

Simon of Cyrene Reflects

(Preached @ Footscray Baptist Church by Cheryl Williams, April 7th, 2023 - Matthew 26 & 27)

I believe a trial of sorts had taken place, they looked for false testimony to convict Jesus, but they couldn't find a good reason to convict him. So they then trucked out a couple of false witnesses, but that didn't really work either. Jesus maintained his silence, finally he was asked if what they were saying was true – was he the Messiah? Jesus responded by saying – well you say so. Well that was enough for them to charge him with blasphemy (unfairly in my view), and of course the punishment for that was death.

His friends seemed to be watching it all from a distance.

The priests and elders took him to the Romans, Pilate was the governor who could do the sentencing. Convenient, given that the Jew's couldn't associate themselves with crucifixion – that was the form of capital punishment around then. Pilate, though, wanted nothing to do with any of it really, he wanted to wash his hands of it all, he was trying to find a way out of the whole silly mess. So he resorted to a rule – you see once a year the Governor could pardon a criminal at the request of the people – guess he thought they would ask for Jesus of Nazareth to be released. The other option was a very violent freedom fighter, some would have even called him a terrorist, his name was Barabbas, guess who the people choose to release – Barabbas.

So Pilate had no choice now, he had to sentence Jesus of Nazareth to death by crucifixion.

Then it started, the mocking, the deriding, the spitting, the making fun of him, the outright disgusting behaviour. Then they led him out to make his way to the place of crucifixion carrying a very heavy cross beam.

My name is Simon, I come from a place called Cyrene – a town in Libya in North Africa. I just happened to be in Jerusalem returning from work and was planning on attending Passover whilst I was there.

I saw what to me seemed like quite a frenzy, people everywhere, screaming and shouting. I moved a little closer but not too close as I sensed danger. I am quite tall and strong so I could easily be spotted in the crowd. The Roman soldiers grabbed me and got me to help Jesus carry that cross beam – they are allowed to force people to help out in situations like this. Perhaps they thought Jesus' strength was waning a bit. So I grabbed the beam from him, took, most of its weight and I looked into his face, into his eyes. They were full of both pain and compassion, I could see a quiet resolve and I could see innocence. After a short time he seemed to gather a bit more strength and took the cross beam from me. I continued to watch from a distance.

I felt like I had not done enough, but what else could I do – I couldn't top the process, I couldn't take the charges away.

So, I followed the crowd.

I can still hear the hammering of the nails into the cross.

I can still see those crucified either side of him – bona fide criminals – they had done the crime and now must do the time.

I can still hear his last words – God why have you forsaken me, and then he yelled out and that was it.

I can still see the Roman centurion keeping watch at the foot of the cross, he had watched it all play out. He made a startling confession, that this man who had endured such injustice was the Messiah, the Son of God, ironic, given that was what Jesus was accused of claiming he was.

I can still see his female friends, consumed by grief, comforting each other, unsure of what they would do next.

I can still see Joseph, he was a respected Jewish leader, he went to the Governor asking if he could take the body and bury it. At least burying Jesus would give him some dignity. Well they let him do that but not without providing extra security – clearly Pilate didn't want any more trouble over this. You see, the Jew's were saying his friends would steal the body and then claim he'd been resurrected and therefore he was the Messiah and that stuff about rising on the Third Day would come true. Couldn't risk that, so they put guards there and a heavy stone across the entrance.

Me, well this event really changed me. Eventually I went back home to Cyrene. There I reflected a lot about my fleeting encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. I heard about what had happened afterwards, and in time, I too became a believer. I was changed by the compassion I saw in his eyes, changed by the dignity he showed in the face of such a terrible injustice, changed by what I learnt about his teachings and the way he practiced and lived such, changed by the testimony of that Roman soldier who stood at the foot of the Cross, changed by those grieving women, changed by the courage of a Jewish man called Joseph.

I did what I could to help the man who changed the world. Amen.