

The Cross in Paradox

I say to you, “Two men entered a house by the chimney. One came out dirty and the other came out clean. Which one washed himself?” And you say, “The dirty man, of course.” And I say, “No. The dirty man looked at the clean man and assumed he was clean. The clean man looked at the dirty man and assumed he was dirty. So it was the clean man that washed himself.” Now I say to you again, “Two men entered a house by the chimney. One came out dirty and the other came out clean. Which one washed himself?” And you say, “As you just said, the clean man.” And I say, “No. The clean man could look at his own hands and see that he was clean. The dirty man could look at his own hands and see that he was dirty. So it was the dirty man who washed himself.” So I say you to you again, “Two men entered a house by the chimney. One came out dirty and the other came out clean. Which one washed himself?” And you say, “Both!” And I say, “No. It is impossible to for a man to enter a house through the chimney and come out clean. The question itself is flawed.”

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross, which we recall on this Good Friday, challenges us to think in new ways, to question all the answers, and even question the questions. I won't use the tired cliché “Think outside the box,” but Jesus' death turns human logic upside down and calls us to re-examine all we ever thought to be true. Jesus often spoke in paradoxes. He said, “The first will be last,” and “whoever loses his life will save it.” Jesus' death on the cross is the biggest paradox of all. That's his death would give us life seems to be irrational, an impossibility. That the grisly cross, an infamous

instrument of death, would be for us glorious, and to Jesus a throne, seems a contradiction in terms.

It's odd how the cross has become the primary symbol of Christianity. Aren't there other biblical images without all the negative spiritual baggage we could have used instead, such as a rainbow, or the Tree of Life, or an angel? Or perhaps a non-biblical image might serve us better today: a peace sign, or a dollar sign, or a smiley face? No, it is only in the cross that Christ's nature is fully revealed. Only the cross is the symbol that can adequately span the mysteries of both life and death. Any other representation of divine glory means little unless we first recall that Jesus was killed on the cross for our sake.

What killed Jesus? Over the years many different forensic pathologists have done detailed studies of the gospels and the ancient practice of crucifixion, and pieced together medically, as a coroner might, how Jesus died. It's a gruesome story. There was years ago a whole genre of literature in the Roman Catholic Church where authors described in laborious detail Jesus' sufferings and death. Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ" was a modern cinematic expression of that genre. Some people find that literature style and film repulsive, and others find it spiritually moving, as do I.

But the bottom line for us is that more important than the science behind how Jesus died is the motivation, the real reasons for his death. We might blame Judas' greed, or the Pharisees jealousy, or Pilate's political ambitions but those easy answers don't really explain the cross. The truth is that Jesus

died to redeem us. He died to show us the height and depth of God's love. It was our sin, it was you and me, that killed Jesus.

So what's killing you today? What is your cross? What is literally killing you? We can lump all our troubles and worries together under the classification "Stress" and we know that stress is a killer. But the things that stress us are only stressful because we care, because we are trying to do the right thing, because we want to be God-fearing people. If we didn't care, stressors wouldn't be stressful. But because we do care, these things steal our energy, steal our joy, and eventually, steal our lives.

Maybe it's your family that is your cross to bear, perhaps your spouse or parents. Maybe someone is leaving, for a good reason or a bad reason, and that hurts. Or maybe someone is coming, coming to live with you, and that's scary. Maybe you are worn down by the choices your children have made; or maybe you feel guilty over choices you made for them. Or maybe you regret the children you never had. And these are just some of the crosses of family life. Other stresses, other crosses, include addictions, broken relationships, bad diagnoses, and many more than I can list. But all of them take their toll on us physically, emotionally and spiritually.

I've never known anyone who had to seek a cross. I certainly never have. Crosses have a way of finding us. I knew a pastor who said that she thought the people of her congregation had life too easy and she was going to find some crosses for them to bear. That's never been my experience. If there is anyone here who has life too easy, who has no crosses to bear, please see me after the service and I will be glad to lay a few crosses on you from all the extra ones your brothers and sisters have here tonight.

No, we all have our crosses. And, I'm sorry to say, that for most of us our cross is something we will never escape. Jesus never promised us that this life would be carefree. But he did promise us we'd have crosses, and he told us to take up our cross and follow him. For it is only in the cross, his cross and our cross, that true peace can be found.

I read a story recently about a woman whose college age son died in an accident. Everyone says losing a child that way is among the worst losses possible. The woman said that she felt a kind of darkness and despair descend on her the likes of which she had never experienced before. Her grief was incapacitating and seemed insurmountable. She said it was like that not only her son had died that day but that God had died too.

But over time she found herself returning again and again to Jesus' words from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," and she found herself identifying with Jesus' dying woes at new and deeper level. She still tells everyone that she thinks about her son everyday and misses him, but that she also has experienced the love and support of God in a new way. In some inexplicable way, despite her pain, she is now closer to God than she ever was before. That's what the cross does. That what our crosses can do. It's a paradox.

Life isn't and will never be all fun, easy, and carefree. Life breaks us down and breaks us open. Life shatters us. Maybe that's because a heart has to be broken open for Jesus to enter in. Maybe our growth into the full stature of Christ is like a baby bird pecking its way through the eggshell, or the

butterfly bursting out of the cocoon, or the seed in the earth dying to rise again and make more grain.

The very best we can do is accept our crosses, as Jesus accepted his. Like Jesus, we can commend ourselves into God our Father's hands, trusting him with our lives and our crosses. We can patiently endure the pain, knowing that somehow, sometime, new life is coming for us. We shall rise even as Christ is risen. The cross establishes our relationship with God, we are his beloved and forgiven children. He does not willingly grieve or afflict us, and our end in Him will be good, it will be paradise. And that all begins with the cross. Amen.