief.

But I hope as you look at Simon and hear and think and pray about his story, you will consider the fact that we don’t know the moments we may be chosen to bear the cross - when the challenge may come our way to stand up for Jesus and for the Gospel. Let us pray that when that moment comes, we’ll be ready.

Lord Jesus, we can’t imagine what it must have been like to come into Jerusalem with cheers and “Hosannas” and go out with jeers and shouts of “Crucify him!”. Perhaps we flatter ourselves that we would have been glad to help carry Your cross, but if that’s true then we should be willing to carry it now. And there have been so many times when we’ve blown it, when we’ve sold You out so that we wouldn’t be mildly inconvenienced. Lord, forgive us and empower us with the Holy Spirit to stop pretending and start living as Your true disciples who are ready and willing to disciple others. Amen.