

The Cross establishes the credibility of God

We are assured of God's love by Christ's wounds

Today the cross adorns our church buildings, graces our bishops, turns up on our lapels, and hangs from gold chains around our necks.

In the first century, it was not so. The cross was obscene. To wear a piece of jewellery fashioned to look like a cross would have been grotesque, an odious bit of macabre humour considerably more shocking than, say, wearing a bit of jewellery fashioned like the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb.

No Roman citizen could be crucified without the emperor's consent. Crucifixion was reserved for the scum of society: for slaves, traitors, barbarians. Quite apart from the hideous and public nature of the death, there was a public odium to crucifixion that sent a shudder of revulsion down the spine whenever the subject was brought up.

Small wonder, then, that Paul can write that 'the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing' (1 Cor.1:18). In particular, the Jews of Paul's day tended to think of God invading history in a powerful display of signs that would authenticate his claims and restore Israel to international prominence. They 'demand miraculous signs' Paul writes (1:22). The Gentiles ('Greeks', in Paul's terminology) 'look for wisdom' - self-contained philosophies, that were essentially centred on one guru or another; holistic theories that allegedly integrated all human perceptions of the universe.

And what, Paul asks, do we offer? We preach Messiah crucified: a contradiction in terms to most people. To the Jews, this was a stumbling



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block: the Messiah was to be victorious, not a crucified, ignominiously shamed criminal. To the Greeks, this was foolishness: how can one build a decent philosophy on the back of a barbarian Jew publicly executed for treason in the most despicable way possible?

But to us Christians, 'to us who are being saved' (1:18) the message of the cross is nothing less than the power of God and the wisdom of God. It is powerful where Jews see only weakness; it is wise where Greeks see only foolishness.

Thus the cross destroys the credibility of God among those whose god is not the God of the Bible. But it establishes the credibility of God among those who are being saved.

We must be careful here. Some modern writers extrapolate from the sufferings of Christ on the cross to the assumption that Christ actually shares personally in all suffering in the world. The cross thus becomes a kind of immanentist identification of God with all human suffering. But that is not the way it is treated in the New Testament. In many respects it is unique: it is Christ's suffering on our behalf, once and for all, to reconcile his people to God. If that unique and redemptive suffering is not appropriated by faith,

all the pictures of divine empathy reduce to so much mawkish sentimentality. Many people rather like a sentimental God; he is easily domesticated. But the cross does not demonstrate God's impotent sentiment; it establishes his justice and his love.

Sometimes the New Testament does indeed portray Jesus as sharing in the continuing sufferings of his church. When Paul was persecuting the church, the risen Lord challenged him with the question, 'Saul, Saul, who do you persecute me?' (Acts 9:4). But typically, this is not only an identification of Jesus with his church and not with the world at large, but more precisely with those sufferings of the church that have to do with their pilgrim passage through an alien world. To extend this without qualification to all suffering everywhere, without even the effort to tie together some of the other biblical emphasis on suffering, is reductionism that radically deforms God.

For Christians who see in the cross the sublime expression both of God's justice and his love, the cross is immensely reassuring. It was a sacrifice offered once for all time (Heb.10:12). Christ, having died once, dies no more, and in that sense no longer participates in the sufferings of the cross. But that does not negate the fact that he knows what suffering is like. 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are - yet was without sin.' (Heb.4:15). Above all, the fact that Jesus is no longer suffering crucifixion cannot mask the love that brought him to the cross on our behalf.

And that is enough. How many men and women have been won to Christ because by God's grace they came to see that Jesus died on the cross for them? How many countless millions have first truly grasped what the love of God means because they have glimpsed the cross? 'This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 John 4:10). Our hymns have made the point again and again, as this well-known example from Isaac Watts (1674-1748):

Alas! and did my Saviour bleed?
And did my Sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?

Was it for sins that I had done
He groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And love beyond degree!

Well might the sun in darkness hide,
And shut his glories in,
When Christ, the mighty Maker, died
For man the creature's sin.

Thus might I hide my blushing face,
While His dear cross appears,
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
And melt my eyes to tears.

But drops of grief can ne'er repay
The debt of love I owe;
Here, Lord, I give myself away:
'Tis all that I can do.

Frequently it is when we are crushed and devastated that the cross speaks most powerfully to us. The wounds of Christ then become Christ's credentials. The world mocks, but we are assured of God's love by Christ's wounds. Edward Shillito understood this. Writing in the wake of the First World War, when an entire generation of young men was mown down by machine guns and artillery in the endless trench warfare that marked that conflict, Shillito composed the poem 'Jesus of the Scars.'

If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn pricks on Thy brow;
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us: they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.

If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know today what wounds are, have no fear;
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

In the darkest night of the soul, Christians have something to hang onto that Job never knew. We know Christ crucified. Christians have learned that when there seems to be no other evidence of God's love, they cannot escape the cross. 'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?' (Romans 8:32).

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