The Problem of the Cross:

1. This was originally written to be preached before Easter but other sermons needed to be preached and so, it was delayed. That said, I think it is very valuable to teach lessons that are not expected, if we are following the standard calendar of Christian readings.

2. We speak of the cross quite a lot at Easter, of course. I think it would be a good idea to speak of it again today. We need to keep the cross in front of our eyes as the song, “Abide With Me,” says. “Hold Thou Thy cross before my dying eyes, shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.”

3. The cross is our glory but it is also a huge stumbling block to the world. May I make a suggestion for your reading this year? Read the Gospels over and over. Read other books, secular or sacred, as you wish but come back again and again to the Gospels. The story of Jesus changes us and it is there that we see the problem and the glory of the cross.

4. NT Wright said that the Gospels are not a Christian version of Aesop’s Fables, but we do tend to read them that way. We pick a story, read 10-11vv and then go on about our way. If, however, you choose to read intentionally, you might find that things change. Pray before you read and pray after you read for wisdom.

5. We need to know Jesus and know Him thoroughly, getting his voice inside our head and his attitude into our personality. Letting him work through our hands, our money, and our heart. He can’t flow out of you until he has flowed into you.

6. From the earliest days of our faith, people have had a problem with our crucified God. The Jews were disappointed, thinking that the cross proved Jesus was not the Promised Messiah. How can the One who is coming to save Israel be nailed to a cross and die in such a helpless, humiliating way? (and some thought it best to wait awhile and see if angels came to save him)

7. The pagan tribes of Europe scoffed at a God who allowed Himself to die such a death. Norse raiders routinely killed monks and priests,

burning their churches after making off with any treasures they could find inside. African tribes balked at the whole idea of a savior who did not come in vengeance against those who hurt or killed him. As Livingston and many others found out, a lifetime of teaching the cross led to no more than a few converts. The missionaries did much good, for certain, but why weren't they more successful?

8. 1st Peter 2:6-12. Jesus is, indeed, a stumbling block to many. I've worked with people to the point where they decided it was possible, and maybe even likely, that there is a God…but they struggle with "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." To some, it is because of the exclusivity of Jesus ("I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me."). For others, it is the stories of genocide, or they read Paul as being a misogynist. But to many, the idea of Penal Substitutionary Atonement, or Vicarious Atonement is the issue.

9. To review, Vicarious Atonement says that God is righteous and holy and good (no argument there!) and that sin is a terrible offense against God (again, correct). To forgive our sins, there must be a blood sacrifice (although many non-blood sacrifices were commanded in the Hebrew scriptures). Since animal sacrifices could only do so much and had to be repeated again and again, God had to send Jesus to earth to suffer and die, bearing the weight of all our sins and paying the price so that we would be saved.

10. There is a great deal right about all of that. There is no question that Paul and the writer of Hebrews emphatically state that our sins required a sacrifice and that Jesus, our Great High Priest, made that sacrifice on our behalf. However…

11. There are problems. It doesn't answer all of the questions about why Jesus had to die in such a manner. It makes God and Jesus be on different sides and…who pays who if they are One? A great many of the people you know and interact with every day would never say this to you, but when someone says "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," they think, "Well, according to the preachers I heard growing up, it is more like "God so hated the world that He killed His Only Son."

12. Fair? Of course not! But it is a real stumbling block to many – far more than you might realize unless you are a late convert to Christianity.

13. It is my opinion that, if we knew the Hebrew scriptures as well as we should, that we could answer a lot of their objections. For example, Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” It is a direct quote from Psalm 22. I find it overwhelming poignant and touching. It also shows me that Jesus the Psalms well enough to pull out phrases and quotations that matched the moment. But, if we knew our scriptures, we would know the rest of Psalm 22.

14. It starts out with a plea, asking God why the psalmist has been forsaken but the rest of the psalm moves to an entirely different place. By the time he reaches v.24, the psalmist begins to see and hope again. The rest of the chapter, he rejoices in what God is going to do. He no longer feels forsaken.

15. Read Psalm 22. Now…how does this change the problem of the cross?

16. I would submit: it only changes it in every possible way! When Jesus was born, the forces of darkness began to gather. Not long after, Jesus and his parents would have to flee their province for another one, outside of the reach of Herod’s soldiers and their swords. Demon possessed people and those struck by illness began to gather.

17. John would surround Jesus’s story with the battle of light and darkness (also the title and theme of a book found in the Dead Sea Scrolls). John 1:1-14.

18. Now the problem of the cross begins to show chips and cracks. By the cross, Jesus did die for our sins as was prophesied in Isaiah 53…but he had already done more and would do more yet. The Atonement was Christ’s life AND his death AND his resurrection, not just the cross. Because he took on human form and became one of us, he became our High Priest when he offered the greatest sacrifice for us – willingly, as he had been part of the plan from the beginning.

19. God did not burn with anger against us nor did He feel the slightest bit different about us than did His Son for they are One. Just as Jesus was baptized when there was no sin in him because he wished to fulfill all righteousness, he died when he did not have to. We will never, ever be able to claim truthfully that God is holding out on us. That was the root of the first lie of the devil and it still trips up a lot of us today. He gave it all.

20. Christ did more than pay for our sins. He defeated death, sin and the devil on the cross. What looked like a loss was the more brilliant of wins. He died with forgiveness on his lips just as he lived with forgiveness on his lips.

21. The cross is not some courtroom maneuver. It is not some transaction, but a triumphant display of God's power to defeat the grace, sin, and the devil. The devil got knocked on the head that day, a mortal blow that limits him today and will end him one day. Jesus was bruised and battered, but only Satan received a mortal blow.

22. For we do not serve a God who can be killed by human hands. We serve a God who let them think they could kill him…just as many today think they can just ignore him. Both those who kill and those who ignore are guilty of a grievous error: We serve a God who is alive and who, alone, has the gift of eternal life.

23. And He is not stingy with that gift or with His love.