

Holy Week – Wednesday

Jesus with the Cross on his shoulders passes through the streets of Jerusalem. Simon of Cyrene.

After a night of suffering, of insults and scorn, torn by the terrible torment of the scourging, Jesus is led out to be crucified. *Then he [Pilate] released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified,* (Matt 27:26) says St Matthew's Gospel quite simply.

The people do not accept an exchange for Barabbas, an exchange of one who was innocent for one guilty of robbery and murder. Jesus is condemned to suffer a painful punishment followed by a savagely cruel death reserved for criminals. Very soon everyone can see that he is already far too seriously weakened to be able to carry the cross on his shoulders right up to Calvary. A man returning home, Simon of Cyrene, is forced to help. Where are the disciples? Jesus had spoken to them about carrying the cross; and they had confirmed with great vehemence that they would go with Him even to death. Now not even one of them is to be found to help him carry the piece of timber to the site of the execution. A stranger has to do it, and that under threat of force. There are no friendly faces around Our Lord, not even one willing to commit himself, to say a word in his favour, let alone champion him. Even those who were cured or who had received some benefit from him now do not wish to be conspicuous. What Isaiah had prophesied several centuries earlier is now fulfilled to the letter: *I have trodden the wine press alone, and from the peoples no one was with I looked, but there was no one to help. I was appalled but there was no one to uphold.* (Is 63:3-5)

Simon gets hold of one end of the cross and lifts it onto his shoulders. The other end, more weighty, the one where there has been no response to love, the one freighted with the sins of each man — this end is carried by Christ, on his own.

There is one exception to the desertion which the Lord experiences. Tradition has handed the incident down to us. A woman by the name of Veronica steps forward with a piece of cloth to wipe the face of Jesus. And on the fabric there remains an impression of the face of the Lord. Veronica's veil is a symbol of the moving dialogue between Christ and the penitent soul. *Veronica responded to Christ's love with reparation; a*

reparation especially admirable because it came from a helpless woman who did not fear the ire of the enemies of Christ . . . Will the image of Christ's face be imprinted on my soul as on the veil of Veronica? (J. Aldewicz, Be my Witnesses)

Our Lord continues on his way. There has been some physical respite. But the path is tortuous and the ground uneven. His energy is dwindling; it is not at all to be wondered at that Jesus falls. Once, twice, three times — He falls and with increasing difficulty gets to his feet again. A few yards on and he stumbles again. Rising up he tells us how much he loves us; falling, he expresses the great need he has for us to love him. *It is not too late; nor is everything lost . . . even though to you it may seem so — even though a thousand doom-laden voices keep saying so. Even though you are besieged by the furious faces of mocking and jeering onlookers. You have come at a good time to take up the Cross: the Redemption is taking place now! And Jesus needs many more Simons like the man from Cyrene. (J. Escriva, The Way of the Cross)*