

# AFRICENTRIC: Lessons from Simon of Cyrene

**By Dr. Maurice C. Taylor**

Although little is written about him in the Bible, Simon of Cyrene has been on my mind quite a bit this Lenten season. In fact, the first three books of the New Testament provide only a very sketchy profile of a man from Cyrene, Simon by name, who was coming in from the country (Lk 23:26) and who was the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mk 15:21) whom Roman soldiers compelled to carry Jesus' cross (Mt 27:32). Few other details about Simon exist beyond the fact that his home, Cyrene, was a Greek settlement in the province of Cyrenaica, which was in the eastern part of present-day Libya.

It is easy to discount the story of Simon of Cyrene as contributing much to an understanding of the significance of the passion of Christ or of having any relevance in our daily lives. Indeed, every Lenten season, more sermons are preached about the cock crowing upon Peter's third denial of knowing Jesus (Mt 26:74) and the two thieves crucified with Christ (Lk 39-43) than about Simon carrying Christ's cross. Yet, for me, in many ways it is Simon's story that most closely parallels the meaning of Christ's journey to Golgotha bearing that cross on our behalf.

First, Christ has no need to carry the cross for himself; after all, he has done nothing to warrant such a burden. Rather Christ is compelled to bear this cross for you and me. It is also clear that Jesus is not particularly enthused about carrying our cross since at Gethsemane, he reveals that he "is exceedingly sorrowful" and prays to his father "to let this cup pass from me" (Mt 26:38-39). So it is with Simon; he is merely a bystander who has done nothing to warrant being compelled to bear someone else's cross. We are told nothing about Simon's feelings in this matter. We can safely imagine, however, that Simon was "exceedingly sorrowful" about having to assume this unexpected burden.

Second, Christ sets aside his feelings and says to his father “not what I will, but what you will” (Mk: 14:36). Likewise, regardless of his feelings, we are told by Matthew, Mark and Luke that Simon does, in fact, help Jesus carry his cross. This fact is memorialized in the fifth Station of the Cross, “Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the Cross.”

Third, for me, the significance of this story is not so much about how sad it is that Christ is crucified after carrying his cross to Golgotha. Nor, does it matter much that Simon happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rather, the significance of the story of Simon of Cyrene is that the most important crosses that we will bear in our lives belong to someone else. Thus, how well we bear our personal crosses, whether of our own making or an accident of birth, is much less of a story than how well we carry the crosses of family, friends and perhaps most importantly, the crosses of strangers.

Like Simon, we rarely have an opportunity to select the crosses that we are compelled to carry. Frequently we are merely happy bystanders to the lives of family, friends and strangers when it becomes clear that their cross is now ours to carry. We often feel exceedingly sorrowful for ourselves at the injustice and unfairness of having to bear crosses that are not our own. And yet, like Simon of Cyrene, it is typically the case that the most important thing that we will do in our lives is carry someone else’s cross, if only for a little while, until they are able to pick up their cross and resume their journey.

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