

# “The Paradox of the Cross”

a sermon by

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Text: “As he was now drawing near, at the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest’” (Luke 19:37-38).

David Brooks has recently written in the *New York Times* that Americans no longer take religious doctrine very seriously. We assume that religious differences are temporary, that denominational differences will one day fall away, and that “we will all be united in God’s embrace.”

This was brought home to me several years ago when I served as a member of the search committee for the new President of Davidson College. The constitution of the college states that the President must be “an active participant in the life of the Davidson College Presbyterian

Church.” When we interviewed a number of candidates, it occurred to me that this requirement did not seem to pose much of a problem for most of the candidates. To some joining the Davidson College Church did not seem too different than becoming a member of the Peninsula Country Club. I remember one candidate specifically who, when I asked him about his church involvement, told me that he wasn’t really a member of a church, but each summer when he and his family visited Nantucket, he always attended the Episcopal Church at least once during the summer.

Brooks notes that religion today is easygoing and experiential rather than rigorous and intellectual. To fill our pews, he writes, pastors emphasize the upbeat and the encouraging and downplay the business of God’s wrath. In modern “seeker sensitive” churches, “the technology is cutting edge, the music is modern, the language is therapeutic, the dress is casual.”

That leads me, of course, to Holy Week. Over the years I have noticed a pattern about Holy Week. On Palm Sunday there is a large congregation here at church. We enjoy Palm Sunday. The hymns are inspiring, the drama of children placing their palms in the front of the church, and the uplifting worship. The same is true with Easter. Easter is not just a religious holiday in this country, it is almost a national holiday. Many businesses are closed on Good Friday. Most families make it a point to get together for Easter lunch.

But what about Holy Week? What about those events in Jesus’ life apart from which neither Palm Sunday nor Easter make any sense: the disputations in the temple, the plotting of the religious leaders, the agony of Gethsemane, the shameful trial before the San Hedrin, the encounter between Jesus and Pilate as well as Jesus and Herod, and then the awful scenes of mockery and scourging, and the slow death on a cross. I will be honest with you; there are not many people around for these events. That is why, as we come to this Holy Week 2004, I am aware that the crucifixion of Jesus and the events of Holy Week confront us with some of the most perplexing paradoxes that one could imagine.

## I.

One of these is that events of Holy Week, while they are very ancient, are as contemporary, personal, and intimate as this morning’s newspaper. The death of Jesus surely is one of the most important events of ancient history. But, it is more than that.

One of the controversies surrounding the Mel Gibson movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” was whether the movie was anti-Semitic. I saw the movie and I did not see it as anti-Semitic. I believe that most Christians have always understood that it wasn’t the Jews who killed the Christ. It was far bigger than that. Do you remember the old Spiritual, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Well, in a deep sense, we were all there when Jesus was crucified. All of the major factors that involved the death of Christ involve you and me. The blindness of religious leaders who could not and would not see a new and larger truth, the selfishness of a business community that did not want the profitable traffic in the temple courts disturbed, the disloyalty of Judas, who cared more for himself than for the Christ, the political shrewdness of Pilate, who did his best to free Jesus, but finding the cost too high, washed his hands of the

whole affair, the emotionalism of the crowd, the fearfulness of the disciples--who of us was not there?

One of the most disturbing aspects of the crucifixion of Jesus was that it did not involve one unusual sin. It was a series of small, familiar, day-by-day sins that did Jesus in: betrayal, denial, apathy, and failure of courage. Several years ago I walked the streets of Jerusalem and recapitulated in detail all the events of that last week in Jesus' life and it was not hard for me to imagine how easy it would have been for all of us to participate in the death of Christ. When they crucified Jesus, we were there.

Consider, for example, the crowd's choice of freeing Barabbas instead of Jesus. Barabbas was no common criminal. He was, says Matthew's gospel, "a notable prisoner." His name means "son of a rabbi." He was a patriot, an outstanding nationalist, tired of the Roman rule, who called for insurrection and rebellion. But he was a violent man who had actually committed murder. So the crowd, when given the choice, chose to release a murderer and to crucify a man who had committed no sin. That is a scene that has been repeated time and time again.

Every factor that sent Jesus to the cross involves our familiar day-to-day iniquities. Do you remember that at the Last Supper Jesus said to the disciples, "One of you will betray me?" Each one of them asked, "Is it I? "Is it I?" So, as we walk once again through the streets of Jerusalem this week, we ask ourselves, "Is it I?"

## II.

There is another paradox of the cross and it is this. The death of Jesus was one of the cruellest things ever done to a single person and yet the cross of Christ has elevated the worth and dignity of humankind more than any other influence of history.

Look at the cross in all of its stark horror. What happened there has been called "the loneliest death in all of history." The Jewish people had rejected Jesus. The San Hedrin had convicted him of "blasphemy." The Roman soldiers taunted him, dressed him with a crimson cloak and scepter and made fun of him. Pilate had washed his hands of the matter. The crowd jeered him, his disciples fled from him. He was alone. Can anyone doubt the sincerity of the cry of the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

That is what people did to Jesus. His death was one of the most heinous and barbarous deaths imaginable. Yet, the irony of it all is that the cross of Christ has elevated and dignified the worth of human individuals more than any event in history. The individual, claims the New Testament, is "the brother for whose sake Christ died." So the same cross that revealed mankind at its worst is the same cross that makes us believe in man at his best. That is a strange paradox.

There is a marvelous story from the Seventeenth Century about the humanist scholar Muretus, who was a fugitive from France. He fell ill in Lombardy, and because he looked like a street person, the physicians who treated him were going to experiment on him. So they spoke to one another in Latin, saying, *Faciamus experimentum in anima vili* (let us try an experiment on

this worthless creature). Then, much to their surprise, this worthless creature replied to them in Latin *Vilem animam pro quo Christus no dedignatus est mori?* (Will you call worthless one for whom Christ was willing to die for?)

The influence of that idea is incalculable. When a king stoops to pick up something, it has value. When Christ dies for a person, there must be something in that person worth dying for. “While we were yet sinners,” writes the Apostle Paul, “Christ died for us.” Christianity has failed in many ways but at our best we have reached out to those whom the world has treated as “worthless,” the outcast, the prisoner, the street person, the homeless.

The cross shows us the worst of human nature. But it also shows us the best as well, and that is a paradox. As the Apostle Paul put it, “Where sin abounded, grace did abound even more.” When I contemplate the cross, I believe anew in God.

### III.

Then, too, there is another paradoxical aspect of the death of Christ. It was the most terrible thing that could happen to him, yet it was also the best thing that could happen to him. Now, it goes without saying that the cross was a terrible form of capital punishment. Jesus would have known that. When he was a boy in Nazareth, a Jewish revolt broke out in Sepphoris, a town barely five miles from where Jesus lived. Josephus, the historian, tells us that two thousand people were once crucified by the Romans alongside the road. It is incredible that Jesus would not have seen a crucified man hanging on a cross. He knew the awful pain of that death. No wonder he prayed in Gethsemane, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.”

Yet out of that terrible experience came something no one could have really predicted. “It became him,” says the author of Hebrews, “in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.”

The New Testament makes it clear that crucifixion was not thrust upon Jesus. He chose it. “I lay down my life,” says Jesus in the Gospel of John, “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down myself.” That is the unanimous witness of all the gospels. Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. Somehow he knew that his death would give life to so many people.

I don’t know where this touches you in your life, but I do know that sometimes--good things come out of bad experiences. A number of years ago when I was a senior at Davidson College, I was completing my final semester. I only needed one science credit to graduate, but somehow in a moment of temporary insanity, I chose to take a course in Physics. I only needed a “D” to graduate and being a senior, I decided I didn’t want to expend any extra effort. So I did what I thought would be a minimal effort, except I did not contemplate that I would fail the final exam and that I had gotten myself into a mess that even the good graces of Dr. Frontis Johnson could not extricate me from. So I was not able to graduate with my class but had to take an additional class in summer school. It was an embarrassing and humiliating moment for me, and I assure you my parents were not very happy about it either. But I did learn something from that experience and it changed my academic career entirely.

#### IV.

Here then is one of the greatest mysteries of all. The cross of Christ was one of the most crushing defeats of righteousness, yet it was one of the greatest victories that righteousness has ever won.

From one perspective, the events of Holy Week mark one of the saddest chapters in all of human history. On Palm Sunday Jesus swung around the brow of the Mount of Olives amid the hosannas of the crowd, but by Friday the crowd was crying, "Crucify him." He had trusted his disciples, but they had failed him too. Peter denied. Judas betrayed him. James and John could not even stay awake with him in Gethsemane for one hour.

And, yet, all of the evil in the world could not defeat this Jesus of Nazareth. For on that terrible Friday, when Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas had gone home, they believed that they had at last put an end to this Jesus. They could have never imagined that on Sunday morning a tomb would be empty, a stone rolled away, and that out of the greatest tragedy the world has ever seen would come the world's greatest victory.

That is surely the greatest paradox of all. The cross was not a denial of God. It was the supreme revelation of God. That is why the cross holds such a great power for us. We place it on our churches, our graves, and our necks. The cross is the great symbol of our faith.

What good would Christianity be to us today if it were centered and confined in the lovely stories of Bethlehem, with adoring wise men and shepherds and singing angels? That is not an adequate representation of what we are confronted with in life. Life is mysterious, baffling, often tragic and the cross speaks to us at the point of our greatest vulnerability, reminding us that God has a wonderful way of taking the worst and turning it into the best. That is why the cross is the symbol of all we believe. The great hymnist Isaac Watts put it like this:

When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss  
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Amen.