

Perspectives on the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Down through the centuries, Christians have worshipped a crucified God. The cross is at the heart of Christian revelation, Christian knowledge, Christian experience, Christian prayer and Christian preaching. Paul says, confidently and boldly, “We preach Christ crucified.” (1 Cor.1:23)

But I wonder today if we have somewhat ‘sanitised’ the cross of Christ so that it doesn’t affect us in the way it once did. Perhaps we have ‘distanced’ ourselves from it and even developed ‘herd immunity’ to its power, its brutality and how its message can change lives.

It seems to me that there are different crosses on offer, so I will begin by looking at some of those examples, before moving on to the challenge that the real cross presents us with. I will examine the Biblical meaning of the cross; the importance of taking up our own personal cross and then ask the debatable question, “Can Christ be re-crucified?” I will consider what the cross says to us about suffering, what its message might be for contemporary society and finally how the cross may be venerated.

The ‘Decorative’ Cross.

For many, the cross has been turned purely into a piece of jewellery, a fashion accessory.



When someone asked a young woman, who was wearing a cross with Jesus on it round her neck, if she knew who Jesus was, she said, “No tell me, I’ve often wondered who that little man was.”

The broadcaster and journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge, once wrote, “Since that Golgotha happening, billions upon billions of crucifixes must have been made, from exquisitely-fashioned ones to the most tawdry, gimcrack, mass-produced ones; from huge overpowering Calvaries to little tiny jewelled crucifixes to hang round the neck or over the heart, but always with the same essential characteristics – a man at the last extremity of a cruel death, with lolling head, and feet and hands viciously nailed to a wooden cross.”(1)

The 'Theological' Cross.

It is possible to clothe the theology of the cross in correct, if rather remote, theological jargon. I'm thinking of Latinised-English words like 'redemption', 'propitiation', 'reconciliation', 'atonement' and 'justification.' Words which have a familiar doctrinal ring to them but lack a visceral quality and therefore need to be unpacked and applied lest they fossilise and lose their power.

The 'Romanticised' Cross.

The cross can be 'romanticised' by beautiful and poetic language. We forget it was an instrument of extreme torture ~ a means of State execution.

In 1912, George Bennard, the American Methodist evangelist and song leader, wrote the words for that popular, favourite hymn "The Old Rugged Cross".

In it he says that for him, the cross has a 'wondrous attraction'. He sees in it a 'wondrous beauty' and he 'loves that old Cross'. Really? I find it shocking, sadistic and brutal.

An 'Approach-Avoidance' response to the Cross.

Perhaps many of us have adopted, understandably, an approach-avoidance response to the cross of Christ. We know it is central to our faith and yet we do not wish to dwell for too long in its presence.

I find it interesting that all of the gospel writers record how some disciples 'stood near the cross' (Jn. 19:25) whilst others were 'watching from a distance' (Mt. 27:55 & 56; Mk. 15:40). Still others, especially the men, (except John) seemed to have fled the scene completely. Today, I think those who have fled are in the majority.

But some women can, I believe, get closer to the heartfelt meaning of the cross than men. Women seem to be able to identify, not only with Jesus, but particularly with Mary, Jesus' mother, and Simeon's prophetic word to her years before, 'a sword will pierce your own soul too.' (Lk. 2:35). Many are the mothers who have felt the pain of their offspring's choices, calling and destiny.

And, having taken care of Jesus' needs throughout his life and ministry, it was the women who remained in greater numbers at Golgotha.

Perhaps another 'approach-avoidance' reaction to the cross is that, at Easter, we are often reluctant to stay with Good Friday and prefer to rush headlong towards Easter Sunday via 'Holy Saturday'.

The 'Intended Message' of the Cross (from a Roman perspective).

Scenes of crucifixion were common in Roman times and served as a public service announcement. Paula Frederickson says that the message was:

“Do not engage in sedition as this person has, or your fate will be similar. The point of the exercise was not the death of the offender as such, but getting the attention of those watching. Crucifixion first and foremost is addressed to an audience.” (2)

Because crucifixions were intended to instil fear in the population at large, they always took place in public places. And at these public spectacles, some only gathered to ridicule and mock (Mt. 27:39-41).

The 'Challenging' Cross

We also find it difficult to embrace the cross, I think, because it challenges all the assumptions and values which our society holds dear and with which we ourselves often identify. Society values wealth, success, intelligence, strength, beauty, power, influence, eloquence, knowledge etc. but none of these count for much at the foot of the cross.

Recently I got talking to a young man who told me he had just completed his first year at Oxford University. I asked him what he was studying and he replied, “Physics and Philosophy.” I wondered if his studies would lead him to the cross.

By way of contrast Paul writes, “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” - some were, but not many.

And then he goes on, “But God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him.” (1 Cor.1:26-29)

If we ask the question, “Where is God to be found in the Bible?” The answer is, “With the oppressed slaves in Egypt; in the manger in Bethlehem; with John the Baptist in the Desert; with Jesus on the cross in Jerusalem; with Stephen as he was stoned.”

So often we don't see God at work because we are looking in the wrong places.

The upside-down kingdom

The cross reverses the expectations and conventional values we hold dear; it introduces us to the upside-down nature of the Kingdom of God. “So, the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Mt.20:16) and, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.” (Lk. 1:52).

Jesus showed us that with God, the way up is the way down. “Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross. **Therefore**, God exalted him to the **highest** place...” (Phil. 2:8& 9a)

James Cone writes: “The Cross, as a locus of divine revelation, is not good news for the powerful, for those who are comfortable with the way things are, or for anyone whose understanding of religion is aligned with power.” (3)

This leads us to another reason why we find it difficult to speak about the cross. Because in doing so, we will be challenging those who have the economic, political, scientific, religious and media power.

Those who hold the power within these authority structures were, and are, threatened by what they regard as the subversive nature of Jesus’ teachings about God’s justice, righteousness and love. This is especially true today in countries with totalitarian governments and in Muslim and Hindu majority countries.

Jesus was crucified as a supposed insurrectionist – one perceived to “pervert the nation”, “stir up the people” and “oppose the payment of taxes to Caesar.” He also claimed to be “Christ, a King”. (Lk.23:1-5)

Malcolm Muggeridge sees the significance of the crucifixion as being “a sublime mockery of all earthly authority and power. The crown of thorns, the purple robe, the ironical title ‘King of the Jews’, were intended to mock or parody Christ’s pretensions to be the Messiah; in fact, they rather hold up to ridicule and contempt all crowns, all robes, all kings that ever were. It was a sick joke that back-fired. No one who has fully grasped the crucifixion can ever again take seriously any expression or instrument of worldly power, however venerable, glittering or seemingly formidable.” (1)

The disciples, then as now, found it difficult to understand and identify with why their Messiah had to suffer and die.

But, from a human point of view, it's not difficult is it? Those with the religious power decided it was expedient for one man to die in order to protect the status quo, in order to preserve their own personal power, position and privilege, and also that of their nation. (Jn.11:48-50). Today, nationalism is getting stronger across the globe and the gospel of Christ is seen as a threat to such a trend.

A stumbling block to the Jews

However, the disciple's real problem was with a suffering Messiah ~ and Peter's confusion well explains their dilemma. Having received a commendation from Jesus for his pronouncement that Jesus was indeed "the Christ/Messiah, the Son of the living God", Jesus then goes on to describe how he himself must suffer, be killed and then be raised to life on the third day.

This talk of suffering was too much for Peter to stomach (he probably didn't hear the bit about Jesus being raised from the dead!). The idea that the Jewish Messiah was going to suffer and be killed was not part of Jewish expectation. So, Peter said to Jesus, "Never Lord, this shall never happen to you!"

And Jesus said to Peter, "Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me." (Mt.16:13-23)

It is interesting to ponder why it is that most Jews have never accepted Jesus as their Messiah.

We could say that it was because Jesus didn't set his people free from the oppressive Roman regime that occupied their land ('we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel' – Lk. 24:21), but there were even greater disappointments than that.

There was no grand ingathering of the Jewish exiles (Ezek. 37); the knowledge of God didn't fill the whole world (Is. 11:9&10); there was no general resurrection of the dead (Dan. 12:2); and there was no rebuilding of the Temple (Ezek. Chapters 37-47).

Jews didn't necessarily think their Messiah needed to be sinless and some even believed he would be married and have sons (Ezek. 46:16 & 17).

In all these ways, Jesus, and the impact he had, didn't fit in with Jewish expectations, so he was then, and is today, generally rejected as their Messiah.

A key passage which Christians believe points to a suffering Messiah, Isaiah 52:13-53:12, the Jewish people don't regard as referring to the Messiah's suffering but either to the personal suffering of Isaiah or to the general suffering of the people of Israel.

Only when the veil is taken away (both for Jews and Gentiles) do we perceive the true meaning of the Cross which is hidden to the 'rulers' of this age but revealed to us by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6-16).

The 'Revealed' Cross

The cross points to the following: -

1. The love of God. (Rms. 5:8; 1 Jn. 4:10)
2. The anger of God. It was at the cross that Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath (Mt. 26:39-44) ~ Sin kindles God's wrath.
3. The pain of God. It was on the cross that God suffered and died.
4. The justice/righteousness and mercy of God.
5. The forgiveness of sins. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." (Heb. 9:22)
6. Reconciliation with God. It was at the Cross that God was reconciling the world to himself. (2 Cor.5:18 & 19; Col. 1:21 & 22)
7. Reconciliation with one another. (Eph. 2:14-16)
8. Victory over the principalities and powers (Jn. 12:31; Col.2:15)
9. Victory over death (1 Cor.15:55-57; Heb. 2:14&15)
10. Freedom from the bondage of the law (Col. 2:14)

All of this, to the natural mind, seems like 'foolishness' and 'weakness' but for those who have had the veil taken away, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:20-25).

Eventually, the veil did fall away from Peter's heart and mind and he was able to write with understanding, "[Christ] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24)

And, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." (1 Peter 3:18)

If this message of the cross doesn't shake, startle and motivate us, what will?

Just before lockdown, I was invited to speak at a traditional Anglican church. We followed the order for Morning Prayer complete with the sung Venite, Benedicite etc.

At the end of the Service an elderly lady came up to me and said, "Thank you for your sermon this morning. I normally have a sleep during the sermon but I didn't today!"

There is surely something wrong with sermons, and theology, which fail to wake us up and keep us awake!

The 'Personal' Cross

Perhaps this is the thing we feel most uncomfortable with in relation to the cross. The personal invitation from Jesus that in order to be one of his disciples we must deny (not indulge) ourselves, take up our cross (not our cushion) and follow him. (Mt.16:24)

In the same way that Jesus voluntarily took up his cross (no one forced it on him), so he invites us to voluntarily take up ours (he won't force it on us).

Some people equate their own personal suffering - maybe a tragedy, an accident, a bereavement, a disease etc. - with the cross they have to bear. But this is to misunderstand what Jesus is saying.

Our cross is not some personal misfortune that God puts on us and is beyond our control. A cross is something that we deliberately choose. It is the suffering we experience because of our words, our actions and our service with and for Christ.

It can include the loss (denial) of personal ambition; it can mean not being conformed to the pattern of this world; it can mean appearing to be a 'social failure' or an outcast; it can mean accepting ridicule and taking social flak; it can mean having to endure a certain amount of humiliation; ultimately it may even mean giving up our lives as martyrs.

The English word 'martyr' comes from the Greek verb 'martyreo' = 'to bear witness'. As part of their witness, martyrs give up their lives.

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, refused to say 'Caesar is Lord' and, at 86 years old, was burned at the stake in 155 AD. A few years ago, Graham Staines, working among people with leprosy in Bihar, was burnt to death in his car, together with his two sons, by Hindu fundamentalists.

These are the reasons why Jesus always wanted those who were thinking of following him, to do a risk assessment and a cost analysis **before** deciding to commit themselves (Lk. 14:28-33). Only by following Jesus in his servant ministry and by embracing the misunderstanding, ostracism, rejection, ridicule and even death that he experienced, can we be said to be voluntarily carrying our own cross.

And the strange paradox is that as we do this, rather than lose our lives, we will find them and as we die to self, we will discover life in all its fullness.

The 're-crucified Christ' on the Cross?

In the sense that Christ gave himself once, was sacrificed once 'and has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Heb. 9:26), there can be no repetition of Christ's unique crucifixion.

However, it seems to me that there is a prolonged, ongoing sharing by God in the pain of humankind. Christ himself continues to identify and suffer with those who suffer. As Saul continued his murderous rage against Christians, Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus Road and said, "Why do you persecute **me**?" (Acts 9:4)

Similarly, all of us are called to identify with, and share in the suffering of others, "Regard prisoners as if you were in prison with them. Look on victims of abuse as if what happened to them had happened to you." (Heb. 13:3 – The Message)

James Cone sees a close association between the thousands of black lives lost in the 'lynching era' in America (1880-1940), and Jesus' hanging on a tree.

He writes, "The lynched black victim experienced the same fate as the crucified Christ and thus became the most potent symbol for understanding the true meaning of the salvation achieved through 'God on the Cross'."

And he continues, "The real scandal of the gospel is this: humanity's salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity's salvation is available only through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst. The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. The crowd's shout 'Crucify him!' anticipated the white mob's shout 'Lynch him!' (3)

He also writes, "Because black slaves knew the significance of the pain and shame of Jesus' death on the cross, they found themselves by his side." (4)

Cone thinks that the most vexing problem facing the Church today is how it defines itself by the gospel of Jesus' cross. 'Where is the gospel of Jesus' cross revealed today?' he asks.

Personally, I am often struck by Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt.25:31-46). It seems a bit one sided to me in that he just picks out the nice things which people had done, or not done, to others i.e. feeding others, clothing others, visiting others. In doing those good things to others, Jesus said we were doing them **to** him.

But it must surely also apply that when we injure, maim and kill others we are also doing that **to** Christ. In this sense are we, perhaps, crucifying him again?

In fact, the writer to the Hebrews (who well understood the 'once and for all' nature of Christ's sacrifice) had no doubt that Christ can indeed **continue** to be crucified, though in a different manner from Cone's observation.

In Hebrews 6:1-6, the writer is clear that a person who has become a Christian and then renounces their faith in Christ, cannot again be brought back to repentance since they are '**continuing to crucify the Son of God all over again and are continuing to subject him to public disgrace**' (both verbs are present participles indicating ongoing actions).

Jesus himself warns of the possibility of such a denial, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven." (Mt. 10:32 & 33)

The Cross and Suffering

It is one of the commonest complaints that suffering disproves the existence of a loving God. But when we look at Jesus on the cross, it is there that we see God's manifest presence. It was at Calvary where God was in Christ, actively reconciling the world to Himself. (2 Cor. 5:19)

It must follow from this, that not only can God be present in suffering, but also that, in Christ, there is purpose in suffering. Suffering can be redemptive.

It is true, of course, that suffering, from our human perspective, can seem unbearable, unnecessary and even ridiculous. Job (a type of Christ), and Christ himself, both had their moments of deep doubt and despair.

Simone Weil had an interesting perspective on affliction. She saw it as a nail, driven into our soul, which fastens us at the point of intersection of the two branches of the cross – the point of intersection between creation and Creator.

So perhaps Mary, the mother of Jesus, wasn't the only one to experience a 'sword piercing her own soul' as she contemplated her son hanging on the cross; perhaps we also will all have our own 'calvary moments'.

And again, paradoxically, the way of suffering and affliction becomes the way of understanding, revelation and comfort, which leads to a life of praise, prayer and ministry to others. This is what Paul states clearly in 2 Cor. 1:3-11.

The Message of the Cross for Contemporary Society

As we have noted earlier, the message of the cross is counter-cultural, diametrically opposed to the direction of travel of today's society.

The way of the cross involves denying self and dying to self in order to have life (Mt.16:24&25). The way of the cross involves losing one's life in order to find it (Mt.10:39; Lk.9:24 and 17:33; Jn 12:25).

The way of the cross involves giving in order to receive (Lk. 6:38); accumulating treasure in heaven rather than on earth (Lk.12:33); and maintaining the soul, not just the body (Mk. 8:36).

Of course, to say, write or suggest such things today, is to be generally met with incredulity if not irritation, and to be regarded as being something of a pessimist, if not an outright killjoy.

But I ask myself, "What is the alternative to that which Jesus is proposing and calling us to?" Is it a society convinced that life is to be found in having more money, more leisure, and more recreational drugs, with more people hooked on calories, alcohol, gambling, gaming, sex and gratuitous violence, a society pursuing easier divorce, easier abortion and easier euthanasia? A society saddled with debt, awash with failed celebrities, and strewn with overweight bodies, disturbed minds and spirits bound in melancholic depression?

Surely that is the way of real pessimism and despair.

I can see now exactly what Jesus meant when, towards the climax of his magnificent Sermon on the Mount, his plain advice was this, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Mt. 7:13&14)

The ‘Venerated’ Cross

To venerate means to treat with deference and respect, to revere. The apostle Paul goes so far as to say, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.” (Gal. 6:14) And, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” (Gal. 2:20a)

There is a way of looking at the cross with profound joy and thankfulness, yet also with deep sadness. But maybe George Bennard was correct. Perhaps there is also an awesome beauty in the cross, sometimes best captured by hymn/songwriters.

So, John Bowring (1792-1872) wrote:

“In the cross of Christ, I glory,
Towering o’er the wrecks of time:
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

When the woes of life o’ertake me,
Hopes deceive, and fears annoy,
Never shall the cross forsake me;
Lo! It glows with peace and joy.”



And I love the verses from this hymn, “The Royal Banners Forward Go”, written by Venatius Fortunatus (530-609). This version is translated by J. M. Neale and is No. 455 in the Lutheran Service Book: -

“The royal banners forward go;
The cross shows forth redemption’s flow,
Where He, by whom our flesh was made,
Our ransom in His flesh has paid.

Where deep for us the spear was dyed,
Life’s torrent rushing from His side,
To wash us in the precious flood
Where flowed the water and the blood.

Fulfilled is all that David told
In true prophetic song of old.
That God the nations’ King should be
And reign in triumph from the tree.

On whose hard arms, so widely flung,
The weight of this world’s ransom hung,
The price of humankind to pay
And spoil the spoiler of his prey.

O Tree of beauty, tree most fair,
Ordained those holy limbs to bear:
Gone is thy shame, each crimsoned bough
Proclaims the King of Glory now.

To Thee, eternal Three in One,
Let homage meet by all be done;
As by the cross Thou dost restore,
So guide and keep us evermore.”

Amen.

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References:

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- (3) James H. Cone, ‘The Cross and the Lynching Tree’, (Orbis Books, New York, 2011).
- (4) James H. Cone, ‘The Spirituals and the Blues’, (New York, Seabury Press, 1972).