

Good Friday Three Hours' Devotion
Blessed are the meek: Simon of Cyrene
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Matthew 5:5

Matthew 27:32

In this, the third Beatitude from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is describing the character of those who are becoming citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, people who are blessed by God and in the sight of God. He was perhaps consciously echoing Psalm 37 (v.11) that, in comparison with the wicked, “the meek shall inherit the land” : an echo which would have helped his hearers. But it is perhaps for us who hear it today one of the most difficult of the Beatitudes. It is partly difficulties of translation and the way language changes over time. When we hear “Blessed are the meek ...” the word meek perhaps inevitably has connotations of “meek and mild”, people who are the opposite of strong and forthright, people

who are fearful and self-effacing, even self-abasing.

But the words used in the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible which are translated into English as meek, do not have the same meanings and associations. They are more to do with gentleness of spirit, patience towards others, and perhaps primarily humility before God. So Moses, who was anything but meek and mild in the contemporary sense, is described in the book of Numbers as meek/humble before God. Paul in Ephesians and the author of the Epistle of James write of meekness and gentleness in one's relations with others and before God.

There seems to be a cluster of ideas around the core Biblical notion of meekness. There is undoubtedly a sense of strength of character and purpose, quite unlike our idea of a meek person as someone who wouldn't say boo to a goose. There is also a sense that a meek person

understands who he or she is, in relation to God and to others: and marking this is the quality of humility. Humility of course has the same linguistic root as soil. A humble and meek person is rooted in real ground: rooted in the reality of himself or herself before God: not in some inflated or self-made or man-made sense of identity and importance. There is perhaps also the idea of getting on with the tasks and situations life throws at one in the place one happens to be – not running away or fussing around trying to find a more congenial spot. Perhaps this lies behind the Benedictine idea of stability as part of God's call.

As we contemplate the Passion and Crucifixion Paul, writing to the Philippians, guides us to see Christ as the great example of meekness, possibly quoting an even earlier Christian hymn (Philippians 2: 6-8):

“Christ Jesus ... though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as

something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death –even death on a cross.”

The story of the Passion demonstrates the key attributes of meekness. Jesus, though he was in a profound sense the victim in the story was also strong. He did not run or evade what was to come, and the cost of this was seen in the wrestling with his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. Though he was betrayed, bullied, mocked and physically humiliated, he was the one who was in a sense the still centre, the one who knew his hour had come if he was to be true to his identity and calling. His strength was born of a love strong as death – a passionate love for his father and for humankind. In the words of the Song of Solomon (8: 6-7)

“For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave; its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.”

He was meek too in the sense of knowing who he was, knowing that his calling was to confront and sin and break its hold on God’s children. St. John’s account of the Passion makes this even clearer than the account in Matthew. (John 12: 32) ***“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”*** As in the words of the great hymn by Newman, ***“A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.”*** Here again is the sense of the strength in Christ’s meekness and humility. And it was taken up very early in Christian thinking and iconography which portrayed Christ as the warrior who reigned from the cross, and rescued his people, even from the very depths of hell. A marvellous eighth century fresco in the church of San Clemente in Rome shows the victorious

Christ holding his cross like a victor's pennant, trampling on the serpent, and grasping the hand of Adam, to bring him back to light and life.

If Christ is the supreme example of meekness, there is also the figure of Simon of Cyrene someone one might miss as having just a little walk-on part in the great drama. Yet though we are told virtually nothing about him he did something essential – he carried the cross which the exhausted Jesus was presumably by now too weak to carry. A passer-by, originating from north Africa, from Cyrene the capital of a Roman district in modern Libya, was pressed into service by the Roman soldiers. And he did the appalling task required of him, in the place where he happened to find himself. It is likely that this experience had a profound effect on him and his family as Mark's gospel mentions not only him but also his sons, Alexander and Rufus, as if they were well known in the early church.

The meekness of Simon – doing what he had to do in a particular place, not of his own choosing, using his own strength to carry the cross, reminds us of yet another dimension of the meekness of those called into the Kingdom of God. They – and we – are called to carry our own crosses, to lose our own lives for the sake of Christ. The three synoptic gospels all record Christ’s teaching that anyone who wants to be his disciple must take up his cross and follow him (eg. Matt. 16: 24). Our crosses are multiple in their nature and their weight. Not one of us can escape at least some of them. There are the crosses of sin, of failure, of broken relationships, of grief and loss, of physical and psychological illness, and vulnerability of different kinds. But it is only through meekness and humility, by quiet endurance of the experience of the weight of darkness, that we shall come to new life and light in Christ. This is the only way that we shall lose our lives and be made new for the Kingdom of God. Moreover, we are called to be like

Simon of Cyrene, to help others carry their particular crosses. The servant is not greater than his Master, and Christ, whom we serve, was himself the servant of all, most supremely in his suffering and death. As we shall shortly sing,

*Take up thy cross, nor heed the shame,
Nor let thy foolish pride rebel;
Thy Lord for thee the Cross endured,
To save thy soul from death and hell.*

*Take up thy cross, and follow Christ,
Nor think till death to lay it down;
For only he who bears the cross
May hope to wear the glorious crown.*