

## **Understanding and Experiencing the Cross**

**Reflections on Good Friday (March 21, 2008)**

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The Cross stands central in the Christian faith. (I capitalized the word, “Cross” to distinguish it as the particular symbol of our Lord’s death and its unique place in history.) Through every century, every generation, Christians have learned of its power and glory. Though historically an emblem of shame and death, it has become the great symbol of victory and life because of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Cross itself is a fault-line of eternal proportions: “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Simply by being what it is, the Cross brings us to a crossroad of decision, and offers us the very life of God, or His judgment. For Paul, there is no boasting except in the Cross of Christ (Galatians 6:14), and the basis of all legitimate unity, the “dividing wall of hostility,” has been broken down through the Cross (Ephesians 2:14-16). God’s peace is accomplished for us through the Cross (Colossians 1:20), and the miserable burden of seeking God’s approval through our own, feeble efforts is erased by the Cross (Colossians 2:14). These and many other benefits flow to us from the Cross of Christ, through which God took decisive action on our behalf, accomplishing at great cost to Himself that which we could never accomplish for ourselves, no matter how hard we try, no matter how successful we become.

And yet, it is the responsibility of the Church to proclaim afresh the wonder and depth of the Cross to every generation. This, we have not done. This we must confess, and from this failure we must repent. These brief reflections are a part of my repentance. There are a number of “popular” conceptions about the Cross, but few actually answer the vital question: “What did God do for us on the Cross?” It is this simple question that I will seek to answer.

The Cross is rich and full of mystery. My reflections will certainly not be exhaustive, nor will they address every question and concern raised by the crucifixion of our Lord. As central to the faith as is the Cross, I do not claim to have understood it nor experienced it fully.

Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon me as a pastor and teacher to offer a few perspectives on the Cross that might contribute to our mission: Keeping the Cross of Christ central to the message of the Gospel, and lifted up to the glory and honor of our Redeemer.

I am deeply indebted to John Stott and his book, *The Cross of Christ*, which is, by his own admission, his seminal work. I commend this faithful and clear exposition to every Christian who seeks to live under the blessed shadow of the Cross. I am also indebted to *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, by Leon Morris. Morris brings alive some of the key words that are used in the Bible to describe the Cross – words like “redemption”, “blood”, and “propitiation”, to name a few. The clarity and passion of these two great Anglican scholars have provided me with much-needed help in my reading and application of the Scriptures in terms of living under the Cross.

### *The Centrality of the Cross for Jesus*

The Cross is not some tragic accident of history that brought Jesus’ life to an end. The Cross is neither the symbol chosen by the Church some centuries later as the “preferred identifier” of Christians. The Cross, according to Scripture, was the goal of our Lord’s life and mission.

When Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus wanted that assertion kept quiet (Mark 8:29-30). Nevertheless, Jesus begin to speak plainly to his disciples about the goal of his mission, that he “must be killed and after three days rise again.” He repeats this prediction of His death later in Mark 9:31. Though His disciples were filled with grief, it appears (from Luke) that this was the moment Jesus “set His face like a flint” toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). The third prediction in Mark comes in chapter ten, verses 32-24, with allusions to the Old Testament figures of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 and the Son of Man in Daniel 7. This three-fold repetition in Mark’s Gospel is a solemn declaration of the centrality of the Cross in the mind of our Lord.

There are other similar arguments from the other Synoptic Gospels, and an even more poignant argument from the Gospel of John, who dedicates almost half of his Gospel to recounting our Lord’s Passion

in the last week of His life. All of these encourage us to conclude with P.T. Forsythe, the great English spiritual writer:

Christ is to us just what his cross is. All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what he did there ... Christ, I repeat, is to us just what his cross is. You do not understand Christ till you understand his cross. (*The Cruciality of the Cross*, 1909, cited in Stott, page 43))

### *The Nature of God: The Intersection of Divine Mercy and Judgment*

The Bible teaches that God is both loving and holy. As a loving God, it is His nature to embrace us. As a Holy God, it is His nature to stand apart from us, even to condemn us. How can God express both His loving nature and His holiness at the same time?

Through the Cross.

Here is the “objective” understanding of the Cross. By “objective”, I mean there is a divine transaction that takes place on the Cross – a spiritual transaction that is not seen with the human eye, but perceived with the eyes of faith and acknowledged in the halls of heaven. The “subjective” perspective of the Cross does not acknowledge this kind of transaction. Rather, in the subjective view of the Cross, the tragic and (perceived) unproductive death of Jesus on the Cross nevertheless inspires us to embrace moral courage, to commit to a life of sacrificial love and to call others to look upon its magnificence with the same eye and so join us in a community of inspired followers who seek to bring God’s love into the world. But the subjective understanding of the Cross does not agree with God’s nature, especially His holiness. In fact, the subjective view of the Cross leaves us where we have always been, in the midst of our own failure and sin, with only our own sense of inspiration to deliver us. As noble and inoffensive as the subjective view may be, it does not deal with the reality of who we are as a fallen and failing people, nor of who God is as a Holy and transcendent Being.

In the objective view of the Cross, God fully expresses His love for us in dying for our sins and thus fulfilling the Law which He had given to

the Hebrews. Here, the Abrahamic Covenant is fulfilled, when in Genesis 15 God establishes a covenant with Abraham in the ancient pattern of suzerainty treaties. Carcasses of various animals are cut in two and laid on the ground, making a kind of pathway through which to walk. The conquering king then compels the conquered king to walk through the pathway (called “passing through the pieces”), after various witnesses have been invoked (both human and celestial). By “passing through the pieces” the defeated king is saying, “If I fail to keep this treaty, may what happen to these animals’ carcasses happen to me.” At this point in the story, one would expect Abraham, as the lesser vassal, to “pass through the pieces” and so invoke the judgment of God upon himself if he does not keep the covenant. In a startling reversal, it is *the presence of God Himself*, in a “smoking fire pot and a flaming torch” (Genesis 15:17), that “passes through the pieces”! In Genesis 15, God says to Abraham: “If this covenant is broken, may what has happened to these animals happen to Me.”

On Good Friday, *God kept that promise*. When Jesus died on the Cross, though we had been unable to keep the covenant God had provided us, God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, “passed through the pieces” – “... he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

As John Stott puts it,

At the cross in holy love God through Christ paid the full penalty of our disobedience himself. He bore the judgment we deserve in order to bring us the forgiveness we do not deserve. On the cross divine mercy and justice were equally expressed and eternally reconciled. God’s holy love was ‘satisfied’. (page 89)

God’s love is expressed in mercy and His holiness is expressed in judgment -- both come to fruition in Jesus on the Cross. Looking back to the Cross, we give thanks for this amazing divine transaction between rebellious sinners and a holy God. Looking forward, we are invited into the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to live as God’s resurrected people in love and obedience.

## *Experiencing the Cross*

Some may see this “objective” understanding of the Cross as a rather morbid view of human life. Many churches, especially those in the “evangelical” tradition, are often characterized as harping on sin, casting layer upon layer of guilt and shame upon their congregations. In fact, some go so far as to say that depicting the Cross in the way described above is nothing short of “divine child abuse”, and does nothing but attract the emotionally weak and imbalanced to its message. Nietzsche bitterly criticized Christianity as “needing” its members to be “sick”. It was the only way the Cross made sense.

In the Victorian era, we in the West saw ourselves as getting better and better. “Every day and in every way we are getting better and better” was the catch phrase of that generation. Filled with what has been called “chronological snobbery”, we saw ourselves as the pinnacle of civilization, superior to every historic society and slowly but surely neglecting the wisdom and contributions of past generations.

Two World Wars, a Great Depression, and a series of polarizing cultural struggles have brought us to a place of sober re-consideration. The Church need not “make” people “sick”. It simply must hold up the mirror of the Gospel and ask that we look honestly at ourselves. And then, it must preach the Cross.

Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). To proclaim ourselves “righteous” apart from the grace of Christ is to enter the most diabolical of delusions. It is denial in its most wretched and destructive form. There is nothing more cruel than to promote a sense of false well-being when the Bible calls for radical transformation.

Yes, ours is a “bloody Gospel”. The shedding of blood is an historic requirement of a covenant and reflects God’s faithfulness through the ages and His ability to keep His promises. While it may be somewhat “off-putting” in today’s culture, it is as necessary as it was in Jesus’ day.

And what about you? Where are the “secret sins” in your life? Are they squirreled away somewhere in the dark recesses of your soul, in hopes that, if you can forget about them, so will God? And in so doing, what will God have said about His holiness? And what will you have said about your failures? The light of Christ shines through His Cross, and illumines every corner of our lives. While initially this may be painful – almost unbearable – it is the radical surgery we need to receive a new heart, a new nature. It is in the light of the Cross that Paul can confidently say, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). As we trust Christ and His death on the Cross for our redemption, we will no longer hear the voice of judgment and shame, but instead the voice of love and mercy. That voice speaks into us a new nature, where we read, “If any one is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away – behold! – the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

“How do I obtain this new nature?” you may ask.

First, acknowledge that you are a sinner. Yes, it is embarrassing, but with brutal honesty, come before God your Creator and admit that you have failed to be the person He has created you to be.

Second, acknowledge Christ’s death on the Cross for you. This is the Divine Remedy. This is the Great Cure. Agree with God that Jesus Christ has taken the righteous judgment against your sin upon Himself, that for your sake God made Jesus Christ sin, who knew no sin, so that you might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Third, accept by faith Jesus Christ as your own Lord and Savior. It is not enough to give some measure of intellectual assent. It is also a matter of allegiance, of obedience, of commitment.

Fourth, resolve (by God’s grace, not your own effort!), to walk in the light of the Cross for the rest of your life – one step at a time. That first step may include letting someone else know of your decision of faith, especially someone you know who is a faithful Christian. Find a Church where the Cross of Christ is preached and where life in the Holy Spirit is offered. If you are a member of Christ Church, we encourage you to dedicate yourself more fully to living under the

Cross within our membership (there are a number of people willing to help you!). If you are not a member of Christ Church, we encourage you to seek encouragement and growth in your own congregation. If you are not active in any church, we invite you to worship with us at Christ Church and seek God's help and guidance – again, there are faithful Christians here who are willing to help you.

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, we pray you to set your passion, cross, and death between your judgment and our souls, now and in the hour of our death. Give mercy and grace to the living; pardon and rest to the dead; to your holy Church peace and concord; and to us sinners everlasting life and glory; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. Amen.”  
(*Book of Common Prayer*, page 282)

For encouragement and help in understanding and experiencing the Cross of Christ, contact us at Christ Church:

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