



## The Way of the Cross – April 5, 2009

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker

“And they led Jesus away to be crucified.”

Ah, the elusive “they”! I can almost hear my mother complaining, Who, *they*? Did they have names?

And you see, They did have names — Pilate, and Simon, and Herod, and Mary his mother, and Mary his friend, and Bob and Patrick and Megan and Ansley.

All key players in the drama of our redemption, because it wouldn't have happened without us. For in these final days of his earthly life, Jesus occupied himself only with doing what he was told. What *we* told him.

We begin with Pontius Pilate. Pilate knew perfectly well that Jesus was innocent. Pilate also knew perfectly well that to release him would be political suicide. And so he sought to make his quarry choose the path that would save face for both of them. If only Jesus would recant, back down even a little, Pilate could let him go and satisfy both his own conscience and the crowd. This is the game of compromise and expediency: and politicians are good at it. But Jesus wouldn't play. Pilate treated him with that special condescension and impatience that people in power save for people who are too saintly to care about personal consequences. To be sure, Pilate gave Jesus a hearing, granted him an audience: but only for as long as it took to determine that Jesus wasn't going to do anything to make life easier for *him*. And the minute he came to *that* conclusion, Pontius Pilate washed his hands of the whole sordid affair. I wonder. How many times have we lost interest in this Jesus because he wasn't dancing to our call? Making life easy for us.

And so Jesus sets out, carrying as was the custom the horizontal beam of his own instrument of torture. But it was too much for him, and so the soldiers pressed into service one Simon of Cyrene to help him. Simon was probably a pilgrim come to Jerusalem for the festival. If this is so, it would have mattered to him that he not compromise his ritual purity by getting involved in a criminal execution. So when the evangelist says that Simon was compelled to carry Jesus' cross, we may infer that he did so against his own will. He didn't want to be there. He was dragged into something which was repulsive to him in every way. But you know what happened later. The evangelist remarks that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus (his assumption plainly being that now, of course, we know exactly whom he is talking about). And in fact, this same Alexander and Rufus figure elsewhere in the New Testament. Do you see what this means. It means that Simon of Cyrene ultimately became a Christian and raised two Christian boys. And that means that repulsive as this experience was, it converted him. No doubt there continue to be pilgrims who are offended, repelled, bemused by the crucifixion of Jesus. And converted by it.

And all along the way, the Onlookers, the Crowd. These are the “they” whose names we do not know. But they were there. Doing what, I wonder? They were individuals underestimating their collective importance; they were a collective who exercised their God-given power to kill God. Of course, if you accused them of this, they would deny it. It was the people with names who made the decisions. Herod, Pilate, Annas, Caiaphas: these were the people who did the deed. The Crowd were nothing more to the crucifixion of Jesus than the recipients of a bit of much-needed entertainment, fodder for marketplace gossip. It is not true. The *Crowd* crucified

Jesus. For if They could have kept it from happening (and the clear message of the story is that they could), then they must assume responsibility for the fact that it did happen. There are no mere Onlookers on this journey. Anyone who thinks that she isn't important enough, or involved enough, or decisive enough, to be implicated in the killing of Jesus, is mistaken. It was Jesus who said, "Anyone who isn't for me is against me."

We arrive at Golgotha; and there, there are soldiers — another nameless group of *theys* who perform the gruesome act of crucifixion itself. This is perhaps the moment which makes clearest of all our contention that the Way of the Cross can never be anything but a collaborative journey. For no matter how freely Jesus took up his own cross, or embraced the possibility of crucifixion, in order for the thing to be done, somebody *else* had to hammer in the nails. Every human being who suffers under a cross does so because someone else has nailed it there. It would, I think, be salutary for us to ask in what way we ourselves hammer the nails into other people's crosses.

And then it is after. And there was Joseph of Arimathea. As much as Jesus in his teaching exercised a preferential option for the poor, in the moment of his dying, it was a rich man who ministered to him. Joseph of Arimathea was well-heeled, well-respected, and well placed politically. And he did, in that moment, what no one else *could* do, and what somebody *had* to do. He used his good offices with the governor to retrieve the body of Jesus. And he paid for a clean burial linen, and donated a new tomb, all on short notice. There is as much room and as much need for the rich on this journey as there is for the poor. And there are some quarters of the Church that need to be reminded of this.

The Way of the Cross is a collaborative affair: it requires all of us, or it doesn't happen. The irony of course is that God turns our curse over him into a blessing over us. *We* thought we were putting an end to a meddlesome preacher. But what we were really doing was cooperating with his own passionate desire to love us.

One thing is sure, whoever you are, whatever your role, you *belong* in the procession which will be leaving any minute now for Calvary.