

“The Cruciality of the Cross”

a sermon by

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**Text: “The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee’”
(Matthew 21:11).**

Two weeks ago I participated in a seminar at Princeton Seminary on “The Gospel in a Secular and Pluralistic Society” in which the group of which I was a part examined the distinctive nature of Christian witness in an increasingly pluralistic society. One of the readings for the group was the introduction to *Church Dogmatics*, by the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth, the founder of the so-called “neo-orthodoxy movement”. In this brief introduction Barth frames one of the most important questions about the Christian faith: Is it a faith of revelation or one of reason? For Barth, the answer is simple and unequivocal. Christianity is the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ and in the Old and New Testament. For Barth, the revelation of God is a great paradox or scandal. In the birth, life, death, and resurrection God chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chooses what is low and despised in the world, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no one may boast in the presence of God (I Corinthians 1; 26-30).

Nowhere is this paradox more evident than in this Holy Week and in the presence of the cross at the center of our faith.

I.

One of the most perplexing paradoxes of the cross is that it represents an ancient spectacle and yet it is a personal and intimate matter that involves every one of us. The drama of Holy Week is one of the most powerful that one can imagine. The Roman Empire was present with all its imperial power. One of the great religions of the world was there as well. It is a powerful story that includes betrayal, denial, death, and resurrection.

There is a very powerful African-American spiritual that we sometimes sing during this week, entitled “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” That spiritual in itself displays the uniqueness of the cross. We would not ask “were you there when President Kennedy was shot?” Or “were you there when Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed?”

And yet, we know that there is a sense in which we were all there when they crucified Jesus. All of the major factors in that tragedy involve you and me: the blindness of the religious leaders who cannot see a new and larger truth; the selfishness of a business community that does not want the profitable traffic in the temple disturbed; the disloyalty of Judas, who cares more for himself than for Christ; the political shrewdness of Pontius Pilate, who does his best to free Jesus, but finding that it costs too much, washes his hands of it; the emotionalism of a crowd, stirred by effective propaganda to cry for they know not what; the fearfulness of the disciples. Is there any one of us who was not there?

One of the most troubling aspects of the crucifixion of Jesus was that it did not involve one unusual sin. Say what we will about the tragic death of Christ, it was the small day-to-day sins that did it. Several years ago I walked through the streets of Jerusalem. As I moved through the Stations of the Cross and recapitulated the events of that terrible Good Friday, it was not hard to imagine how easy it would be to feel the shame of that day. When they crucified our Lord, we were all there.

Take, for example, the crowd’s choice to release Barabbas rather than Jesus. It was a custom during the time of Passover for the Roman ruler to release one prisoner to the crowd. Pilate thought surely they would prefer the release of this “Prince of Peace” to this murderer and insurrectionist. Yet, the crowd chose Barabbas.

Every factor that sent Jesus to the cross involves our familiar day-to-day iniquities. Recall how at the Last Supper Jesus said to the disciples, “One of you will betray me,” and they all asked, “Is it I?” So as we walk from Palm Sunday to Easter there is one haunting question above all the rest: “Is it I?”

II.

There is another aspect of the centrality of the cross and it is the fact that the cross demonstrates both the worst of humankind and its best as well. On one level the cross represents the worst of humankind. Jesus was betrayed and abandoned by his disciples. The Roman soldiers

had spit upon him. Pilate had washed his hands of Jesus. He was despised and rejected. The crucifixion of Jesus is as cruel a witness to human debaseness as one could imagine.

And yet, look what the cross has meant to so many people. “Man,” cries the New Testament, “is the brother for whom Christ has died.” The crucifixion of Christ, more than any single event in human history, has elevated human worth.

There is a story in the church about a Seventeenth Century humanist scholar, Muretus, a fugitive from France who fell ill in Lombardy. He was dressed as a vagabond but sought help from the doctors. The physicians who attended him addressed one another in Latin, not thinking that this bedraggled pauper could understand their learned tongue. “*Faciamus experimentum in anima vili,*” they uttered, “Let us try an experiment on this worthless creature.” Much to their astonishment this worthless creature replied to them in Latin, “*Vilem animam appelas pro qua Christus non dedignatus est morti?*” - “Will you call worthless one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?”

The influence of that idea is hard to calculate. One of the greatest and abiding influences of Christianity has been its emphasis on the worth of the individual. Through the years the church has reached out to the lowly and the lost, the neglected, the insane, the blind, the prisoner. Why? Because we believe that Christ died for every person. This has been the rallying cry through the centuries. “Will you call worthless one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?”

The cross, where humankind is at its worst, somehow made us believe in its best. As Paul put it, “Where sin abounded, grace abounded even more.”

III.

The cross is crucial for yet another reason, and it is that while it was the worst thing that could have happened to Jesus, it was the best thing as well.

Jesus understood the horror of crucifixion. When he was a boy in Nazareth, there was a Jewish insurrection in Sepphoris, barely five miles away. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that there were two thousand crosses that the Romans placed along the roadside. He understood the barbarity of that form of death. No wonder he prayed, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.”

And yet, one of the most remarkable aspects of Holy Week was that the death of Christ was not something that was imposed on Jesus. The New Testament says this. “I became him,” says the Epistle to the Hebrews, “in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.” The New Testament never viewed Jesus as a pawn on a chessboard. The New Testament is unequivocal on this point. “I lay down my life,” says Jesus, “no one takes it away from me.” The Gospels are unanimous in this. Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. No one made him do it. Who could have imagined that two thousand years later people would sing;

“In the Cross of Christ I glory
Towering o’er the wrecks of time;
All the light of scared story
Gathers round its head sublime.”

This mystery of the cross illumines many lesser mysteries. Recently I came across a biography of George Washington, entitled *His Excellency: George Washington* by Joseph Ellis

In this book Ellis points out that in many ways Washington is the least known of the founding fathers of this nation. He did not have the brilliance of Thomas Jefferson or the wide range of interest and contacts enjoyed by Benjamin Franklin. Nor did he have the political know-how of a John Adams. But all of these men recognized in George Washington a spirit of leadership that made him the “Father of his Country”. Much of Washington’s character was shaped by his experience in the military. One of the most crushing defeats that the Colonial army suffered was at Fort Necessity, where Washington’s poor judgment suffered in a terrible loss for this struggling nation. But Washington never forgot Fort Necessity. He learned from his mistakes. It was the worst experience of his career, but it was fundamental in shaping his destiny and the destiny of the country he loved.

In the light of the cross of Jesus Christ it is clear that trouble, hardship, disappointment, tragedy, are not accidents and intruders in life, but part and parcel of it and no one is prepared to live who is not prepared to welcome them, walk with them, take them in, and transmute them into good.

IV.

Then, finally, the centrality of the cross at the beginning of this Holy Week reminds us that sometimes the greatest victories are brought out of the worst defeats. On Palm Sunday Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem amidst the cries of “Hosanna” by those who welcomed him. Palm Sunday is painted in strokes of a king who comes in triumphal victory. But by Friday, the same crowd that had hailed him on Sunday were now saying, “Crucify him. Crucify him!”

In many ways what we call “Holy Week” was a complete disaster. Jesus sought to bring about a religious reform, but the religious leaders rejected him. He trusted his disciples with the meaning of the Kingdom of God, but one betrayed him, another denied him, and the rest abandoned him. The Jews turned their backs on him. The Romans crucified him. On Friday afternoon, when his dead body was taken off the cross, it appeared that everything that Jesus had stood for was totally gone.

Here appears one of the greatest mysteries of all time. At the point of Jesus’ greatest failures came his greatest victories. Here is the key to the greatest power in the world: the power of self-sacrificial love. Jesus understood this. Listen to his words: “Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abides by itself alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

This, of course, is the greatest mystery and wonder of all. The cross was a denial of God, a blatant, cruel denial of God, and yet it was the supreme revelation of God.

Part of the great power of the cross is its ability to illumine our own lives. Life itself is an enigma and it takes an enigma to illumine them. What good would Christianity be to us today if it were only the story of the triumphant entry of Christ on that Palm Sunday? That is not an adequate representation of what life confronts us with. Life is mysterious, baffling, frustrating, often tragic, and it is the cross that illumines our lives for us, for the cross reminds us that great victories come only after great defeats.

In the face of this overwhelming fact we can only bow our heads and sing:

“When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gains I count as loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.”

Amen!