

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Power of the Cross"
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Third Sunday in Lent

I continue to be amazed at how we experience time as human beings. I remember older people telling me when I was young that time moves more quickly as you advance in years. And now I believe that is true.

It's almost as if someone has been doing time lapse photography. You know that's when a photographer takes a picture every half hour or hour and you can move through days and weeks fairly quickly. It's the same now for months and seasons and years, they fly by, and before you know it, there is someone else staring at you in the mirror, not really someone else, but perhaps not the person you expected.

And then there are those times and moments that seem to freeze in history. There was the time when we heard of the Ocean Ranger. And I'm sure you can remember what you were doing when that disaster took place 27 years ago in February. And you may remember for a while this last Thursday when you received the news of the helicopter going down in the ocean, and now all lost, save one, Robert Decker who we will be praying for and for his family.

These moments get frozen in time. They seem to stand still. It's also something like watching the TV on that morning in 2001, well, it was morning on the West Coast, watching the second tower fall to the ground in New York. These are moments we are not likely to forget. These are disasters with multiple lives on the line. These are events that change history.

The event that changed history for Christians is the cross. We don't really understand the cross, and therefore it makes it harder to make sense of what really happened in the execution of the Lord. Perhaps it is difficult for most of us to even imagine the gore and the inhumanity that was being done by the Roman military occupation forces of the day.

We don't have the weekly public demonstrations of civil law such as in Saudi Arabia where on Fridays people in the cities would see a convicted criminal beaten, or a hand cut off, or an execution, usually by the sword.

We simply don't have the reality of these things in our lives. Our violent movies, as violent as they are, are no comparison. In the Roman days of the occupation of Palestine, soldiers could enlist civilians to carry gear for them a certain distance. The army certainly must have behaved as most occupation armies behave with some excess and some criminal activity, plus the usual bullying, extortion and threatened violence unless some favor or favors were produced. I imagine that time to be tense, at best.

On top of this you had the practice of putting someone up on a cross to die, whether nailed to the cross or strapped to it, the death usually came slowly and was the lowest form of slow torture and humiliation. It was reserved usually for runaway slaves or slaves that incited rebellion against their master or household. If you had any status at all, you would be executed in a quick fashion by beheading. But there was a purpose in the cross, in crucifixion.

That purpose was for others to see what you had done, and to fear the same punishment should you consider doing likewise. So the cross was a kind of gruesome billboard, with the person hanging naked on it, dying slowly, usually of asphyxiation, although because the person was usually on the cross for days, the wild animals would also wreak havoc on those hung in such a way. The billboard was there on the side of a road usually where people had to pass, so that people had to see what was happening. On the top of the cross was the crime, Joe decide to lead a rebellion of slaves against their owners, for example. The message was simple: you had better not do the same or you will end up like Joe.

Such crucifixions were so disgusting to the higher classes of the day that they would choose to not use the word "crucify" or "crucifixion" because it was such a horrific image. Those who liked to swear and use crudity amongst the common folk would use this word as a disgusting taunt, in the way some use the "f" word today.

So there was a high emotional tone and connotation heard when Jesus used this word, as we heard last week, "Take up your cross and follow me." It must have been offensive to some, although no reaction from the crowd is recording in that particular instance.

On top of this Roman context in occupied Palestine, there was also the clear admonition from Scripture that anyone hanged on a tree or a pole was

cursed. (See Deuteronomy 21:23) This was a sure sign that God had abandoned that person.

And so we come with this background to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1. The message of the cross, that is, total commitment to Jesus, just as he gave total commitment to us is simple foolishness. Why? Because to utter the cross and salvation or Jesus as the true King in the same breath was a kind of insanity to thinking people. How could a true King be crucified? Who would let this happen, let alone call for it?

It seemed to even be too much for Pilate, who thought that Jesus being flogged would have dealt with the need for such a thirst for violence as entertainment. Pilate wanted to release Jesus. So it was crazy to talk about a person of distinction or of royal lineage being crucified. It was unimaginable.

And the Jews knew that if Jesus really were a prophet from God, or the promised Messiah, he would never have been hung on a pole or tree. All that would do would be to confirm that Jesus was not who he said he was.

But we know a different story. Paul tells us clearly that the foolishness of God makes more sense than the highest human wisdom. He also tells us that the weakness of God, in this amazing frozen moment in history at the cross, is stronger than the strongest human strength.

Here God's plan for us, and grace on our behalf thwarts all the philosophers and scholars. Here we see God giving everything that God can give to make sure we have a relationship, where sin is dealt with, and we have a safe place with God. Jesus receives the guilty verdict, although we deserved it, and takes the punishment we deserved, and frees us and heals us.

The cross is transformed in this process from something dirty and disgusting to the most precious possession on earth. It becomes a symbol of commitment, or sacrifice, of deep friendship, of the Lord giving himself for us, of forgiveness, of a fresh start in our relationship with God, and of many other things, because a symbol such as the cross can never be pinned down to only this or that meaning.

We don't fully appreciate what Jesus did for us unless we do understand this background to the cross. Paul not only argues for the importance of what is

done for us in salvation at the cross, he also argues for the power of the cross to keep on transforming us, not just drawing us into a one-time decision to follow Jesus, but also to change our lives, our attitudes, our behaviour, more into what God wants us to be like. This is so that we might indeed carry the life of Jesus inside us that His power and love would come out through us. In fact, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have him with us wherever we go.

So Jesus fulfills at the cross what we could not do for ourselves. He fulfills all the requirements of the Law. He Himself is the sacrifice for our sins, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews reasons. While before all we had was the righteous standard of the Law and our inability to measure up to it. Now we have the person of Jesus who counts us righteous and indeed makes us righteous by his one time act, frozen forever in time.

The power flows from the cross, as the hymns say, that we might give our life, our all to God. The power to change us is right here. The question we all must ask ourselves in this Lenten season, is "Are we saying 'yes' to this transformation of God in our lives?"

When we look at the cross, any cross, let us remember all that Jesus has done for us. When we take communion, let us remember all that Jesus has done for us. When we look at each other, let us remember all that Jesus has done for us.

As we remember those who lost loved ones, as we remember those whose time has been frozen in these last days,

Let us pray.