

AT CROSS PURPOSES

Good Friday Meditation

April 10, 2020

There is a famous story told by biblical scholar N.T. Wright about Cardinal Jean Marie Lustiger, who was the Archbishop of Paris from 1980-2005. It is about three somewhat rambunctious boys who wanted to play a trick on the local priest by going into the confessional and confessing all kinds of wild and outrageous sins they claimed to have committed. The first two boys did it, and quickly ran away laughing. After the third boy, who happened to be Jewish, had his fun, the priest said he was going to give him a penance to do. The priest then indicated a large statue of the crucified Jesus at the east end of the church, and then said, *"I want you to go up to that statue, I want you to look that figure in the face and say this three times: 'You did all that for me, and I don't give a damn.'"*

And so the boy trotted off; to him this was still part of the fun, and when he got to the statue he said it once, and then he said it again ... and then he found he couldn't say it the third time. He just broke down ... and he left the church changed. The archbishop concludes by saying, *"The reason I know that story is that I was that young man."* He went on to become a Christian against the wishes of his Jewish family, he later went on to become a bishop against the wishes of many in France who saw him as a social outsider, and to his dying day he lived by that love that grasped him that first moment he really beheld the cross. The cross of Jesus, despite its horror, perhaps even because of its horror, speaks powerfully across the centuries and across cultural barriers even to this day, about the profound love of a good and gracious God.

We remember the story of how the disciple Simon had been the very first to acknowledge and confess that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. As recorded in Matthew 16, Jesus had affirmed him for that, telling him, *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."* Jesus honored Simon for this confession by giving him this new name, almost as an affectionate nickname. *"You are Peter, the original Rocky."* The very next thing Matthew records for us is that Jesus began to explain how He must go to Jerusalem suffer and even be killed, and Simon (now Peter) took hold of Jesus and said, *"Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!"* To Simon Peter, this talk of suffering and death was literally *at cross purposes* with what he envisioned a Messiah would do! He did not yet understand *the cross's purpose*.

We read that Jesus then turned and said, *"Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things and the ways of men."* Now, I don't think he was actually calling Peter the devil. I think He was saying, *"Get back in line; Peter, because you are out of line! Don't get ahead of Me, don't run away from Me, don't walk counter to Me ... that's the sort of thing Satan would do. Get behind Me, and follow!"*

Jesus goes on to say, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* In Luke 14:27, Jesus reiterates, *"And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be my disciple."* And toward the end of his Gospel, Luke tells us Jesus carried a cross down the road to the place where He would hang upon it. Many people lined the road as Jesus was led away, including women who wailed in grief for him. Then we have these words in Luke 23:26, telling us of another Simon - *"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."*

This Simon was just a relatively anonymous man in the crowd, who had just come to town from the country. Cyrene was a city in northern Africa where a large Jewish community lived, and Simon had most likely come to celebrate the Passover along with many other Jewish faithful from all over making this annual pilgrimage. He more or less just stumbled into this scene. Suddenly, some soldiers grab hold of Simon, they drag him out of the crowd, they lay that cross upon his shoulders, and force him to carry it behind Jesus ... which is eerily reminiscent of Jesus earlier words: *"Whoever does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple."*

Not to wax overly allegorical, but a day may come for any one of us where we will stand right where Simon stood. You'll be just another face in the crowd, minding your own business.

Like Simon, you certainly won't have volunteered to carry a heavy burden. But suddenly, something happens. Something that you didn't plan seizes you, something that will change everything about your life. An accident, a random act of terror, a job loss, a loss of a loved one, a grim diagnosis ... a national quarantine ... whatever it may be, one day it is just laid on you. Whatever it is, you can't believe this has happened. A heavy burden has been laid across your unwilling shoulders, and now you are traveling down a road you never expected to walk.

When our lives are seized by that which we were not looking for, we face the great choice of how we will respond. We can respond by saying, "*Why me? I was just minding my own business. Why should this happen to me?*" A whole lot of people spend the rest of their lives asking that question, but it really doesn't get them very far. But others ... others choose to look up when a burden is placed on their shoulders. They choose to look up and see the cross they are bearing as a type of the cross spoken of by Jesus Christ. They choose to look up from underneath this burden thrust upon them in order to see a whole new vision of Jesus, Who is just up ahead.

Now, I don't mean to trivialize the cross of Christ by placing it on a par with the burdens we are given. On one hand, many of us do bear difficult burdens; however, on the other hand, to compare our difficulties, large as they may be, to the trauma and trial of Jesus' cross can be a little grandiose, to say the least. First, I doubt any of us here today will ever bear the martyr's burden of the cross of Christ, and second, He is literally bearing the weight of the world, the weight of the world's sin. But all of us will bear some burden; if you are not doing so already, I guarantee one day you will. Whether the burdens come through suffering from our inevitable lot in a fallen world or through suffering for our faith, such burdens can serve to transform us into better people, rather than bitter people; people who discover a wholly new, real, and vital vision of Jesus leading just ahead of us.

We may have to carry the burden of heartache and grief for a while; we may even have to bear it all the way to our dying day. But your calling, my calling, our calling is just to keep following Jesus ... until He takes the cross back. While we are beneath this burden, the most amazing things can and do happen. Ask anyone who has been through one of the great crises of life who, along the way, discovered a new vision of Jesus ahead of them, leading the way. They will tell you bearing that cross transformed them. It made them into people they had never been before; it made them into better people, better disciples. They've learned Jesus works **at cross purposes** ... transforming oppressive crosses into wonderful means of God's saving grace and refining, redeeming blessing.

We are not told what happened to Simon of Cyrene after Jesus took the cross back and died upon it. It is interesting, though, that the Gospel of Mark (Mark 15:21) introduces Simon by naming his sons, Rufus and Alexander, as if the church that would be reading this Gospel would know them, as if they would recognize their names. Perhaps Rufus and Alexander were members, even leaders, in the early church.

And maybe they had come to the church because their father spent time beneath that cross ... and after spending time beneath the cross of Jesus, Simon was never the same again.