

Simon From Cyrene



Simon from Cyrene strides out

It's not how I'd often imagined Simon. He does not look brow-beaten, compelled, picked on out of the crowd, press-ganged, the unsuspecting foreigner arriving in the city from the country.

And yet the image challenges my assumptions. Technically, painted in egg-tempera on paper, this is described as "an illumination" rather than an icon. And for me it illuminates by raising questions, suggesting possibilities, puncturing presuppositions.

We do not know from the Biblical narratives how Simon reacted to the task he undertook: we only know that he did the task. Was Simon resentful or annoyed? Or could Simon have become a willing conscript, gladly undertaking the supportive role? Did he recognise or find significance in the burden he carried? Did the job laid upon him become his vocation? Did he, to quote a later hymn writer, find doing an apparently menial or burdensome task "as for thy laws makes that and the action fine"?

Here we see Simon striding out, almost proudly undertaking that charge for which he is remembered.

In the 21st century, western culture offers many expectations of individual choice: we want to embrace the freedom of all to discover their full potential without being limited by any predetermined socio-economic category.

- But does the discovery of vocation always need to be seen as a detective mystery, where we have to discover and select a single purpose God has pre-ordained for us?
- When may our vocational journey involve a gift to be recognised rather than a problem to be solved?

Simon from Cyrene carries the cross

It's not how I'd imagined the cross being carried on the way to Calvary. It does not look a heavy and uncomfortable burden, a disgrace.

And yet the image challenges my assumptions. Of course the picture is painted with hindsight, within a tradition, and one that has developed symbolic ways to recall events. But for me it illuminates by suggesting possibilities and raising questions.

The cross is lifted high as a standard, foreshadowing so many liturgical processions-moving inexorably towards an act of worship. The cross is an essential part of the story, yet here it has not yet been transformed as the group moves towards crucifixion and Christ's gift of his death. The cross is curiously light and unsubstantial: "my yoke is easy and my burden is light"

- In what ways, in our vocations, do we carry that which symbolises the greater gift? In what ways are the tasks we undertake as part of our vocation indeed worship?

Simon from Cyrene leads

It's not how I'd often imagined Simon. He does not look like a minor player, one of the cast of supporting actors with a small walk-on part created to conveniently fulfil a particular task within the drama. And yet the image challenges my assumptions. It illuminates by puncturing presuppositions.

Simon leads, but he is not the focus of the picture. Christ with his rich robe and halo of holiness draws the eye. In iconography, the gold glistens, catches light from different angles, stands out from its surroundings. Seen from close, the gold is a bright part of the colour palate: yet from a distance it becomes the most visible part of the picture, arresting attention while the rest of the image seems to recede into the background.

In this way, this picture becomes a symbol not only of the Biblical narrative, but of the vocation of Christian leadership. It is a leadership that undertakes a task but never detracts from Christ as the focus: it is a service, enabling others to move forward and Christ's destiny and purpose to be fulfilled.

- As we walk in the vocation to which we are called, how do we ensure we do not detract from Christ?
- How do we ensure that our task, however visible, remains service and that Christ remains the focus?

Question to reflect on

- In the picture, do you think Simon is leading the group, or is he being pushed from behind?
- Which interpretation fits your understanding of Simon's role?
- What details included in the picture make you think there was compulsion involved in the events shown?
- Can you think of any examples of a task or situation that was imposed or 'unchosen', but which became part of God's call (either for you or another person)?
- Some vocations are often thought of as a long-term or life-long pursuit or occupation. Here Simon is undertaking a specific task. Is this his vocation at this point?
- Describe any experiences of 'one-off' or short-term activities that were 'vocational', for you or someone else.

FROM GEORGE HERBERT

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for thee:

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.

FROM CHARLES WESLEY

The task thy wisdom hath assigned,
O let me cheerfully fulfil;
in all my works thy presence find,
and prove thy good and perfect will.

FROM SAINT TERESA OF AVILA

Govern all by Your wisdom, O Lord,
so that my soul may always be serving You
in the way You will,
and not as I may choose.
Do not punish me, I beg You, Thee,
by granting what I wish or ask,
if it offends Your love,
which would always live in me.
Let me die to myself,
that I may serve You:
let me live to You,
who in Yourself is the true Life.

FROM H BONAR

Thy way, not mine, O Lord,
however dark it be:
lead me by thine own hand,
choose out the path for me.

Not mine, not mine, the choice
in things or great or small:
be thou my guide, my strength,
my wisdom, and my all.