

Cross Purposes: Why Did Jesus Die?

I. *The Exchange*

II.

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7 & Romans 5: 12-19

First Sunday of Lent/ 13th February 2005

In the church office we receive all kinds of catalogs in the mail, like you do at home. A few weeks ago Dorothy Boulton called me into her study to show me the latest Christian toy catalog, full of all kinds of novelty items, what I like to call Christian *schlock*, such as Jesus night-lights to remind us he is the “Light of the world,” or Jesus pencil erasers that remind us that he has rubbed out our sin. There on the page before us – we couldn’t believe our eyes – were *cross-shaped water pistols for sale*.¹ Funny, maybe, if it weren’t so sad. The cross used as a toy, the cross used as a toy *weapon*! Harmless? Two ministers who need to lighten up? Maybe. Or maybe not.

The shape of the cross remains one of the most powerful images of human experience. For almost two thousand years it has been used as both an expression of love – maybe *the* definition of love – as well as a symbol of hatred. It has both inspired people of faith and terrified people of faith, like the Jews of Auschwitz (many of whom were put to death by Christians in Christian Germany where many did nothing to stop the killing.) As you probably know, the swastika, itself, is a type of cross used by early Christians in India, although the symbol is about 3000 years old. Or think of black Americans when they see the cross set alight at a Klan rally. In 312, Emperor Constantine (c.288-377) of the Roman Empire fought the Battle of Milvian Bridge. The fate of the empire hinged on the outcome of this battle. Then, legend goes, he saw a vision of the cross in the sun and heard a voice that said, “*In hoc signo vinces*,” “In this sign, conquer.” He painted the cross on his army’s armor and they marched into battle victorious. Constantine became a Christian and Christianity became the official religion of the empire. *Isn’t it odd how*

¹ After the sermon Dorothy informed me they were actually, as the catalog describes them, “plastic cross-shaped sponge shooters.” Oriental Trading Company, Inc., Easter [!], 2005 issue. Even worse!

the powerless one on the cross who died for his enemies is aligned with the power of empire to destroy an enemy? Some scholars believe that event in 312 actually marks the beginning of the end of Jesus' vision, it marks the beginning of the decline of the church despite the fact that the church continues to this day.²

Since then the cross has been associated, certainly, with salvation, hope, new life, love, struggle, redemption; the early church father, Justin Martyr (c.100-165) believed that the human face reflects the four points of the cross, we bear the imprint of the cross on our faces; in Jungian analysis, the cross is a symbol of wholeness, its four points an archetype of healing.³ But the cross is also the greatest symbol of sacrifice and suffering, violence, victory and valor. The militaristic associations with the cross emerge with Constantine and continue even to this day. When the first crusaders were summoned by Pope Urban II (1035-1099) in 1095 to take up arms and rescue Jerusalem from the infidels – Jews and Muslims – the soldiers went with the sign of the cross to conquer and in the sermons of the time Christ was the great Warrior who called the faithful to arms. Listen to what Pope Urban said: “If you triumph over your enemies, the kingdoms of the East will be your heritage; if you are conquered you will have the glory of dying in the very same place as Jesus Christ, and God will not forget that he shall find you in his holy ranks.”⁴ Several years ago when the United States was about to invade Iraq I came across an image of the cross wrapped in an American flag with an imperial eagle perched on the top.

Come with me to Flanders Fields. It is the time of the Great War and we're in Belgium. As a young soldier, maybe from

² Douglas John Hall, “The Future of the Church,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 36:4 (1993). See also *Thinking the Faith: Christian Faith in a North American Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991).

³ Justin Martyr, “The Cross is imprinted upon man, even upon his face,” from the *Apologia* quoted in J. Jacobi, *Complex, Archetype, Symbol* (Princeton University Press, 1959) cited in James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), p. 163.

⁴ Quoted in *Michaud's History of the Crusades*, trans. W. Robson, vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Co., 1852), p. 50-51 cited in Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), p. 105. The title of this sermon series is taken from the provocative title of Bartlett's challenging study of the atonement.

Protestant England, you are marching to the trenches and you are shocked and disturbed to see along the roads, especially at the cross roads, statues of Jesus, crucifixes, known as roadside Calvaries. These were common in both Belgium and France as places of prayer and devotion (true today, but less so). But soon you find you're grateful for those crucifixes because they are an external expression of the hell you are experiencing all around you. The troops of the Great War "embraced the image of crucifixion as quintessentially symbolic of their own suffering and 'sacrifice'."⁵ Troops on both sides of No Man's Land, invoked the cross as a symbol of sacrifice, as a way to make sense of the pain and suffering all around them. Writing forty years later, Robert Graves (1895-1985) observed that most "English soldiers serving in the purgatorial trenches [lost] all respect for organized Pauline religion, though still feeling a sympathetic reverence for Jesus as our fellow-sufferer. Cross-road calvaries emphasized this relationship."⁶

We find images of the crucified throughout the poetry of the Great War. The poet Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) equates his soldiers with Christ about to approach crucifixion. Listen to how he recounts training new troops in England: "For 14 hours yesterday I was at work – teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst until after the last halt. I attended his supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha."⁷

During the Great War the image of Christ on a cross took on great meaning. There's a wonderful photo from inside the cathedral at Reims of a large dismembered crucifix; Jesus' arms are missing. This was not uncommon. The roadside calvaries would get hit and

⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 118.

⁶ Robert Graves, *5 Pens in Hand* (New York, 1958) commenting on the popularity of George Moore's *The Brook Kerith* (1916) quoted by Fussell, pp. 118-119.

⁷ Letter to Osbert Sitwell, July 1918, Owen and Bell, eds. *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, quoted in Fussell, p. 119

all that was left was an armless Christ, his torso hanging on an upright beam. The soldiers saw an “embodiment of the link between suffering and sacrifice.”⁸ I can certainly understand that. I’ve had occasion to drive through the Somme, and have walked down into the trenches in Arras. I would have grasped for anything that granted meaning. It was common to see large wooden or cement calvaries along roads, but also in fields which had been bombed to smithereens, yet miraculously amidst all that destruction they were still standing. There was a famous one in the cemetery in Ypres in which a dud shell lodged between the wood of the cross and the figure of Christ (it stood there until 1969). Stephen Graham, observing the cemetery in 1921 wrote, “In this acre of death the high wooden crucifix still stands, with its riven agonized Lord looking down. Of the hundreds of thousands of shells which fell in Ypres all spared him – all but one which came direct and actually hit the Cross. That one did not explode but instead half-buried itself in the wood and remains stuck in the upright to this day – an accidental symbol,” he suggests, “of the power of the Cross.”⁹

The power of the cross. What exactly *is* the power of the cross? What makes it so powerful? Surviving in the midst of destruction? But what about all those armless calvaries in Flanders Fields? Was Christ somehow suffering *with* them, with the soldiers? If so, why? If so, is there something about the way the cross is appropriated that actually encourages and validates moments of extreme sacrifice and violence? Does the cross justify or sanctify such actions?

Or do the armless calvaries symbolize something else, maybe the failure of Christ’s message of redemption to make a truly profound and lasting difference in human life? Are not those images a judgment *of* Christ, a judgment of his cross as being powerless in a world controlled by brute force?

⁸ Reims Cathedral photo and commentary in Jay Winter and Blaine Baggett, *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century* (New York: Penguin Studio Books, 1997), p. 154-155.

⁹ Stephen Graham, *The Challenge of the Dead*, quoted in Fussell, p. 118.

Or maybe we are being judged, perhaps Jesus is saying from those crosses – “Look how you have dismembered me. Look how you continue to crucify me.” How many calvaries do we need to get the message? The literary critic, Northrup Frye (1912-1991), notes that most of the war images that relied upon the cross were actually a “*displaced Christianity*.”¹⁰ Confusing Christian symbols with the true message of the cross.

We are always at risk of doing this, guilty of a “displaced Christianity.” The image of the cross is so powerful and life-giving, but also so dangerous when viewed incorrectly, or at least not viewed the way it was seen in the New Testament. Then what was and is the purpose of the cross? *When have we in the church twisted the wood of cavalry to such an extent that we find ourselves at cross purposes with it and actually accomplices in distorting the message of the gospel?*

What I hope to do in this series through Lent is offer an *archeology of the cross*. Last year around this time I was visiting ancient sites in Turkey and Greece. Most of these great cities, like Ephesus and Troy, were buried under mounds of dirt and sand of the ages. Cities were built upon the foundations and ruins of earlier cities and in order to go back to the original base archaeologists had to come up with ways of carefully stripping away layer after layer to see what was originally there. A similar kind of process is needed when it comes to the cross – we think we know what it means, we think we know what’s there, but once we start digging we discover centuries of layers and distortions that have hindered us from really hearing the message that Paul proclaimed – of “*Jesus Christ – and him crucified*. (1 Corinthians 2: 2)” What did this really mean for Paul, for the early church, for the disciples? Actually, the worlds of biblical and anthropological studies for the last twenty-five years have cast a whole new light on the New Testament; we know more than scholars did a century ago. The question for us is this: *How does the death of a Jewish craftsman in the First Century, executed as a criminal [a political enemy of the empire], upon whom the past, present, and future salvation of*

¹⁰ Cited in Fussell, p. 115.

*humankind depend?*¹¹ What does all of this mean for us? What difference does it really make for us on a Wednesday afternoon in the middle of the week?

It means something for us because, at minimum, we are still flesh and blood disturbed by the human condition, sons of Adam and daughters of Eve; their sin is our sin, their death is our death, and their fundamental estrangement from God is no different than ours, thus making us strangers to each other, even to ourselves. Adam's *disobedience* is our disobedience that alienates us from God. This Jesus shared our flesh, there is no doubt – it is “one of the most secure facts in the history of the world.”¹² Jesus of Nazareth “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” giving him coordinates in space-time. But thousands of other Jews were also crucified by the Romans, two others along with Jesus. What makes him so special? What makes this death different? What is more, what was really gained from his death? And if something was gained, what was it? And how? And what difference has it made in the world, in the human condition, in our lives, in any real, tangible way? Or do we have to wait for the next life to be given some sure proof and reward for our belief?

I'm guilty this morning of something my preaching professors at Princeton would have disapproved – I really haven't obviously stayed close to the texts (although in my mind I have, maybe not in yours, because the texts have propelled me on this course) and I've raised many questions and have answered none. Let me just say, to do justice to Paul at least and hopefully the gospel, Paul did believe Jesus' death was different, something drastically different, *not* because Jesus died, but because God raised him from the grave. Paul

¹¹ Reworking of a quotation from Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 31: “The new doctrine of salvation had not only barbarian, but also irrational and excessive features. It appeared to contemporaries as a dark or even mad superstition. For this was not the death of a hero from ancient times, suffused in the glow of religion, but that of a Jewish craftsman of the most recent past, executed as a criminal, with whom the whole present and future salvation of all men was linked.” Quoted in Bartlett, p. 191. Crucifixion was reserved for political enemies of the state. Wright comments, regarding the “theological politics” of the Gospels, “It must be emphasized that here more than anywhere it is worse than futile to try to separate theology from politics.” *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 541 quoted in Bartlett, p. 186.

¹² N. T. Wright, *The Original Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 18, quoted in Bartlett, p. 185.

says Jesus is different, *not* because he was sinless, *not* because he didn't deserve to die, *not* because he was going to die as a sacrifice to somehow absorb the wrath of an angry God. There's something in Jesus' life that accomplished for us something human beings have never been able to achieve (and never will) – *obedience to Yahweh*. Somehow – and I don't completely understand it – through *his obedience*, Paul tells us here, many were made righteous, a word that means brought into a covenantal relationship with God. Jesus gives us what we don't possess to give – *the ability to obey God completely, the ability to be completely faithful to God*. Yes, an *exchange* takes place, something has been added to humanity, but it is not an *even* exchange – not death for life. It's more like life for life. *Jesus' life given so that we can really live*. That's the nature of the “free gift.” “If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:17)”

That abundance of grace and the gift of *Jesus' faithfulness and obedience to God*, even to the point of death – *this is what is given to humanity, this is what is released and unleashed upon the world*. Here we see who Yahweh really is – which is really the whole point of the Bible – this is always the way of Yahweh: “there has always been a cross in God,” a God who gives to humanity out of the abundance of grace, who seeks and saves the lost, who will do whatever it takes to save us and always prepares a way to do this.¹³ But *how?* And *why?*

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¹³ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: “...there is a cross in God before the wood is seen upon Calvary...across unseen, standing on its own undiscovered hill, far back in the ages, out of which were sounding always, jut the same deep voice of suffering love and patience that was heard by mortal ears from the sacred hill of Calvary.” American Congregationalist theologian, Horace Bushnell (1802-1876), *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (1866).