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Luke 23:1-31
Lenten Devotion
23 March 2022
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide

Every Friday afternoon in Jerusalem, and especially on Good Friday, pilgrims and visitors walk the way of the cross, the *Via Dolorosa*, stopping at 14 stations to meditate on Jesus' suffering for us and to pray. Stations 1, 5 and 8 from the traditional liturgy are represented in our reading this evening: Jesus before Pilate; Jesus and Simon of Cyrene; Jesus and the women of Jerusalem.

First the trial, which takes up most of our reading this evening. One of my teachers wrote this about Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea: 'The mantle of greatness had been handed to this prefect of mighty Rome, but he would have been better off never to have tried it on for size. Attempting to go down quietly in history as a clever administrator, Pilate ended up embalmed in the Apostles Creed' (Danker 369). **Suffered under Pontius Pilate**, we say in the Creed, and that is history's memorial to him. Injustice happens every day, also in what are called courts of justice, but Pilate presided over history's most lamentable travesty of justice. Pilate sentenced God's Son to a criminal's death. Pilate, Herod, the Jewish leaders and the brutal soldiers meant evil against Jesus, but God used it for good: for the salvation of the world.

Who are we to judge dithering Pilate, also ruthless Pilate with blood on his hands that no amount of washing could remove? Or who are we to judge flippant Herod? It was not only Pilate and Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus, nor Jewish chief priests and a howling Jerusalem mob, rather, it was the sins of us all – the sin of the world – that drove Jesus to the cross.

We would love to know more about this hapless bystander, Simon of Cyrene, **who was coming from the country, and upon whom they laid the cross.** Cyrene was in North Africa, so sometimes in art and cinema you will see Simon depicted as a black person – for example, Simon was played by Sidney Poitier in the Jesus movie, *The greatest Story Ever Told*. However, Cyrene was built by ancient Greek colonists and was Romanised from 73bc onwards. There was a significant Jewish population there with a synagogue, so perhaps Simon was from the Jewish dispersion. Not very likely, but perhaps Simon was

both black and Jewish, like the Ethiopian Jews you can see in Jerusalem today. We simply don't know. What we do know is that this experience of carrying the cross of Jesus must have changed Simon's life so that afterwards he became a follower of Jesus, a Christian. We can say this because Mark identifies him as the father of two Christian brothers, Alexander and Rufus (Mk 15:21). Luke takes special notice of those on the edge and those on the outside who take part in the story of salvation. As Jesus makes his way to the cross, it is not one of his own people, but a stranger from far away who lends a hand and carries the cross for Jesus.

Simon is remembered in the tradition, and especially in the Stations of the Cross, or the Way of the Cross, as one who can be a model for us in our discipleship. Jesus bore the cross for us and our salvation, and in response we take up the cross and follow him. Jesus said more than once that **if any want to be his disciple, let them deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow him**. We are called to endure shame and suffering for the name of Jesus. And just as Simon carried the weight of the cross for Jesus, so we, who follow in Jesus' footsteps, are called to bear the burdens of others who are weighed down.

Simon helped Jesus carry the cross, but Jesus the Christ alone is the one who died on it for our redemption. There is only one Redeemer, but that doesn't mean our suffering means nothing. On the contrary, in Christ our suffering and bearing of the cross can and ought to have a redemptive character that draws attention not to one's self, but to him who **'... died for all, that those who live might not live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised [to life]'** (2 Cor 5:15).

(A prayer from the Stations of the Cross:) **Grant us, O Lord, the privilege of sharing in your suffering by giving us the strength to raise up those overburdened by the cares of this life.**

Turning now to the 'daughters of Jerusalem', also commemorated in the Stations of the Cross. I have often noticed that when someone is near death it is usually women who tend them. I don't know why this is. And we find it to be the case when Jesus is close to death. It is women who mourn for him on his way to death, it is women who will watch and wait at the foot of the cross, and it will be women who hasten early to the tomb to anoint his body. Jesus

acknowledges their tears. These are the only recorded words he spoke on that journey to the place of crucifixion. Jesus does not complain or look for consolation for himself. Rather, he offers the women consolation and advice in a word that is also a prophecy. The advice is not easy. He advises not to weep for him but to weep for themselves and their children because of the great tribulation that will eventually engulf Jerusalem. Jesus' picture about green wood has various interpretations. Perhaps he is referring to himself: If they do this to God's Messiah when the wood is green, that is, in the time of relative prosperity, what will it be like when the wood is dry, that is, when the time of judgment comes? Whatever the precise meaning, the message is one of impending judgment and fearful retribution. The prophecy was fulfilled 40 year later, when the Roman military came and devastated Jerusalem and its temple, utterly destroying everything and murdering thousands of people. It was like what the Russian military is doing to Mariupol in Ukraine right now. Unspeakable evil.

Jesus' stern warning to the women is a call to us for repentance. We live in prosperous times, when wood is green, to use that image. But the wood is fast drying out and our world is becoming ripe for judgment. The signs are all around for those who have eyes to see. What is happening in Ukraine could happen anywhere. Before the end, there will be **wars and rumours of wars**, famines and diseases, apocalyptic **signs in the heavens and upon the earth**. When you see these things happening, said Jesus, do not cower in fear and despair, but **lift up your heads because your redemption is drawing nigh**.

Jesus' suffering for us is finished, so we are not to weep for Jesus. We are to weep for our own sins and the sins of the world. The comfort for us is that Jesus died for our sins on the wood of the cross, on the altar of calvary. Freed from sin, we can shoulder the burdens of others, like Simon the Cyrenean, and we can weep with those in distress, like the daughters of Jerusalem did for Jesus.

(A prayer from the Stations of the Cross:) **Lord, may we respond to your love by reaching out to those who need our love. Amen**