

The Meaning of the Cross

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[Reading: Matthew 16:21-28]

Peter's response to Jesus' prediction of his death has uncomfortable parallels with Christians who squirm at the notion that Christ's crucifixion was in the will of God.

God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.

To Peter the idea that the Christ should be put to death was unthinkable. It flew in the face of popular beliefs about the Messiah's triumph and victory over God's enemies.

It's hard for us to imagine, centuries removed from the practice of crucifixion, just how opprobrious Jesus' prediction must have sounded in the ears of his disciples.

The people who hung on crosses tended to be of the rabble or criminal sorts. Getting your head around the idea that somebody's crucifixion might usher in the kingdom of God is as incongruous as the notion that a convicted paedophile could be the Messiah.

In St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthian's he describes the cross of Christ as being intellectually foolish and religiously obscene (1 Cor 1:18-2:5). This didn't augur well for world evangelism.

Yet the message of the cross has spread to the ends of the earth. How do we explain its phenomenal reception—in particular the fact that countless millions have found this symbol of torture and death a source of forgiveness and life?

In our reading this morning Jesus lays bare the meaning and power of the cross. Over against Peter who envisages a solidly conventional Messiah Jesus maps out the victory of God in terms of his own humiliation and death.

Our natural instinct as human beings is to cling to life—to fight for our existence. Jesus invites us to become truly alive by embracing misunderstanding, rejection, and death. He commands us to live the paradoxical life captured in the pithy aphorism which says: "if you don't love others you're dead; if you love them they'll kill you". Or put slightly differently: "if you are still alive your mission has failed".

It is no surprise then that the first Christian sacrament should be that of baptism. Paul says that when we are baptised we are plunged into Christ's death (Rom 6:1-4).

When Jesus commands us to follow him he instructs us to take up our cross and make haste to the place of our execution where we will die with him alone and forsaken by the world (Matt 16:24).

You would imagine such a message would have dropped like a led balloon. But it touched a nerve. All classes of people—pagans and Jews, rich and poor, slave and free—were strangely attracted to the cross of Christ.

Many Christians imitated the Saviour's passion in Roman amphitheatres where they were torn apart by wild animals. Others died to self by forsaking family and homes, or by giving all their possessions to the poor.

It's not the kind of lifestyle change that you'll read about in the Daily Telegraph weekend supplement.

But why did the cross have such significance for Christians when they might so easily have focused on the triumph of Jesus' resurrection?

There are a number of answers to this question.

In 1 Corinthians Paul speaks of the cross as "the power of God" which stands over against the intellectual wisdom and philosophy of human beings (1 Cor 1:17-18). What the rich and clever people of this world consider might and prestige is worthless compared to the power Christ unleashed in the universe when he was crucified. Most of the people to whom Paul brought the message of the cross were powerless subjects of the Roman emperor.

Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth, says Paul (1 Cor 1:26).

For Paul the cross was the "power" and "wisdom" of God because it introduced a new way of being in the world that wasn't dependent on human strength or ability. If God was able to take a despised executed criminal and use his death to bring redemption to the world, then following in Christ's footsteps could only ever lead to life and glory.

This is what Paul is getting at in Philippians when he says that after Christ's death on the cross

God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name (Phil 2:8-9).

For Paul the cross was the gateway to glory, transformation, and exaltation. What this meant for the first Christians was that their suffering and lowly status in the world was an opportunity for God to demonstrate his awesome power in their lives.

The cross then became a symbol of triumph and victory rather than shame. Human weakness became something to glory in because through it God perfected his strength (2 Cor 12:9).

Paul says this in 2 Corinthians:

I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:9-10).

In Galatians Paul also boasts in the cross because through it he becomes crucified to the world and the world to him (Gal 6:4). What Christian experience lies behind this strange statement?

At the heart of Paul's theology is the notion that believers are "crucified with Christ" (Rom 6:6). We die with him, are buried with him, and are raised with him to new life (Rom 6:1-11). Because the cross symbolises the death of our old self-centred life it also symbolises our death to the world with its false gods and corrupt ideals.

Through the cross we are done with the world. But not in the sense that we aren't in the world or don't care about it anymore.

We are done with the world to the extent that we are dead to its call and its claims upon our life. We are done with its attractions, fashions, and morals; its ideologies, values, and priorities; its riches, wealth, and materialistic philosophies; its elitism, greed, and cult of the self; its religions, intellectual systems, and pretentious humanism.

We are crucified, in short, to all that the world offers us in terms of idolatry, self-worship, and getting right with God on our terms.

So if the cross is about the power of God in our lives it is also about our weakness and vulnerability as we put to death our egotistical cravings for worldly pleasure, approval, and self-fulfilment.

But the cross is also the place of forgiveness. In Colossians Paul says that God took all our trespasses and nailed them to the cross (Col 2:14).

You are probably familiar with the image Paul is using. People who were in debt had their records hammered up in public places for all to see. The idea here is that God took the register of all our sinful debts and wrote over it *cancelled*. By nailing it to the cross he was publicly declaring our freedom from bondage and debt to sin.

The cross, in this instance, is where we experience God's love and forgiveness through Jesus' death or sin offering.

It is perhaps this dimension more than any other which has coloured Christian thinking about the cross of Christ.

The New Testament is full of references to the fact that Christ died for us, or on our behalf, or in our place (Mk 10:45; Gal 1:4; Heb 9:11-14; 1 Tim 2:6; 1 Pet 2:24; Rev 1:5).

The cross is where we see ourselves for what we truly are, but also where we meet the boundless, inexhaustible love of God which reaches out to us and accepts us in all our sinfulness (Rom 5:6-11).

We can never know God or be right with him unless we come to the cross and agree with him about our sin.

Sin is many things. Above all it is self-deception. It blinds us to the truth about ourselves and God. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the dangers of being "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb 3:13). This is an unwillingness to see ourselves from God's perspective.

When we come to the cross and agree with God about the seriousness of our sin and the cost of our redemption we experience liberation, forgiveness, and eternal life. At the cross we learn what it is to be pure and clean. We discover what it means to have peace with God. We come to understand for the first time what love truly is. We also come to realise our potential in Christ. We experience what it is to be saved from ourselves as well as our sin. At the cross we glimpse the depths of our lostness, but the greater depths of God's redemption.

This is why Christians throughout the centuries have always come to the cross for a reality check. It can be very painful to discover the truth about ourselves; but when our heart condemns us, says John in his first epistle, "God is greater than our hearts" (1 Jn 3:20).

The cross remains an unfathomable mystery in Christian thought and spirituality. It's both a hellish nightmare and shaft of glorious light on the nature of God and the human condition.

In Colossians Paul also suggests that through the cross Christ triumphed over the powers of darkness. He says that through the cross Christ

disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them (Col 2:15).

Who are the principalities and powers? According to the scriptures they are intelligent cosmic forces that seek to destroy humanity and corrupt God's creation. If you read the newspapers you can see that they have done a pretty good job of it.

But their control and influence was decisively shattered at Calvary. The author of the Book of Revelation suggests that the activity of Satan will become frenetic in the Last Days

because he knows that his time is short! (Rev 12:12)

For the New Testament writers the forces of darkness will continue to fight battles and win skirmishes, but they have lost the war (Lk 10:18; Rev 20:7-10).

The image of Christ making a public example of them alludes to the Roman Triumph when returning generals would put on display the captives and prisoners they took as spoils of war.

We might ask in what sense the cross of Christ neutralised the powers of evil.

I think in the sense that the cross gave birth to a new way of being human. The First Adam said No to God in the garden, the Second Adam, Christ, said Yes to God's call. The First Adam was disobedient, the Second Adam was obedient. The First Adam succumbed to temptation, the Second Adam stood firm in his resolution to obey God. This, at least, is how Paul sees it in his epistle to the Romans (Ch 5:12-21).

But you get his point. The first humans sought autonomy from God and when they achieved it plunged the world into chaos. When the Lord Jesus Christ sought absolute fidelity to the will of God he opened up the possibility of others following in his footsteps. His willingness to die on the cross undid the cycle of selfishness associated with our first parents, and allowed Christ to be the head of a new humanity, which was infused and driven by the Spirit of God. Once this began to happen Satan's power to deceive and lead astray was decisively broken as humankind was offered the opportunity and possibility of turning back to God.

I have barely touched upon the subject of the cross.

I finish this morning by drawing your attention to Hebrews 12:1-4. They are wonderful verses which direct our thoughts to the cross of Christ in times of trial and difficulty. This is what they say and I pray you will take them with you into the coming days.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him, who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Amen.

