

WHAT WE HAVE SEEN & HEARD



Reflections of Those Who Walked
the Way of Sorrows with Jesus

FATHER CHET SNYDER

INTRODUCTION

For centuries pilgrims have traveled to Jerusalem to follow Jesus' path to the hill called *Golgotha* or Calvary where he was crucified. Uncertainty about exact locations and events has not deterred pilgrims longing to be united with Jesus in his suffering and death. The faith of pilgrims who walk the *Via Dolorosa* or Way of Sorrows in Jerusalem and those who walk the way vicariously by praying the Stations of the Cross in churches and homes throughout the world has inspired spiritual writers in every age to offer reflections and prayers to guide the faithful in their journey.

My reflections in this little booklet have their origin in my two month sabbatical in Jerusalem in 2006. Walking the *Via Dolorosa* and reading the scriptures there encouraged my spiritual imagination to consider what it may have been like on the day Jesus was led through those narrow streets to his death. My reflections invite you to consider what the people and events on that first Good Friday might say to our faith lives today.

So now I invite you to walk with me, to ponder and pray through our imagination with those who saw and heard the mystery of our salvation as it was played out on the Way of Sorrows with Jesus.

—Fr. Chet Snyder

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The First Station

PILATE CONDEMNS JESUS TO DEATH

When it was morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate, the governor.

—Matthew 27:1-2

Jesus: I know what I have done. When a blind man wanted to see, I gave him sight. When a crowd listening to me on a Galilean hillside was hungry at day's end, I gave them bread to eat. When a young man was carried in death past the city gate, I gave him new life and returned him to his mother, a woman paralyzed with grief. When a woman, filled with shame knelt before accusers anxious to stone her, I offered her forgiveness and restored her dignity as a child of a merciful Father. Is it for this that I stand accused? If so, then I accept your sentence of death.



Pilate: My wife told me to have nothing to do with this man. “Let not his blood be on your hands,” she said. I did not heed her warning. Fearing the crowd, I handed him over for crucifixion. Even today I cannot erase his image from my mind. Even today I cannot wash his blood from my hands.

Reflection: With the crowd, we see this man Jesus condemned to death. With the crowd, we too, know that he is innocent. May we always strive to speak the truth to power, to do the work of justice and to free those bound by the indifference and fears of others.

The Second Station
JESUS CARRIES HIS CROSS

So they took Jesus, and carrying the cross himself he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew Golgotha.

—John 19:16b-17



Jesus: The wood of this cross is not so heavy. Although I have been denied sleep, denied even bread and water, I can carry the wood the soldiers have placed on my shoulders. No, what burdens me is not this piece of wood. What burdens me is a world that seems to have lost hope. What burdens me is a brother who has cheated his brother or a sister who feels the slap of her husband's wrath. What burdens me is a child denied warmth and tenderness and the promise of tomorrow.

These are the real burdens I carry—not on my shoulders, but in my heart. These are the wounds I take to *Golgotha*. My will is to leave those wounds on that hill forever while my Father's children run free, filled with courage, crying only joy-filled tears in a land that knows peace.

Reflection: We do not have to search for the cross. We know that if we live the gospel way that the cross will come to us. When we feed the hungry, clothe the naked and comfort those in sorrow, the cross of inconvenience, the cross of tiring days and sleepless nights will be placed on our shoulders.

The Third Station
JESUS FALLS THE FIRST TIME

Have pity on me, LORD, for I am weak; heal me, LORD, for my bones are shuddering. —Psalm 6:3

Passerby: He always walked with purpose. His steps were sure, his intent certain. And now he stumbles. What am I to think? Is he whom we thought he might be? But how can one who is called “the messiah” stumble and fall?



Jesus: I know what you are thinking. Perhaps you did not listen when I told you from the beginning that the Son of Man must suffer much and be handed over to wicked men and be given over to the forces of death.

But I understand. When there is bread, you do not think of hunger. When you are well, there is no talk of pain. When the warmth of the sun falls gently on your brow, you cannot imagine that one day there will be cold and chill.

My friends, I understand. But now that time, that day I told you about is here. Do not be afraid because I stumble and fall. I will stumble and fall again. But each time I will stand and continue the journey I walk for you.

Reflection: Why are we afraid to fall? Why are we afraid to fail? Is our worth measured only by the successes we have known, the triumphs we have celebrated? Are we not children of God even when we know shame and defeat, which invite us to a deeper trust in the Father’s outstretched hand?

The Fourth Station

JESUS MEETS HIS MOTHER

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. —John 19:25



Mary: Today I remember long ago, soon after he was born. Joseph and I went to the Jerusalem Temple for my purification to fulfill the law of the Lord. A man with hope in his eyes and wisdom on his lips greeted us in the shadow of the courtyard. With head bowed and spirits lifted, he began to pray. His hands trembled and his voice whispered as

he told us that now he could die, for he had seen the centuries-old promise fulfilled, the promise made to our people that salvation was at hand.

I did not know what he meant. What had my child to do with God's salvation? For my son would learn from his father the carpenter's trade. His hands would fashion from wood a table for the Passover feast and a stand for the evening lamp. But now the wood he carries is the wood of his cross. And the light that once shown in his eyes grows dim as shadows lengthen and the sky grows dark. On that day so long ago the wise man in the temple also told me that a sword would pierce my heart. Today I feel its sting.

Reflection: We do not want to share in another's pain and sorrow. How can we carry the burdens of others when all too often the worries and cares of our own lives are hard enough to bear? How will we find room in our hearts to offer to our neighbors the place of rest they so desperately need, so fervently seek?

The Fifth Station

SIMON OF CYRENE HELPS JESUS CARRY HIS CROSS

They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian, to carry his cross. —Mark 15:21

Simon: I was coming home from harvesting the spring wheat, aching from wielding the sickle all day. There was great commotion in the streets when suddenly, without warning, a Roman soldier pushed me through the crowd to a man carrying a cross to his death. The soldier placed the crossbar on my shoulders and told me to carry it. I protested: “I am a farmer, I have done nothing wrong. Why should I be forced to help?”



But my protest was in vain. I carried the cross, with hate for the Roman soldier who placed it on my shoulders and contempt for this criminal who was sentenced to death. Many years have passed since that day. And now my sons Alexander and Rufus and I are counted among his disciples.

One of the Twelve later told me that Jesus once said: “Take my yoke and learn from me, for my yoke is easy, and my burden light.” Those words stunned me and I had to confess that the cross had no weight at all that day. And when we reached *Gol-gatha*, my aching arms and shoulders were healed and strong again. That is why I followed him. He was not a criminal. He was true to his word.

Reflection: We want there to be many Simons in our lives—others who share our burdens and help carry our crosses. But we often do not want to be Simon. We find ourselves unwilling players in the life drama of others, made to feel responsible for problems we cannot solve.

The Sixth Station

VERONICA WIPES THE FACE OF JESUS

For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of [Jesus] Christ. —2 Corinthians 4:6



Veronica: I saw him once in the temple courtyard speaking with the teachers of the law. He looked past their accusing gaze and saw me staring in wonder. His gaze was intense, his features strong, his demeanor sure and certain.

How different he appeared today. His eyes were sad, his spirit broken. He was silent. I could not help myself. I pushed my way through the crowd past the Roman soldiers and with my veil wiped his sad and bloody face. The soldiers threw me to the ground and left me on the cobblestones clutching my veil. I could not stop the tears. It was only when I arrived home that I saw his face again. Not in my mind's eye—but on my veil!

My hands trembled but my heart was still. I understood his silence. No words could speak the depth of his love as I touched his face with my veil. I wear the veil everyday now. Not on my head, but next to my heart. And each day his face speaks to me again of love.

Reflection: Jesus, the veil we wear is the goodness you have placed in our hearts. The compassion we can offer to others is the patience you have shown to us.

The Seventh Station
JESUS FALLS THE SECOND TIME

God gives power to the faint, abundant strength to the weak.

—Isaiah 40:29

Bystander: He was walking behind another man I did not know. That man was carrying his cross for him, so I do not know why he stumbled and fell. Perhaps he was weak from the constant beating of the soldier's whip. Or perhaps, with his death imminent, he simply gave up the will to live.



Whatever the reason, there seemed to be defeat and resignation in this, his second fall. It was only later that I understood that his falling was not defeat. His willingness to fall was our victory. It did not matter that it took great effort to stand steadily on his feet again. What mattered is that three days later he rose again forever. In that rising, all the fallen and broken of the world were given permission to stand tall, with heads held high, rejoicing in their dignity as children of a God whose will is our salvation and our peace. We are now able to hold our heads high, for we are worth more than many sparrows.

Reflection: How often we see a second fall as a sign of things to come. What lies before us can only be defeat. We become resigned to days of misery, fearing we are destined to fall again and again.

The Eighth Station
JESUS MEETS THE WOMEN OF JERUSALEM

Many women mourned and lamented him. Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and your children, for the days are coming when people will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.’” —Luke 23:27-29



Women of Jerusalem: Our neighbors told us what had happened and we ran to the center of the city. The soldiers came first, ordering us to stand back. Then the condemned man stopped where we were standing in horror and in tears. It was as if he knew we would be standing there and was coming to meet us. Then, in a quavering voice, he spoke words we did not understand. “Weep not for me but for yourselves and for your children.” What did he mean?

We weep for our children whenever we fear for their security and well-being. The Roman soldiers bring fear and uncertainty. Of course we weep. We are mothers who love our children. But his words were not about the outside forces causing fear but even more about those inner fears and doubts that keep us from living life to the full. We once hear him say: “Fear not little flock.” Today, we understand what he meant.

Reflection: How often we listen to the voices around us that speak of doom, that promise only darkness, hatred and despair. How hard it is to listen to that gentle voice within us that speaks of mercy and truth, that promises light and hope.

The Ninth Station
JESUS FALLS THE THIRD TIME

They that hope in the LORD will renew their strength, they will soar on eagles' wings; run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.—Isaiah 40:30-31

Simon Peter: I ran away when he was arrested. I denied knowing him. I hid behind the crowd, head covered so no one would see me. I was afraid. Once he called me a “rock.” But now I was a coward.



Through the crowd I saw him fall. Someone said this was the third time he had fallen. I, too, fell three times when three times I denied even knowing him. Perhaps that is why, after he rose, he asked me three times if I loved him. Do I love him? Yes. But not as he loved me. My heart holds back until I am certain it will not be broken. He never held back and his heart was broken—by me, by Judas and by the others who fled in fear from the garden. But still he loved us and trusted us to continue his mission after his death.

Reflection: We, too, are often afraid to be seen as his disciples. We do not want to speak the truth for fear others will reject us, to forgive when others call for revenge. We hesitate to take the first step when other steps may be required. When we fail to speak and act and reach out, then we too have fallen for the third time.

The Tenth Station
JESUS IS STRIPPED OF HIS GARMENTS

The soldiers divided his clothes into four shares. They also took his seamless tunic, woven in one piece from the top down. So they said, "Let's not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it will be."

—John 19:23-24



Jesus: With a look that betrayed indifference and a hand that spoke violence, a young soldier strips me of the robe my mother made for me when I left our home in Nazareth. But in my nakedness, I am not ashamed. I have nothing to hide. I am the child of my mother's womb, conceived in mystery and nurtured with love by a mother most faithful and a father most just.

They taught me to remember my dignity as one made in my heavenly Father's image and likeness. I recall that lesson as these soldiers try to embarrass me before the world. But my heart has always been open to all who long for peace, to all who search for truth. I have nothing to hide and no reason for shame. *Abba*, Father, everything I have is yours.

Reflection: In times of distress let us find comfort remembering Jesus' encouraging words (Matthew 6:28-30): *Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith?*

The Twelfth Station

JESUS DIES ON THE CROSS

When they saw that Jesus was already dead, they did not break his legs, but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out. —John 19:33-34



Longinus: At midday, when the sun should shine brightest, the sky instead darkened. The earth quaked and I steadied myself by placing my hand on his cross. When I touched it my knees were strengthened even though the earth moved. And so, too, was my spirit. Who else but a god could darken the sky? Who else but a god could cause the earth to quake?

I never know the men I put to death. But this man knew my name. With a voice too faint for others to hear, he whispered: “Longinus, I forgive you.” He also spoke to the two other men on his right and on his left: “This day you will be with me in paradise.” I knew from their faces that they believed him. And I, too, believed him. Yes, I the forgiven executioner, bowed before this man who was truly the Son of God.

Reflection: Today let us remember the prophet Isaiah’s words describing God’s suffering servant (53:4-5), that are now fulfilled: *Our pain he bore, our sufferings he endured. We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole. By his wounds we were healed.*

The Thirteenth Station
JESUS IS TAKEN DOWN FROM THE CROSS

There were also women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses, and Salome. These women had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him. —Mark 15:40-41

Mary Magdalene: When Jesus' body was gently lowered from the cross and placed in his mother's arms, no tears could express her torment. The arms that cradled her son in Bethlehem cradled him once again on this desolate hill. We shared her terrible grief.



Mary told us little about her son. She never spoke of his early years except once about when the young boy Jesus was lost in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph searched everywhere until they found him in the Temple with the teachers of the law. With embarrassment she said Jesus told her he was to be about his father's business.

Those words come to mind today, because before he died he lifted his eyes to the heavens and in a halting voice said: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Mary must be remembering those words as well. The body of the son she cradles was born of her womb. But the spirit of this man has always belonged to God. Now she returns to her God the son she was given for so brief a time.

Reflection: Let us join our hearts to the pierced heart of the sorrowful mother and like her, let us "keep all these things in our heart" (Luke 2:51).

The Fourteenth Station

JESUS IS BURIED

Nicodemus also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about one hundred pounds. He and Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body and bound it with burial cloths along with the spices, according to Jewish burial custom. —John 19:38-40



Joseph of Arimathea: The tomb was mine but when the master died I offered my tomb for his burial. And now his body rests in my tomb but his spirit is alive in my heart. Just as he took my place in the tomb, he also took my place on the cross.

He had committed no offense and did not deserve death. I, on the other hand, have failed many times.

But what I regret most is this: I came to him only in secret, afraid what others might think. Now I want to follow him openly. But I do not know what will happen next. The Twelve have fled and are hiding in fear. Some women are getting spices to anoint his body when the Sabbath has past. But now a stone blocks the entry to the tomb and we can only wait for tomorrow.

Reflection: Again let us prayerfully reflect on the words of the prophet Isaiah describing God's chosen servant (53:3, 11-12): *He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, knowing pain, . . . spurned, and we held him in no esteem. He shall justify the many, their iniquity he shall bear because he surrendered himself to death, was counted among the transgressors, bore the sins of many, and interceded for the transgressors.*