

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, March 14, 2021

“Cross Talk”

A clerk in a gift shop in California was responding to a customer about purchasing a gold cross. The clerk said, “Yes, madam, we do have gold crosses. Do you want a plain one, or one with a little man on it?”

To an outsider, the cross must seem like a very strange thing to have at the center of our worship. It was a gruesome instrument of torture and death. It is like having an electric chair, or handyman’s noose at the center of our attention. Outsiders may wonder at the Church’s preoccupation with one single atrocity, committed twenty centuries ago. We know Christ’s cross was only one of thousands on which enemies of the Romans were hanged. When Jesus was a lad about six years of age, the revolt of Judas of Galilee was put down, and crosses lined the roads near His home town of Nazareth—two thousand of them.

After the failure of the Spartacus rebellion about a generation after Jesus, some five thousand crosses lined the Appian Way. Why concentrate on this one? Yes, it was a brutal form of execution, but we are no longer as horrified by it, as we once were. We have seen wars, atrocities, and extermination camps in recent years. We have become almost immune to such suffering. But we are not asked to weep over crucifixion as a unique form of cruelty and injustice, for what is important is not what was done, but to whom it was done.

Mark’s Gospel ends the detailed description of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus with the confession of one of the soldiers standing by: “Truly this man was the Son of God.” (Mark 15:39) Whatever he may have meant, he probably spoke more than he knew. For Jesus Christ is not merely one in a long line of martyrs across the centuries. This was the world’s supreme act of defiance, in the face of a loving God.

The world did its worst, but God did His best, and Easter was the result. When St. Paul thought about the crucifixion, he came to the profound conclusion: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself...” (11 Cor. 5:19) Contrary to most of the world’s religions, it is not God who needs reconciling, but the world. Our God is not an angry God who got ticked off, and took it out on His Son; but a

loving God who entered fully into our human condition, to take the worst that the world could do, and wring from it His best.

Did you ever have the experience in life when, looking backward after a particularly harrowing time, you saw the hand of God at work, sustaining you? Many of us have come through dark nights of the soul, and have felt sustained by the everlasting arms of God. In hindsight, we often find a strange pattern of meaning in events, which at the time were agonizing and absurd.

David H. C. Read, a Presbyterian minister in New York, said of the first Christians: "As they looked back on the death of Christ, it became more and more apparent there was a liberating reckoning with sin. The word 'sacrifice' came to their lips, and also the moving words from the Old Testament about the one wounded for our transgressions' and 'bruised for our iniquities.'

They began to see when God let Christ die, He was allowing the weight and guilt of our human rebellion to be absorbed in love. He was taking the strain from us. He was suffering in our place. He was reconciling us to the Father in offering Himself to the last drop of His blood." This was the victory of God, who has given His all for us, and now waits for our response to His suffering love.

Over the centuries, Christians have used different "word pictures" to describe what happened at Calvary:

- 1) Anselm of Canterbury, who lived from 1033-1109, put forth the notion that Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for our sin. When we sinned, we disobeyed God's moral laws. Therefore, somebody had to pay. There must be suffering to atone for our sin. God made us for fellowship with Him, but we rebelled, and sinned. In so doing, we dishonored God. We must either repent and repay, or be punished. But if all people were punished by being sent to hell, and thereby lost to God, then God's purposes for the world would be defeated. God faced a dilemma: God could not treat sin lightly, nor could God risk losing everybody. What could God do? Anselm said that God could not just let bygones be bygones—somebody had to pay the debt. But the debt was so huge that no one human being could repay it. So God paid the debt Himself...in giving His son. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son..."

- 2) Peter Abelard lived from 1079-1142, and he came up with what we might call the “Moral Influence” theory of atonement. Abelard said that Jesus’ death on the cross was simply the supreme example of God’s love for us. What happened on Calvary in no way changed God’s attitude toward us. It revealed it. In the Cross, we see just how much suffering our sin cost God. When we survey the wondrous cross, our hearts are melted within us, and we feel drawn back to God, and away from our sin. As Paul said in the Letter to the Romans, “God shows His love for us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)
- 3) A third view of what happened on the cross has been set forth by a Swedish bishop and theologian of our own day. He wrote a little book which has had an enormous impact on the church, a book titled CHRISTUS VICTOR. He says that for the first millennium of the Christian Church, an entirely different view held center stage. The view that dominated the church for the first thousand years or so was the notion that in the cross, Christ did battle with the forces of evil which held humanity captive—and won the battle, victorious. On Easter, we sing the triumphant hymn of Charles Wesley: “Love’s redeeming work is done. Fought the fight, the battle’s won! Alleluia!” This is the view that dominated the church for the first millennium of its existence. It was neglected for a time, but was rediscovered by Martin Luther at the time of the Protestant Reformation. It speaks of Christ as one who delivers us from bondage.

You see, the New Testament writers believed the world was in the control of evil powers. This world was “occupied territory,” in the control of Satan, the “Evil One.” In fact, the original Greek of the Lord’s Prayer does not say “Deliver us from evil” but rather, “Deliver us from the Evil One.”

The New testament message is that this world is in the grip of demonic forces, the “principalities and powers” of whom Paul speaks. (See Romans 8:38, Eph. 3:10, 6:12; Col 1:16, 2:14). But Christ came to free God’s children from them. In the Cross and Resurrection, Jesus Christ fought a battle on our behalf, and defeated the powers of evil which hold us in bondage. Therefore, Satan is not “alive and well on planet earth.” Since that first Easter, Satan is definitely unwell. God, in Christ, has dealt Evil a mortal blow. This view of the Atonement was very popular

in the early church, for everyone knew what slavery meant. And I believe it can have great meaning for our day.

We have seen whole nations and peoples caught up in demonic forces. We need a deliverer to come and rescue us. We need to remember that we are enlisted in a battle against evil, whose outcome is assured. Easter is the promise of God's ultimate victory, over any and all evil.

In one of Elie Wiesel's stories of the Holocaust, prisoners are staring at the execution of a young man on gallows by Nazis. "Where is God? Where is God in all this?" someone asks. Softly came the reply, "Up there. Up there on the gallows with that boy." That is the price God was willing to pay to win a wayward world back to Himself. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself."

The problem in the Christian Faith is not getting God to love us. According to the Gospel, He could not love us more. The problem is getting us to respond to that love by giving ourselves to Him. The whole Biblical story is the story of God's romance with the human race, and God's attempts to win us back to Himself.

As I said, Christians have used different words and word-pictures to describe this. One has been the idea that Christ paid a price for our sin. Another was that Christ revealed the suffering love of God. Another was that in the cross, Christ entered into a battle with the forces of evil on our behalf, and won the victory. All of these theories express part of the truth, but perhaps our hymns say it best:

We may not know, we cannot tell

What pains He had to bear;

But we believe it was for us

He hung and suffered there.

And again:

Were the whole realm of nature mine

That were any offering far too small;

Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all. AMEN!