

### **THE PULPIT OF THE CROSS - PART III**

“The People”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Matt. 21:33-36; 55-56

In the first of these three messages on The Pulpit Of The Cross, we dealt with the credentials of The Preacher of Golgotha, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We showed He was uniquely qualified to mount this most unusual pulpit because of who He is: The God-man, and because of what He is: The Savior of mankind.

As the supreme paradox in history, that perfect blending of deity and humanity, He provided the only adequate link between heaven and earth. Possessing the attributes of God, yet feeling the infirmities of humanity, He became God's way to us and our way to God. His cross became the catalyst which held these warring forces together. His blood became that sacred element which, when injected into the test tube of human experience, precipitates our sin.

No other preacher has even been so closely scrutinized as the carpenter-preacher of Calvary. No other sermon has ever been so closely weighed as that which He acted out in the final moments of His life on The Pulpit Of The Cross.

Last Sunday's sermon dealt with The Pulpit itself and we saw it to be --

The articulation of the voice of God,

The revelation of the mind of God,

The presentation of the person of God,

The demonstration of the power of God.

More than that, we learned that the cross is not a cold, lifeless thing, but a warm and vital experience. We discovered that unless we wear it in our heart, there is little value in our wearing it about our necks. Unless this historical event becomes a personal experience, we can never

know the salvation, transformation, and consolation which it offers.

We come now to the final sermon in this series as we turn our eyes upon The People who were gathered at the base of history's most unusual pulpit - The Pulpit Of The Cross.

Countless sermons have been preached and numerous books have been written about the spectators who comprised the crowd about the cross. One of the most inspiring to me was by a chap from Belfast, Ireland, Kenneth D. Harvey. To him, I am indebted for the seed thought which inspired this particular sermon.

Dr. Harvey points out that we often impatiently brush aside the question asked by that plaintiff negro spiritual, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” We try to literalize it and we hotly protest that we weren't alive 2000 years ago when the cross was raised against a darkened sky. How could we have been there? “And yet, the strange thing is that, as we look into our hearts, we know we have all been there.”

As Bishop Gerald Kennedy has said so beautifully --

“Every time we have given way to cowardice and self-seeking, we have helped drive the nails into His hands and feet.

Every time we have fallen prey to hatred and disloyalty, we have helped cast the spear into His side.

Every time we have felt a wave of sickening shame for wrong doing, we have heard His voice whisper, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.'

Every time we have had a deep longing to commit our lives to truth and righteousness, we have seen on that cross the example of His love and it has been a challenge to the noblest and the best which is in us. Yes, when they crucified our Lord, we were there.”

This morning, I want us to look at the crucifixion scene through the eyes of three of the spectators who comprised the crowd of people around the cross.

**Mary Magdalene**

The first is a woman who seems tired beyond her years. The lines in her face are deep. Her eyes reflect an inner wound whose pain somehow will never subside completely. Even though there is a faint glimmer of the haunting beauty that once was hers in her youth, there is something in her bearing that is reminiscent of a mis-spent life. Such is the curse of sin. Though it be forgiven, it's scars remain, and we bear them as long as we live. Her name is Magdalene.

What we know about her must be pieced together from only a few references in scripture plus an inference here and a suggestion there. Tradition has it that, coming from the unsavory city of Magdala, her past certainly left something to be desired. Luke puts it this way in Chapter 8, Verse 2 of his gospel, “Mary called Magdalene, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities...out of which went seven devils.”

Some believe her first meeting with Jesus was a sad and somber one. If that be so, I'm sure that as she watched the soldiers nail Jesus to His cross, she was thinking of that day when, according to tradition, she first met him.

He had been standing on the steps of the temple teaching a group of his disciples when a disturbance was heard at the edge of the crowd. The disciples parted to make way for the disturbers and through the path in the crowd, the Pharisees pushed a woman who had been taken in the act of adultery.

With a cruel shove, rough hands had hurled her at the feet of Christ. As she lay there like a heap of gaudy rags, trembling with fear and shaking with embarrassment, knowing full well the dreadful fate which awaited her, she heard Him speak. There was something in His voice that made her heart leap with hope.

Perhaps it was the gentleness. In all her life, she had never known such gentleness as she heard in His voice that day. Maybe it was the strength with which He spoke that gave her courage. Or

His compassion. Or the quiet understanding she picked up in the tone of His voice.

I don't know what it was. But at any rate, as she lay there in a huddled heap entranced by the voice of Him who was called The Friend Of Sinners, she heard the dull thud of stones falling in the dust, and the soft shuffle of sandals as her accusers walked silently away. When she lifted up her face, she saw they were alone, Mary Magdalene and The Stranger Of Galilee.

As she looked into his eyes, she was something there she had never seen before. For the first time in her life, she was looking into eyes which returned love instead of lust, compassion instead of contempt.

No, she would never forget that day when tradition says she first met Jesus. That was the day life began for Mary Magdalene. That was the day when, in response to the impulse of love, she went forth to obey His quiet command, “Go, and sin no more.”

Surely all this must have been among her thoughts as she watched them plunge the spear into the hole. And, as she saw him hanging there like a bunch of purple rags, she must have whispered to herself, “This man who is dying is my Lord, and He loves me.” The second person who watched the crucifixion scene was --

### **Barabbas, The Criminal.**

In Hebrew his name means “Son of a Rabbi.” He belonged to that religious aristocracy of Jews who gloried in the greatness of Israel. He was a nationalist. A militant patriot who rebelled against the hatred yoke of Rome and for this we must give him credit. All of us admire a man who is loyal to his native land.

But we cannot approve of the methods he used to achieve the noble end of freedom. Like some of our more influential people today, Barabbas found the plodding democratic process too slow. He wanted short cuts, so he resorted to force.

In our day, his political descendants use the more civilized techniques of slander and wild accusation. Instead of the accused being innocent until proven guilty, these character assassins claim people to be guilty unless they can prove themselves innocent!

It is not necessary that there be any facts. It's enough that a charge be made. People are judged guilty by a bevy of short-sighted souls who somehow cannot see that by resorting to Gestapo methods, they are undermining America's most valued possession: freedom!

That was the sin of Barabbas. The way of love and patience, the Christ-like way of changing society by changing individuals was not fast enough. So he resorted to other methods. When, at last, he was caught and thrown into prison, he knew it meant certain death. And then, before he realized what had happened, because of the Passover-release, he was a free man again, and the mob was roaring for the blood of Jesus.

It wasn't necessary that he attend the crucifixion. But there was a kind of magnetism which drew him to Golgotha that afternoon. Perhaps it was curiosity. Perhaps it was an insatiable desire to see the Man who was taking his place on the cross. I don't know. But at any rate, as they lifted Jesus up between two thieves, Barabbas was there.

Can you imagine what his thoughts were as he looked up at those three crosses? On the ones to the right and left of Jesus hung his former cell mates. They, too, were men of violence. Barabbas found himself remembering how the Jerusalem jail had reverberated with their raucous laughter as, on the eve of their execution, they had kept their spirits up by spinning wild tales of their criminal escapades.

He knew they were deserving of death and so, as he watched them dying, he found little sympathy in his souls for them. He only felt sorry they had been so careless as to get caught.

But as he turned to the central cross, he felt an emotion he wasn't used to. Criminals are not supposed to feel shame and sadness. But try as he might, Barabbas could not put down the

haunting thoughts which picked away at his brain, “This man is hanging on a cross which had been hammered together for me. He is dying on a cross that should have been mine.” As he paused to look up at the darkened sky and then back to the center cross, the wonder of it struck him with an impact which made him shudder, “This man...this Jesus...is dying for me.”

The third spectator was --

### **Simon Of Cyrene.**

He had come from North Africa to join in the Passover celebration to be held in the city of Jerusalem. It was perhaps a matter of chance that he should have been standing at that particular point just outside the city walls as the death march of Calvary passed by.

Many a man had gone stark raving mad under the cruel lash, weighted as it was with lead and jagged bits of flint, and Jesus was no superman. He was no mock human. The pain He felt was just as real as that of the two criminals who walked beside Him. And so, as Simon watched Him stagger by, he saw that He was stumbling under the great weight of that ghastly cross, His shoulder quivering with pain from the constant rubbing of rough timber on raw, open flesh.

Simon started to turn away in disgust at the cruelty of men when he heard a dull thud, followed by the breathy gasp of the crowd. Turning back, he saw that the central figure had collapsed and lay prostrate in the street, pinned there by the weight of the cross.

For a moment, Simon searched the face of the fallen figure and something in it compelled him to rush forward and pick up the load. So it was that a great, burly black man from North Africa had the privilege of carrying the cross of our Lord. To our knowledge, this was the one and only time Simon of Cyrene came in contact with Jesus. But it must have made a tremendous impact upon him. Tradition has it that when he returned to his home, he told it all to his sons and they later became leaders of the church.

As they grew older, they never tired of hearing their aged father tell them the story of the

crucifixion. And, as he finished it, he would always walk over to an open window, and looking wistfully up toward heaven, he would say, “I was there when they crucified my Lord. I saw Him fall on the road side. I rushed to his aid. I had the privilege of carrying His cross.”

Three people around the pulpit of the cross.

Mary sobbing, “This is my Lord and He loves me.”

Barabbas thinking, “This man is dying for me.”

Simon of Cyrene remembering, “I had the privilege of carrying His cross.”

But if you look beyond the surface stuff, you see that the reaction of these three people sum up our feelings about Jesus too. For when you look at the cross through the eyes of Mary Magdalene, you are forced to say, “This is my Lord and He loves me.”

With Barabbas you go a step further and come to the realization that he's dying in your stead. For one cannot long be in the presence of the cross without hearing an inner voice which says, “He's dying for me. He's doing something for me which I cannot do for myself. He is my Savior, and He's taking my place.”

And there flashes upon you the third and final meaning of Golgotha as you awaken to see that love so amazing, so divine, demands your soul, your life, your all. Even as Simon of Cyrene was compelled to rush to the aid of Jesus, so, too, you find yourself saying, “This is my Master, and I must bear His cross.”

Then it is that you enter into the Society of the Saints, that select society of whom Jesus said: “They who confess me before men will I also confess before my Father which is in heaven.”

Simon of Cyrene bore

The cross of Jesus - nothing more.

His name is never heard again,

Nor honored by historic pen.

Upon the pedestal of fame

His image courts no loud acclaim.  
Simon of Cyrene bore  
The cross of Jesus - nothing more.

When my life's work is done  
And golden beams life's setting sun  
I'll ask naught of wealth and fame,  
Or that men may loudly sing my name  
But in my heart I humbly pray

Dear Father, let my record say  
Upon the page divine,  
He bore  
The cross of Jesus - nothing more.