

Palm Sunday: Suffering - Simon the Zealot

Crossroads. We all face them. Some days, life seems good by our estimation; things appear to have fallen into place for us, at least from our perspective. Life almost looks as good as it could get. And then it comes. A crossroad. A choice point. A decision moment. Suddenly, we stand, frozen to the spot. Which way is the right way? Right? Left? Straight? Turn around? What will occur based on the choices I make at this moment? Which way makes sense? Which way does my heart call me to go? Most importantly, which is God's way?

Crossroads never have easy answers. If they were easy, we wouldn't think of them as a crossroad, as a decision-making moment, but merely as a curve on life's path that we can handle without effort. Crossroads are life's tough moments and they can and often do bring us spiritual pain to say the least. Those challenging crossroads can bring us to our knees, reduce us to a pile of rubble and they can even bring us to destruction.

Today we have an expert on the crossroad that Jesus faced as he moved toward the cross. We have a Simon, a disciple of Jesus who was with him throughout his years of ministry and at the last, as he went toward the cross. This Simon is not Simon Peter. This is Simon, sometimes called the Zealot.

(Simon enters. He is dressed well or in biblical costume.)

P: Welcome, Simon. In our day, we struggle a bit to understand why you are Simon and Simon Peter is also Simon. Since we're accustomed to using last names, it gets a bit confusing for us. However, knowing who you are, I'm sure what you have to share with us will be helpful, but, just to ease our curiosity, tell us, why do they call you Zealot?

R: Zealot? You would probably say rebel or revolutionary or troublemaker, at least as the Romans viewed me. I had joined a group seeking to get rid of the Romans because the Romans were oppressive and had an obvious dislike for Christians. Some of my group were marked men wanted by Roman authorities for acts of what you might call terrorism. The rest of us, well, the rest of us were quieter about our desire to see Rome out of our country and out of our lives.

P: And how were you going about your rebellion?

R: At first, I wasn't sure how to act, how to accomplish my goal, but then I came upon Jesus of Nazareth. Here was one with power and authority, one who could act. I saw him feed thousands. I saw him still a storm. I saw him escape the religious leaders who were obviously attached to the Roman government. He kept talking about the coming of the Kingdom of God. I wanted to be in on that kingdom. I thought he could do it, that He could do what I hadn't yet accomplished.

P: But what about Jesus' words about his path toward suffering and death?

R: I was so sure he was going to overthrow the Romans and establish the new rule of King David that I didn't even hear those things. I thought he was talking in images, in some kind of picture language. I didn't think He was serious.

P: How could you have missed what he was saying?

R: Well, first of all, I wasn't alone in my thinking. In fact, most of his disciples were hoping for a new ruler and thought Jesus could be that ruler. Consider what we were observing. Jesus was immensely popular. People flocked to him. Thousands sought him out. His name was on every lip when he raised Lazarus. Even Greeks, foreigners were attracted to him. Then he did exactly what we thought he should do, he paraded into Jerusalem on a donkey, just like the Scriptures said the new king would do. He came into Jerusalem with the shouts of people proclaiming him the Messiah, the new king. It was perfect. He was perfect, just the kind of king we had been waiting for.

P: Is that what people thought as they welcomed him?

R: Certainly. They shouted a kingly greeting, they threw their cloaks in front of him. They called out: Hosanna! God saves! At that moment, he could have been everything we wanted him to be. He could have called the people to rebellion, he could have moved the masses against the Romans, against the corrupt religious rulers. He could have done it all, but ...

P: But he didn't, did He?

R: No, He didn't. I understand now, but I didn't understand then. I couldn't understand how a leader with his authority, with his place as the chosen one of God, with his connection with the Father, could fail to act against the evil around us. How could he do nothing but drive some money-changers out of the temple? By all appearances, He had it all, but it's like He had it all, but did nothing.

P: Nothing?

R: We did nothing except share the Passover meal and go to the Garden to pray. No speech to the crowd; no exciting the masses with all sorts of attractive promises; no commands to act. And worst of all, when we went to the Garden, he was arrested. Our future king, the one who had it all was arrested.

P: And moved to trial before the High Priest.

R: I was totally confused at the moment. I saw Jesus, with the chance to be ruler, the chance to change the world and suddenly, he choose to allow himself to be arrested, choose to allow himself to be taken to a mock trial, choose to allow himself to be humiliated before the council and before the Roman governor, choose to go meekly to the cross. How could he make the choice to suffer and die? How could he not rise up as the king he surely was in my mind? I could not understand the events or his plan.

P: Do you understand now? Do you understand his crossroad choice now, that decision-making point that Jesus encountered as He made a choice that was for your benefit and at His expense?

R: Jesus once said, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." After his resurrection I understood, but not before. When he invited us into his kingdom, he wasn't inviting us to a place of rulership on earth. He was inviting us into a spiritual kingdom, a kingdom marked by believers who would follow him, even to the cross.

P: You faced your own crossroad then. You faced your own choice whether to continue to follow the risen Christ or seek another leader who might give you the success in rebellion that you sought.

R: Yes, I faced that crossroad. So did all the other disciples. We could have gone our own way, sought our own successes, found what we thought we needed. But we chose to stay with him. By the power of the Spirit we stayed, even though we knew

that it might cost us our lives. Jesus warned us that we would be persecuted, hated and even put to death, but we joined him in his choice, we chose to follow.

P: But unlike you, we have not walked with Jesus, seen his miracles, or heard his voice. How can we make that kind of choice?

R: But you have seen him in the hands of those who have loved and helped you. You have seen his miracles in the hearts of those changed by his power. You have heard his voice in the voice of those who have brought you the Word. You have been touched by the same Spirit and can make the same choice.

P: It isn't easy to choose to follow when it leads to unrest, danger, ridicule, and suffering. Like you, we'd prefer the other route, the one that appeared to be in place on Palm Sunday.

R: But Jesus calls you to follow at all costs, to lose your life for his sake, to take the narrow road, his path. And he promises to walk with you, to give you his strength and to receive you into his eternal kingdom. St. Paul once wrote: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us ... And we know that, for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." With that kind of power going for us, how can we fail?

P: Indeed, how can we fail?

R: I must admit that I'm not impressed with where I once was. Then, I was blind, but now I see, and now you, too, can see the real Jesus, the Jesus of love and compassion, the Jesus who died out of love for you, and, as you already know, the Jesus who rose for you, who promises you eternity with him in heaven.

P: I'd have to say that it doesn't get any better than that here or in eternity.

R: I couldn't agree with you more!