

It is now the fourth week of March, and there are only two weeks left until Easter Sunday. Next Sunday marks the beginning of what is known as Holy Week—the final week of the Lord Jesus’ life. As we journey through this season of the church calendar, the Scripture passage we read this morning is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 23, verse 26 and following. This passage depicts the scene where the Lord Jesus, having been tried before Governor Pilate, was found guilty and walked the path to the place of execution. If we read the preceding passage, we see that Pilate himself did not wish to sentence Jesus to death. This was because he found no evidence that Jesus had plotted rebellion against Rome or led a rebellion by inciting the people to rise up against Rome, as the Jewish temple authorities had accused him of doing. Therefore, Pilate intended to have Jesus flogged and then release him. Alternatively, he considered releasing Jesus as a Passover pardon. However, the Jews would not allow this under any circumstances. They demanded that Barabbas—who had committed insurrection and murder—be released instead of Jesus. Pilate listened to the crowd. Behind this, it seems there were circumstances in which Pilate, as governor of Judea, had committed several serious misgovernments in the past. The Jews saw Pilate’s weakness and threatened him, forcing him to sentence Jesus to death.

Thus, after having Jesus flogged, Pilate handed him over to the Jews. Condemned to death as a political criminal who had rebelled against Rome, Jesus set out, carrying his cross, toward the hill known as Golgotha. This route is now known as the “Via Dolorosa” (Way of Sorrows) and refers to the approximately 500-meter journey from the place where Jesus was sentenced (the courtyard of Pilate’s residence) to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, believed to be the site where the Lord was laid to rest. In March 2012, during my time at my previous parish, we walked this Via Dolorosa while visiting Jerusalem on a trip to Israel. It was a cobblestone street—a narrow, hilly path—and the thought that Jesus had walked this very road bearing a heavy cross made my heart ache. Incidentally, to commemorate this journey to the cross, the route has been divided into 14 scenes, and 14 paintings or 14 crosses are hung on the walls of nearly every Catholic church chapel. People stop in front of these images, reflect on the steps of the Lord Jesus depicted there, and engage in meditation and prayer. The first scene depicts Jesus being sentenced. The final scene depicts Jesus being laid in the tomb. These are called “stations” in English and “ru” in Japanese—the same character used in the word “ru” in “ru-sho” (station). It is said that this custom began with a certain monastic order in the 15th century and spread rapidly. What exactly are the details of these 14 scenes? I cannot introduce them all here, but for example, there is the event of “Jesus falling three times.” All three of these instances are remembered as separate “stations.” It is particularly worth noting that the two central events depicted in today’s passage are both remembered as one of the 14 “stations.” One is the story of Simon of Cyrene, and the other is the scene where the Lord Jesus speaks to the women of Jerusalem. Today, I would like us to listen to the message that resonates from these two events.

The first of these is the incident in which Simon of Cyrene was compelled to help carry Jesus’ cross on the way to the place of execution. What kind of person was this Simon? Various speculations have been made. It is said that he later became a Christian and is even regarded as having become a church leader. Cyrene was a town on the Mediterranean coast in northwestern Africa, located in what is now Tripoli. In the 6th century BC, after Israel was destroyed by Babylon, the Jews dispersed and settled in various places; it appears that a Jewish community was established in Cyrene as well. We can surmise that Simon had traveled all the way from Cyrene to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage for the Passover festival. Alternatively, verse 26 states that he “had come from the country.” The New Common Translation of the Bible renders this passage as “returning from the fields,” since “countryside” can also be translated as “fields.” According to this translation, Simon was originally from Cyrene but had returned to Jerusalem, where he lived nearby and worked as a farmer. In any case, the important point is that something completely unexpected happened to Simon at that moment. During the Passover season, while walking on the outskirts of Jerusalem, he happened to come across the scene of Jesus being led to the place of execution. As he watched the proceedings as a bystander, he was suddenly seized by soldiers and ordered to

help carry the heavy cross that Jesus was bearing. For Simon, this was an absolute disaster and a huge nuisance. However, since it was an order from a Roman soldier, he could not refuse. Simon must have thought, “Why am I being forced to carry this man’s cross? This is completely unreasonable.” However, in director Mel Gibson’s film **The Passion**, which depicts this scene, there is a moment where, on the road to the place of execution, Jesus actually helps Simon up when he stumbles under the weight of the cross and takes it upon himself. What does this signify?

In Luke 9:23, Jesus says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” In other words, the image of Simon carrying Jesus’ cross is directly superimposed here upon the image of Jesus’ disciples. However, bearing a cross is not something anyone would willingly choose to do or rush to undertake. Simon was no exception. In a parallel account of the same event, Matthew 27 states that “they forced him to carry Jesus’ cross.” As the Gospel writer records, is not a disciple of Jesus one who is compelled to bear the Lord’s cross?

In September 2007, I was welcomed as senior pastor at my previous church, having previously served as an associate pastor there. I left my corporate job and began serving as senior pastor at the end of that year; in February of the following year, I held a thanksgiving service to mark my installation, inviting neighboring churches to attend. On that day, both the main sanctuary and the mezzanine were packed, with over 160 people gathered in the church. After the service, a celebration was held in the adjacent education hall, and there, an old acquaintance from Oi Church who had rushed over to attend said to me, “Pastor Kimura, congratulations.” However, at that moment, I could not wholeheartedly accept those words. For a church to invite a pastor—a vessel with its own flaws—is both a joyful occasion and an acceptance of the shared burden that lies ahead. There will undoubtedly be times when complaints or murmurs arise, wondering, “Can’t something be done about this pastor?” Yet, such an imperfect being is permitted to undertake the noble tasks of preaching and pastoral care. We must ask the congregation to be patient. Just as in marriage, what is important in a family living together is not fleeting emotion. Rather, it is having something we look up to together, and the resolve to keep what is first in first place. With that resolve, offering our very best as service to God—that is the Christian way of life. Simon was the only person in the New Testament who was compelled to help carry the cross that the Lord bore. Yet, viewed from another perspective, he was the one who was granted the grace to share in bearing the cross that the Lord bore. As one who knew the weight of the Lord’s cross, Simon’s name will undoubtedly be remembered by people forever.

The second event concerns the moment when the Lord Jesus turned to the women who had been following him and spoke to them. These were the last words Jesus spoke before he was crucified. It is believed that these women lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem and, having heard of Jesus’ reputation, had come to witness his journey to the cross. Some believe they were “mourners”—women who, in Jewish custom at the time, accompanied the deceased or condemned to death to feign grief. In any case, upon seeing Jesus, who had grown so weak that he could no longer bear the weight of the cross, they could not help but weep and mourn. Yet, seeing these women, Jesus said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep rather for yourselves and for your children.” What you should be grieving over is not your own fate or misery right before your eyes. This is not the time for you to grieve as if it were someone else’s problem, saying things like “How pitiful” or “Poor thing.” Rather, the Lord is telling you to realize that the Lord’s crucifixion is an event intended to bear the sins of none other than the people of Israel—the entire people of God. He tells us that a time of such suffering is coming that, because of the magnitude of God’s wrath and judgment, it will seem better for a woman not to have children. The Lord’s cross is the event in which God’s Son bears our own sins. Verse 31 says, “If this is done to a green tree, what will happen to a dry one?” We can interpret the “green tree” as referring to Jesus Himself, and the “dry tree” as referring to the unbelieving people of Israel. At the “Hymn Singing Gathering” held during the second week of March, we sang the hymn “Upon the Cross of Calvary.” The final line of the lyrics is, “The cross of Calvary is for me.” As we journey through the heart of Lent, I want to deeply engrave in my heart the fact that our God not only sits on a throne of high glory but also descended to the lowly place of the cross to bear the cross that we should have borne.

I pray for you.