

# The Crucifixion of Jesus

## Diversity

---

*Based on an address St Chad's and St Mark's Wolverhampton – 5 April 2025, Seeking the Kingdom on Foot*

Mark 15: 18-21

These verses are of course part of Mark's narrative of the Passion; at the same time, they look ahead to the experience of Pentecost. The event of the crucifixion is international and multi-linguistic: it is carried out by Roman soldiers; alongside Jesus criminals from Judaea are executed; the disciples are from the culturally distinct province of Galilee; and the title on the Lord's cross is written in the three languages of Latin, Greek and Hebrew. All around, at Passover time, Jerusalem is full of visitors from all over the world, representing the multi-national character of the Jewish people of the time; Mark tells us that this includes a man from Cyrene in Libya – as Luke in Acts 2 goes on to mention people from Cyrene being in the city on the Day of Pentecost.

Bearing a Jewish given name, Simon of Cyrene is an African presence in the central story of the gospels, and he also symbolises a wider diversity of nations. The African Church was in fact to be a very vibrant part of early Christianity, nurturing such great teachers of the faith as Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine; and Simon is the first of its members of whom we know. We can conclude that he himself became a Christian from the fact that Mark refers to him as 'the father of Alexander and Rufus' meaning that the names of his sons would be recognised by members of the church for whom Mark was writing. One name, Alexander, is Greek, and the other, Rufus, is Latin: this is a family which shares in several different cultures. Indeed, in Romans 16.13 Paul writes of another who may belong to the same family: 'Greet Rufus, his mother has been a mother to me also'.

Simon has come into Jerusalem 'from the fields' – in Latin, this phrase *per agros* is the root of the word *peregrinus* (from which our own 'pilgrim' derives). The *peregrini* in the Roman Empire were not citizens, but people on the move between different city states. Simon's travelling is turned round when he meets Jesus: he starts as a 'passer-by', but then something happens in this encounter: the nature of his journey changes, and he finds himself at the cross as a disciple when all but one of the apostles have fled in fear.

The word which is used to describe the way in which Simon is 'compelled' to carry the cross is a very strong verb. In fact, it is the same word which Jesus himself uses when he talks about people being 'compelled' to walk one mile with somebody, then freely choosing to go another mile further. Simon's encounter with the Lord is not from choice but by compulsion; yet we can believe that when given the Lord's cross to bear he does take it on willingly. Perhaps we

can see in this simple episode a pointer to what would happen in many places in the encounter of African people with Christianity: the religion often entered their lives allied to compulsion, oppression and even slavery, but equally often it was turned around to become a source of liberation and power through a freely willed embrace of the cross. So God's providence can work to turn human sin into a source of divine blessing.

Not only is Cyrene Libya is named in the Pentecost narrative, but there is also mention of a Simon Niger in the church at Antioch (acts 13.2) – in that Greek-speaking community, this man is described by the Latin adjective for 'black'. Could this Simon Niger be the Simon of Cyrene whom Mark mentions here? Whether we can prove that or not, seeds of diversity are sown in the Passion narrative as told by the Gospels which will germinate in the life of the early Church as described in the Acts of the Apostles.

*How do we celebrate the presence of people of many backgrounds, in the story of the Church and today?*

*Can we recognise that it is through God's providence that people of many ethnic and cultural backgrounds are found in many countries?*

+Michael Lichfield