

Basics of the Faith 1: The Meaning of the Cross
Romans 5:6-11
January 12, 2020

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. (Matthew 27:50ff)

All the Gospels place this event as the climax of the story. His capture, torture and death occupy almost a third of their Gospels. Jesus in one of his sayings tells his followers that the goal of his mission is ultimately to die. Why we must ask did he have to die? What does it mean? It wasn't what was expected of a Messiah!

If you attended a Christmas party or function my guess is that you will have seen at least one or two people wearing a cross. It is commonplace today to see the cross on necklaces or ear rings. Strange in a way that the most gruesome form of execution devised should be worn as an ornament around our necks. For many, however, it is a symbol of their commitment to their Lord and their faith. Even church architecture was influenced by the cross, with the nave and transepts forming a cross.

Anyone reading seriously the gospel accounts of Jesus comes away acknowledging that he was a magnetic and compelling teacher. Most would acknowledge this about Jesus. But ultimately the gospels point beyond him as teacher to Jesus as sacrifice. For without the cross and resurrection, Paul reminds us, we are still in our sins. Unpacking the meaning of the cross takes us to the very centre of the drama. The cross is, in short, the pivotal point in the drama of our salvation.

But the question remains, why? In the Alpha series on this topic people are interviewed asking them why they think Jesus died. Their answers remind us just how far removed the general population is from this story of Jesus. Most of those interviewed had no idea why Jesus had to die. What about you? Do you know?

The New Testament is replete with texts that point to the sacrificial death of Jesus. The cross and resurrection is central in Apostles' preaching. In the Romans reading we find Paul also stressing the cross: *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly...God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

The basic message of the New Testament is that God loves each one of us. The cross is the supreme expression of that love. In our Gospel today we notice that when Jesus died the curtain in the temple split in two signifying that the way into God's holy presence had been opened up for each human person. The cross is a reminder that God's burning desire was to reconcile each one of us to himself. We are told over and over again that sin was the problem. It created an insurmountable barrier to us being in relationship with God. And God's answer to that dilemma was to enter into our world and die in our place to sin. Nicky Gumbel in the Alpha series calls this the self-substitution of God. He died for me and for you!

In the New Testament writers like Paul and Peter, among others are keen to let you know why Jesus died. They all remind us that it was our sin that separated us from a relationship with God. And no amount of self-effort, no amount of good works, no amount of self-discipline can clean the slate. For as Paul reminds us: *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. God has taken the initiative to resolve this dilemma. Peter says: He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that free from sins, we might live for righteousness: by his wounds you have been healed. (1Peter 2:24)*

Paul says: *that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:19ff)*

John says: *I am the bread of life... This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. (John 6:48ff)*

There is a beautiful sculpture by Charlie Mackesy of the Prodigal Son being embraced by the father when he comes home. It reminds us in an emotional way just how profound God's love is in this story. The father embraces his son when he comes home. This, Jesus taught us, is how God welcomes us home. God's love embraces us and hugs us, loves us, weeps with us, and welcomes us into an intimate relationship with the God who created us.

Some of our hymns try to express this truth but often do so in language that might seem crude to the modern ear, and perhaps even offensive to a few in the 21st century. For example, the famous hymn made popular by the Billy Graham crusades, *Just as I am*, speaks of the blood that was shed for me. Another famous hymn, "Rock of Ages" speaks of the shed blood. One of the verses goes, *let the water and the blood, from thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure: cleanse me from its guilt and power*. And even more demanding for our modern ears is the third stanza which goes, *foul, I to the fountain fly, wash me, Saviour, or I die*. Indeed, once you start to thumb through the hymn book you discover a plethora of references to the blood of Jesus shed for us. Blood, of course, is a powerful metaphor for life. He gave his life for us.

Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that he decided to come to them knowing only Christ crucified. And even bolder is his triumphant theme announced in the opening chapter: *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing: but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*. The centre of his proclamation to the Gentiles will be **Christ crucified**. To the Ephesians Paul writes: *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ*. The New Testament's entire theological vision is predicated on God's redemptive action in the cross of Christ.

And of course, collapsing all of this discussion into the words instituting the communion we come to the centre of the action. It is his body and his blood that is symbolized in the bread and wine. Perhaps we need to see the cross both, as a means of cleansing our guilt and sins, and as a symbol of God's amazing love for us. Both, I think, are contained in the symbol of the cross: God's sacrifice for our sins and God's love in the giving of his Son.

And so now we turn to the table on which lie the elements representing that cross. The broken bread and the poured wine speak eloquently of Christ's death for us. This bread is my body given for you, and this cup poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood, he says. It was for every one of us, good or bad, the seemingly righteous and the obviously unrighteous, all of us together. This communion takes us to the heart of the matter on what the cross means. He died for me and for you; for everyone!

Amen