

3.26.2023 Passion Sunday (Luke 14:27)

Almost four hundred years ago, in a Bavarian village that was being ravaged by the bubonic plague, villagers stood beneath a cross and prayed that God would spare their families from further death. In that prayer they promised God that if He spared them, the people of this village would reenact the events of Holy Week, the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of our Lord, on every tenth year, forever after. Their prayer was answered, in 1634 they reenacted the Passion of our Lord for the first time, and their promise has been kept up to this day.

A story has been told that during one of these reenactments, a man in the audience sprang into action when the actor portraying Jesus fell while carrying the cross. This man was so caught up in the drama of the scene that he wanted to lift the cross from the back of the actor portraying Jesus, but then coming to his senses and expecting it to be a prop, the man reached down with one hand to lift it up, yet quickly discovered that he couldn't move the heavy wooden cross. Afterwards, he met with the actor, who offered this explanation, saying, "I've found that I cannot look like Christ without carrying a real cross."

Jesus declared, "*Whoever does not carry his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple*" (Luke 14:27). By Jesus' own definition, to be a Christian is to be a cross-bearer, and on this Passion Sunday, as we begin a time in which the Church calls us to narrow and intensify our lenten focus by carefully reflecting on the Passion and Death of our Savior, it's necessary for each of us to consider just what it means to carry a real cross, as Scripture would say: to *imitate* Christ (Ephesians 5:1-2), to "*suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him*" (Romans 8:17). This morning we ask, what is the Cross, and more personally, what is our cross, and how does a disciple bear their cross and follow after our Lord?

We wear crosses as jewelry and hang them up in our homes, but a person didn't do that in the first century, because they knew the cross as an instrument designed to inflict the worst kind of death, a torturous, bloody, shameful death that was reserved for barbarians and slaves. The Roman politician Cicero labeled crucifixion as the "most cruel and hideous of

tortures,” and perhaps he described it that way because crucifixion not only brought about the most grievous, painful death, but also caused the crucified, the mocked, the degraded, the spit upon, to feel so much shame (Hebrews 12:2) that they thought of themselves as no longer human.

This truth is expressed at the seventh station of the cross, when our Lord falls a second time and we reflect on these words from Holy Scripture: “They delivered me into the hands of the impious, they cast me out among the wicked, and they spared not my life. The powerful gathered together against me, and like giants they stood against me. Afflicting me with cruel wounds, they mocked me. I am a worm and no man. The reproach of men and the outcast of the people” (Job 16:10-11; Psalm 22:6). Our Savior, and all who hung on a cross were despised, forsaken, and rejected, as if they were the most insignificant of all living creatures. The crucified were like worms to be either trampled underfoot or left in the sun to shrivel and die.

We cannot begin to imagine the “cruel and hideous” torture of crucifixion, yet perhaps reflecting on the Cross from a first-century perspective, the Cross that Jesus endured, helps us gain a better understanding of what it means to carry our cross and come after Him. In our day the idea of bearing a cross normally refers to some sort of trial or difficulty, a personal challenge that we must face and may never overcome. A person might say: my job is the cross I bear, this lingering illness is the cross I bear, this person that God has placed in my life is the cross I bear. We speak of the cross as a particular trial, one troubling aspect of what may otherwise be a really good life, but as we’ve seen, in our Lord’s day the cross was an instrument of death. The cross led not to the loss of something, but to the loss of all things.

Consider another example to illustrate that truth: After 33 years on this earth, our Lord approached Calvary with only two things, His Cross and His clothing. St. John, an eye-witness to the crucifixion, tells us that the soldiers, before they crucified Jesus, divided that clothing into four parts, one part for each of them, and then they cast lots to see who would get His seamless garment (John 19:23-24). So, Jesus approached Calvary with His Cross and clothing, and the soldiers who crucified our Lord left Him with only the Cross.

Likewise, to carry our cross is to be willing to part with everything in order to follow Christ. The act of taking up our cross daily (Luke 9:23) is not fulfilled in confronting any particular trial of this life, but instead in grasping an instrument of complete self-sacrifice, for by the grace of God, through the Cross of Christ, we surrender our selves, our souls, and bodies. Through the cross we crucify pride, arrogance, and every evil way, and put to death the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil. In our culture, where the continual selfish desire is one of “serve us,” our cross is found, and we carry it faithfully, as we give up ourselves to “His service,” and walk before the Lord in holiness and righteousness all our days, no matter the cost.

By Jesus’ own definition, to be a Christian is to be a cross-bearer. He declared, *“Whoever does not carry his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.”* We cannot look like Christ without carrying a real cross, and our “real cross” is complete self-sacrifice. Just as our Lord was stripped of all things, just as He carried His Cross to die upon, we must, in the words of St. Paul, *“count all things to be loss”* (Philippians 3:8), and to use the words of our Lord, we must lose our life for His sake, that we may find it (Luke 9:24).

Bearing a cross in the first century cost a person everything, and for the authentic, cross-bearing disciple of our Lord, there’s a sense in which that will always be true. Bearing our cross costs us everything, and yet, in conclusion, I’d ask you to consider the thought that bearing our cross also costs us nothing. After all we’ve talked about that seems like an odd thing to say, but let’s look at what the Gospels tell us about a man who was forced to carry Jesus’ Cross, and how different that is from our own experience in bearing our cross. St. Luke writes, *“As the soldiers were leading Jesus away on the road to Calvary, they laid hold of a certain Simon, of Cyrene, a passerby, who was coming in from the country, and forced him to take up the Cross of Jesus”* (Luke 23:26).

Scripture describes Simon of Cyrene as *“a passerby, who was coming in from the country.”* He was a man who did not yet know Jesus, and since he didn’t have a relationship with the Lord, you can imagine bearing the Cross of Christ cost him a great deal. It was no minor inconvenience to carry that weight, or to be associated with this condemned Man, but let me ask you, if the Romans had taken hold of St. John, the beloved disciple, or the women

who accompanied Him, or what if Joseph was still alive at that time, and was standing there with Mary, the blessed mother of our Lord, would the soldiers have needed to force any of these people to bear our Lord's Cross, and if they had the opportunity to walk that road of suffering with Him, do you think they would say that it cost them anything?

Certainly not, and may the same be said of us! It is our relationship with Jesus that moves us to be cross-bearers. Our love for Him transforms every act of service into a freely-given act of love, that is not a costly burden but a glorious blessing that fills us with joy. By the grace of God, may we ever be mindful of the truth that in a very real sense taking up our cross daily costs us nothing, because it cost the Son of God everything.