

Walking the Via Dolorosa – Session 2 – Stations 4,5,6

Stations 4,5 & 6 were regarded as very important by the earliest pilgrims along the Via Dolorosa. A Spanish Franciscan, Antonio of Aranda, writing in 1530, said that between the place of Pilate's judgement and the place of the Crucifixion at the Holy Sepulchre, there were only three stations: (1) Jesus' encounter with Mary, who collapses; (2) Simon of Cyrene takes the cross from Jesus, who addresses the women of Jerusalem; and (3) Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.

The Fourth Station of the Cross – Jesus Meets his Mother.

No such meeting en-route to the cross is described in the Bible. The Bible instead relates – in all four Gospels – that Mary was present at the cross, supported in her heartbreak and sorrow by the Beloved Disciple many regard to be John; “Dear woman,” Jesus somehow manages to say; “behold your son.”

A heart-rendingly ambiguous statement; is Jesus saying, “Mother, look to John, he will care for you now, as I am no longer able.”? Or is he saying “Mother, look what they have done to me, your son.”?

I think the Fourth Station is there to capture precisely that ambiguity; to allow this meeting between Jesus and his mother, before the tragic scene of the cross, when he commends her to the care of John.

It is, in fact, difficult to imagine that he didn't meet her on the way, that as the sad procession turned into the busy marketplace and out of Pilate's precinct, it is difficult to imagine that Mary wasn't there, pushing her way through the crowd, straining to reach her son as the guards whip him back to his feet.

If you were the mother of Jesus, where would you be? Waiting at the execution grounds? Or at the nearest place to where you could see him, and reach out to him, and comfort him?

On the fourth station we find a balustrade carving, of Mary seeking to comfort Jesus. It is a rough kind of carving, with little artistic merit, but it does capture Mary, aged and wordless with grief, reaching with a mother's hand to touch the face of her battered son.

Enter through a low doorway and you are in a lovely courtyard, somewhat incongruous to the grim nature of the Fourth Station; there is a café, a small restaurant, advertising the best pizza in town. This jarring contrast is at it should be; then as now, Jerusalem is a busy, bustling city.

The journey to the cross was not amidst a respectful, pious silence; it was through busy streets of hurried people, simply getting on with their lives. Jesus happens in the midst of that, as he does with ours; it is we who have to stop, and notice him in the bustle and business of our days.

Before you is the entrance to the Armenian Church of Our Lady of the Spasm; an unfortunate translation from the Latin, better rendered, Our Lady Wracked with Grief. The interior of this beautiful church is a good place to catch your breath, and prayerfully contemplate the Station.

But if you spot a small, dark doorway in the side of the chapel, you can go downstairs to another chapel, far older. As you descend the stairs, you step back in time. You are now standing on what was street level in the 400s AD, when a church was built, and a mosaic tile floor was laid, with two strange footprints – the outline of where Mary stood on that long-ago day.

Guides 1500 years ago may have told you that's just where Mary stood. That's the very spot. But I see it as an opportunity for contemplation. To contemplate what these stations might tell us about Jesus - Jesus, beaten, who stumbles under the cross. Jesus, condemned, who sees the face of his mother.

Jesus is no superhero, no aloof, unfeeling demigod upon whom the beating, the lashings, the clubs have no effect. Jesus is, we proclaim, fully human and fully divine, and in his complete humanity, is bruised, broken, dizzy from pain and loss of blood, unable even with the encouragements of the soldier's whip to put one foot in front of the other.

Jesus somehow has to keep going, and it is for us he does. It is for us – for you, for me – it is for us he stumbles, for us, he falls, for us, he gets to his feet, and keeps on going, one foot in front of the other, over the cobblestones, through the impatient crowd, up, and up, and up to Golgotha.

And as he gets back up, he confronts all the suffering and heartbreak and agony and injustice and confusion and sorrow and grief of the world, for here is Mary, his mother, her face twisted in tears, and in her face he sees us all, all our suffering, all our heartbreak, all our agony and injustice and confusion and sorrow, all our grief.

And while the sight must break his bleeding heart, while to see the one who held him as a baby in her arms, taught him to walk, to talk, to pray; while the sight of her must have filled him with a pain beyond even the lash, maybe, too, it is her tears that kept him going.

For he knows that the only answer to Mary's sorrow is what he is about to do, and three days later, what he is to be; he knows that his suffering is the only real answer to our own. For in his suffering was the salvation, was the healing of the world; was the salvation, was the healing, of you and me. Of our heartbreak. Of our grief.

The Fifth Station of the Cross – Simon of Cyrene Carries the Cross

Matthew 27:32 - As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.

Luke 23:26 - As the soldiers 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.

Mark 15:21 - 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.

Not 60 metres away from Station Four, even the soldiers will give up trying to get Jesus to go a foot farther, and will compel a passerby, Simon, to carry the grisly burden of the cross. And for Jesus, those 60 metres must have seemed a mile. Body and heart broken, he is about to turn another corner, and in front of him is a steep uphill climb. And he cannot go another step.

“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.” That is what Mark writes down, thirty years later, in Rome, as Peter remembers the story, and tells it again.

Matthew and Luke, when they tell the story, also remember his name, “Simon of Cyrene”, Cyrene in northern Libya, Simon a Jewish name for certain. And, adds Mark alone, “the father of Alexander and Rufus.” Why this detail? Why these names? There is only one reason why these names have been so carefully guarded, preserved, attached to the story, retold.

They must have been known, these two, thirty years later in the church to which Mark writes his letter, his Gospel. They, the sons of the man who carried the cross of Christ, the sons of the passer-by, Alexander and Rufus, were part of that very church. Alexander and Rufus had to have been Christians.

There is another tantalising reference, from Acts 13, which is detailing Paul’s early missionary journeys – say, the mid-40s AD, a dozen or so years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus:

Acts 13:1- Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

Antioch was “home base” for the mission work of Paul and Barnabas. A member of that church, listed among the “prophets and teachers,” was one Simeon – Simon – called Niger (“Black” or “Dark”), and Lucius of Cyrene (Cyrene is in North Libya – hence the “niger” reference). What is important to recognise is that in ancient Greek, there are no commas – so the verse could (and probably should) read, “Simeon (called Niger) and Lucius, of Cyrene.” Simon and Lucius of Cyrene.

Why would Matthew, Mark and Luke all identify Simon a) by name, and b) as being from Cyrene? And that he was “from the country,” “on his way in from the country,” “just passing by?” These references only make sense if Simon becomes known to the Christian community after the fact – becomes one of the key Christians in the central Christian community of Antioch.

Why “after the fact?” because of the “passerby” context – Simon was not one of the supporters of Jesus in the crowd – he was “*passing by on his way in from the country.*” His conversion came after the fact.

Yet there is even more. Paul, finishing his letter to the church in Rome with a list of greetings to the people he loves, writes this (Romans 16:13): “*Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother - a mother to me also.*” Could this Rufus whom Paul greets in his letter to the church at Rome be the Rufus of whom Mark writes in Rome?

And what of this woman: “*his mother - a mother to me also.*” Could she be the wife of the passer-by, the wife of Simon of Cyrene, the man who goes home from Jerusalem shaken but somehow changed, with an incredible story to tell his wife, his children?

Think about Simon, reunited with his family, with his patient wife, with his young sons, that they asked him what had happened, why his clothes were bloodied, why his hands shook and his eyes were filled with tears. I can hear him say, for the sake of his wife and his children, for the sake of sparing them the fear which had

gripped his heart, “It was nothing. It was the Romans. I was in the wrong place, the wrong time, you know how they are.”

And I imagine how when three days had passed, when the one some had called the Messiah, that this Jesus, who was crucified, was rumored to not be dead at all, but risen.

And it wasn't long before Simon began to seek out the others who believed this story too (wouldn't you – having carried the very cross?), others who had known, had travelled with, had shared the life of this one named Jesus. And they told them their story. And he told them his.

And together they praised the God who had brought life to the one who had been crucified, died, and now risen. And together they praised the God who had brought new life to one certain Simon, Simon the Cyrene, Simon, father of Alexander and Rufus, who had simply been passing by.

Thanks be to God for the passer-by; for Simon of Cyrene, who took upon himself the burden of the cross, and who found new life; for Jesus Christ, who took upon himself our death, and is risen that we might never die.

The Sixth Station of the Cross – Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus

Leaving Station Five, we proceed up the steep stone stairs, to Station Six, marked by a tiny ancient pillar - the Station of Veronica, and it tells a story that you won't find in the Bible. Unlike Station Four, where Jesus meets his mother, or Station 5, where Simon carries the cross, there is no direct Biblical connection to the station.

But again, put yourself in the story. It is the Day of Preparation for Passover, the city is jammed with pilgrims. A frightened man, moments before a simple passer-by, is stumbling awkwardly under the weight of a cross, and behind him is another man, a bloody, beaten wreck of a man, robe red with his blood, a crown of thorns cruel upon his brow.

From out of the crowds pressed against the walls of the street, a young woman suddenly darts into the middle of it all, quickly kneels in front of the beaten man and, removing the white linen scarf from her head, wipes his bloody face.

The soldiers push her away, and the moment is over, the grim procession forcing their way forward, the momentary act of kindness - of reckless, courageous compassion - the last the beaten man would know that day - is at an end.

The young woman is about to rub the grit from her hands with the same linen headscarf she used on the beaten man's face, when she looks more closely at it, and her eyes grow wide. For, in an unlikely piece of tradition, in a remarkable miracle you won't find in Scripture, that cloth which wiped the face of Jesus is said to have somehow borne his image; that on that cloth, in blood and sweat and tears, was imprinted the very face of Christ.

It is said to have had miraculous powers of healing, that cloth; that to touch it, somehow, was akin to touching Christ. "Healing cloths" are not unknown to Scripture – there's this curious verse in the Book of Acts: "*God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured*" - Acts 19:11-12. Additionally, there's the woman with the "issue of blood" (Mark 5:25-34):

And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

If you look at the ancient pillar which marks the spot, you'll find a name, carved in neat Latin script - Veronica. It isn't a Hebrew name, and is almost certainly not the young woman's actual name. It isn't, or wasn't, a proper name at all. It is instead a compound Latin / Greek word - Vera Icon. Vera means "true." Icon means "image." Veronica means "The True Image."

At first, it was the name tradition ascribed to the cloth. Before long, the name was given to the otherwise anonymous young woman - Veronica, upon whose cloth was miraculously captured the true image of Christ. It is not the cloth which bears the image of Christ. It is, instead, the young woman. For in choosing to act in a moment of compassion, in choosing to help when others hurt, in reaching out in a simple act of kindness, Veronica herself became the true image of Christ.

Like Veronica, when we are kind - and remember, kindness is an attitude of compassion revealed by what we actually do - when we are kind, when we "do kindness," we resemble Christ. We become the true image of Jesus.

With Mary we grieve what Jesus endured; with Simon we share what Jesus endured; with Veronica, we reach out in compassion to others, and help them in their suffering.