

Cross Talk – Lent 5

As I indicated last week, this final installment of 'Cross Talk' sets out my ruminations on the meaning of the Cross – **for me**. I share with you my understanding of the Cross with the hope that you might think about, and even share with others, your own understanding.

The crucifixion of Christ is one of the Christian religion's great mysteries. While theories abound regarding it and books without number have been written about it, it remains a matter that has as many meanings as there are persons contemplating it. Each of us has a particular 'relationship' with Christ and that will necessarily influence our view of the Cross.

Your understanding of the crucifixion will be very different if you understand Jesus to be divine, God incarnate, rather than if you understand Jesus to be, say, a great prophet but nonetheless ordinarily human.

As I go back many years to an early stage of my growing faith development (it still is developing!), I recall being in the congregation to which I belonged in Toronto. On Communion Sundays (only once every three months in those days), it was my habit to close my eyes during the communion liturgy as I sat in my pew. My thoughts always turned to the horrific nature of Jesus' death and how God had sent this wonderful Saviour to us, how his example and his teachings had become so important to me, and then I'd think what it was that human beings had done to this incredibly good person. I would find myself imagining how hurt and angry God must have been at the way Jesus was treated; how hurt and angry God must be at the way we, all too often, treat one another.

I thought there must be a part of God that just wanted to destroy all humanity and start all over again. And I believed God could do it if God wanted to. But God didn't want to. It made me realize just how forgiving and loving God is. And I also realized that God willingly, out of love, transformed the horror of the crucifixion into something amazing and beautiful – the resurrection of Christ.

However one interprets this story, literally or figuratively, historically or not, or a combination of both – for me, it has proven to be a pattern in the way I view life and the way God's presence affects our lives. Not only in my own life have I experienced this pattern, but I have witnessed the pattern in others' lives – the pattern of movement from our Good Fridays to our Easter Sundays; from sorrow to joy, tragedy to triumph, troubled endings to wondrous beginnings, despair to hope, death to life.

Somehow, God assists us, empowers us, encourages us in the worst experiences of our lives so that we are given new life, offered renewed possibilities, live into futures of worthwhile living, that in the present difficult moment seemed impossible even to imagine. In the Cross I understand God as forgiving and loving beyond measure. I understand God as working in and through our experiences of suffering and death to experiences of transformation and resurrection. God's love is more powerful than human hatred; God's goodness has the final word over human evil.

Once a teen-aged boy struggling with questions of faith told me that he believed in God, but had a hard time believing in Jesus as God. "What do you think of that?" he asked me. My response was something along these lines: "Well, if you believe that God loves us so very, very much, what would be the greatest gift God could give to us as an expression of that love? I think that gift, if it were in God's power, would be to become one of us. And, so Jesus, called Emmanuel meaning 'God-with-us', is that wonderful gift." I think there is a way in which we are all "incarnated". God's spirit is in all of us; we are made in God's image. And yet, in Christ, God was supremely incarnate. In Christ, God experienced all it was to be human, including suffering and death – even death on a Cross. I have found this to be, for me, quite powerful for I understand God to know me, in my humanity, not as an abstract imaginative exercise, but as one who has actually shared my humanity. The one to whom I pray truly knows personally and experientially of what I pray.

Another meaning which has become more important to me over the years, is one in which the Cross signifies the world's opposition to God and the values of justice, inclusiveness, peace, goodness and love. Jesus, in his loyalty to God, in his love of God and humanity, stayed true to the mission to which God had called him – even when it meant betrayal, abandonment, torture and death on a Cross. The Cross exposes the forces of evil and by such exposing of these forces, they are diminished and ultimately defeated.

Just one more word on the meaning of the Cross. While I do not subscribe to the classical atonement theory which I described in Cross Talk for the first Sunday in Lent, there is a way in which Christ's death on a Cross is a sacrifice. I am not able to articulate this well and, I admit, it is all somewhat fuzzy for me. But I have long thought that there had to be a direct connection between Jesus and the cult of sacrifice that God's people of Israel had practiced for centuries. After all, he was a devout Jew, knowledgeable about the religious Law, and steeped in the religious customs and traditions (some, of course, he severely criticized when they came into conflict with God's overarching mercy and love).

I can't help but think that as Jesus made his plans, determined to go to Jerusalem and do things to upset the political and religious leaders, he must have known the high likelihood of being arrested and killed. He must have considered how he might 'link' his Jewish faith to his death. The idea of Christ as 'high priest' plays into this. As it states in the book of Hebrews:

"Under the old covenant, the priest stands before the altar day after day, offering sacrifices that can never take away sins. But our High Priest offered himself to God as one sacrifice for sins, good for all time."

But what is meant by sacrifice here? How does that sacrifice lead to forgiveness of sins? I take a cue, once again from 'Hebrews' in Chapter Ten, where it is written:

"You did not want animal sacrifices and grain offerings, but you have given me (Christ) a body so that I may obey you. No, you were not pleased with animals burned on the altar or with other offerings for sin. Then I said, "Look, I have come to do your will, O God – just as it is written about me in the Scriptures."

The sacrifice on the Cross is that of loyalty and obedience to God and God's way to the bitter end. It is a sacrifice representative of the sacrifices (usually much less severe) that all of us make to do God's will when that will is opposed by worldly powers. Jesus sacrificed his life, in this way, but it became a means by which followers of Christ have come to know just how incredibly forgiving and loving God is. For even that cruelest of acts – the crucifixion of Jesus – God was able to forgive – and by God's loving intentions for the world, this despicable, horrific event was transformed through Christ's resurrection – into a blessing for all.

Lent is a season in the church year to do some reflecting on these, admittedly, difficult topics and themes. Still, I believe that the Cross and the Empty Tomb, have been and remain central to the Christian faith – and so merit our pondering. In the end, the Cross and the Resurrection are mysteries of our faith signifying above all God's love for humanity – a love that knows no bounds and no limits. May we return that love by living in the way of Christ.

Thanks and praise be to God!

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