

The Cross is the key

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18, Psalm 27, Philippians 3.17-4.1, Luke 4.1-15

So now we are into the second week of Lent—ten days closer to the events of Easter, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Lent is a journey to the cross and every thing we do in Lent is done in the shadow of the cross. Today I would like to draw your attention away from everything else—work or study that needs doing, the beautiful new cupboards in the foyer, the plight of Peter Garrett and all the rest—and help us to focus on the cross.

The cross is obviously not some side issue in Christianity. It is absolutely central. Even theologians who want to downplay its significance cannot dismiss it entirely. All the Gospels have been called passion narratives, that is, narratives about the crucifixion, with prologues. All the stories about Jesus point to this one extraordinary event. It is true other religions have stories of gods suffering and dying and indeed rising again. Only Christianity has the scandal of the cross – the historical person of the carpenter from Nazareth who is executed as a common criminal in the most public, violent and shame filled way. Paul called it a stumbling block and foolishness but (and this both perplexes and strengthens us) it is the power and wisdom of God.

It may surprise you to know, or perhaps you will not be surprised at all, that there are many theories as to what the cross of Jesus Christ is all about. The classic teaching is that God as Jesus died on the cross for our sins. This is an understanding that has transformed thousands of people. Take the example of a homeless gang member and terrorist of an African country who was about to lead the firebombing of a Christian community. As he sat in the worship service for a few moments waiting to signal the killing to begin he listened to what the preacher was saying about Jesus being executed by those he came to save and making peace with God for us by his death.

He wrote: *“I could identify with Jesus. He suffered in all the ways that I knew so well—poverty, oppression, hunger, thirst, loneliness. I had known all of these things, and so had he. But the amazing thing was, he had not needed to know such suffering – but had accepted it for my sake, to pay the price for me. On the cross he had become a nobody so that I could become a somebody...tears for all the pain, loneliness, self-hatred and fear I had known coursed down my cheeks”¹.*

The effect on this person was profound and transforming. The man who had come for violence left in peace. Ultimately he was led out of poverty and oppression and into a completely new life focussed on reconciliation and service. This understanding of the cross, that Jesus died in the place of us for our sins was originally developed by the medieval scholar Anselm and was enthusiastically taken up by the reformation theologians. We hear echoes of this in some of our thanksgiving prayers. Yet there are other understandings, ancient and modern.

There is the understanding developed by Peter Abelard another medieval scholar. Abelard held that Christ's work is best understood as a manifestation of God's love, which has the sole purpose of awakening a corresponding love in the hearts of humankind. It is the awakening of love, neither more nor less, which constitutes salvation. When we enter into the story of Good Friday, when we become aware of the deep and abiding love of God, then love

¹ Cited in Heim, S.M. *Saved from Sacrifice – a Theology of the Cross* William B.Eerdmans Publishing 2006 p29

is awakened within us. Perhaps Abelard's theology was influenced by his own tragic love of Heloise. I for one would actually like to think that real human difficult loving leads one to a deep understanding of the divine

And here are a couple of modern understandings—the first comes from the French philosopher Rene Girard who came to faith via the academic, rational path. Girard holds that the violent death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus reveals to humanity its own violent scapegoating. The cross reveals that all sacrificial and therefore all religious systems and our view of God are corrupted by the basic human need to find individuals and groups to lay the blame on for all the suppressed conflict and potential disasters facing a community. In essence human communities find an innocent subgroup to 'take' the blame. What Jesus death does, and particularly how he behaves post resurrection with his forgiveness and compassion, is to reveal both our collective violence and blaming and God's eternal loving. This revelation is powerful but is swamped again and again by our human need to find scapegoats and sacrificial victims.

The other modern view sees in the death and resurrection of Jesus the pattern of the dying of our own ego self with its fear and self-centeredness to a new life. We die to an old way of being and are born again into a life centred in Creator, Christ and Spirit. It is the journey to our highest good and the recovery of our true self. What the cross and resurrection make possible is our transformation into Christ-likeness, God-likeness. In this understanding Jesus embodies or incarnates the universal path of transformation that is also spoken of in other religions and spiritual practices.

Now, I hope you were not too bored or flummoxed by all of that, but I wanted you to get that there are indeed many ways to understand the cross. I do not have the definitive answer. No one does. Every one of these theories can be 'proved' by scripture. Everyone is well argued, rationally thought through and debated. In the face of such a confusing array I love the brevity of the creed – *for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven...for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again.* The creed puts it simply and simply put, salvation means to be saved from our predicament, whatever that is. Christians have understood their predicament in many ways – physical illness, a soul burdened by guilt, political oppression, the tyranny of the ego, abandonment and existential depression amongst others – and these same Christians have found in the cross of Jesus Christ a path to transformation.

I must admit my story has been a mix of all these understandings – forgiveness and understanding for some pretty terrible things I have done, finding an all encompassing non-violent love, finding a God I can wholeheartedly believe in and finding my true identify in Christ. If we over time we live out our salvation, or as Paul puts it, work out our salvation, then it is not only our transformation that is affected – it is the transformation of our relationships, our world and our environment. But the key is the cross.

Perhaps instead of trying to understand the cross and what it means we should let the cross read us, interpret us, and redefine us. Perhaps we should sit under the shadow of the mystery of the cross and let it speak to us. To paraphrase of Blasé Pascal, perhaps we need to approach the cross with love not speculation. For we can get our understandings very skewed.

Paul in the letter to the Philippians that we heard read from warned about the enemies of the cross. It is the only place where this phrase occurs. These enemies of the cross were not a band of militants or terrorists that wanted to bring down the early Christian church. They were Christians who had misunderstood the essential message of the cross. These Christians

insisted on following the letter of law around old purity codes, on legalistic prescriptions on food and behaviour and on the Jewish rite of circumcision. They were still trapped in the idea that following rules could win you salvation. They were still trapped in prideful thinking that set them apart from everyone else. Legalism is a terrible temptation for any religion but I think particularly for Christians. It leads us into what is essentially a perversion of the message of Christ.

Paul's great accomplishment was to get the early church to see that Jesus message was for all people—slave or free, Jew or gentile, man or woman, all and any one. Christianity's great mistake has been to continue to try and define who gets saved and by what criteria. We have fallen into the temptation of thinking we own the truth rather than we simply sit under the power of the truth and proclaim the love and freedom of Jesus Christ. The love and freedom of our Lord is based in humility, not pride. How could it be otherwise when he has given of himself in such a way?

Our Gospel story makes clear that Jesus teaching was that all people, all, are called to repent. That is all are called back into relationship with the divine. The biblical meaning of repent is not primarily contrition but resolve. It means to return from exile and to reconnect with God. It is about a conscious, committed decision to head on home to God. It is finally deciding that you need a loving power higher than yourself. The roots of the Greek word also meant, "*go beyond the mind that you have. Go beyond the mind that you have been given and acquired. Go beyond the mind shaped by culture to the mind you have in Christ*".² Go beyond the conditioning that tells you that you need to be and behave in a certain way to gain God's favour. In a very real way we have to go beyond the mind we have to begin to see another reality—the reality of God that the cross reveals to us. We have to open our minds and hearts to the mystery of the cross for as countless people have discovered this new vision saves and transforms.

When we turn to our true home, go beyond our mind and it's constraints, we find ourselves in the presence of a caring, nurturing and loving God. When we begin to know and live that reality we are participating in the communion of love, which is the very being of God. Shortly we will join together in Holy Communion. In it we tell the story again of the cross, the death and resurrection of Jesus. We share a meal of bread and wine, a memorial of his body and blood, in remembrance that in love he died for us—however we understand that, however that touches our heart. In the sharing we unite ourselves to God, creation and each other. We proclaim his saving death. We claim his freedom and wholeness. May we all this lent be touched and transformed by the cross of Christ. Amen.

² Borg, M.J. The Heart of Christianity Harper One 2004 p180