

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"What Makes This Day 'Good'"
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March 21, 2008
(Good Friday)

*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.
(1 Corinthians 1:18)*

The first and main confession of this time together is: We don't understand the Cross. We think we do, but we don't. Once we grasp how little we know about it and how little we have experienced its power, then we can begin again our journey to know the resources Jesus has given us. For us who take Good Friday as very good because of the relationship with God that we gain, we need to know how very bad the Cross actually was in its time.

We don't understand the Cross because it is too foreign, in other words, we don't understand its historical and cultural context. Most of the historical and cultural comments to follow come from Martin Hengel's little book entitled *Crucifixion*.

The Greeks understood the Christian message of the Cross as *moria*, "foolish," from which we get the English word "moronic." Trusting a crucified man was a *mania*, "madness" according to Justin's *Apology*. To trust someone as God who had been given the heaviest penalty as a state criminal was absurd. Worshipping a criminal and his cross was simply stupid.

Because we live in a time so remote from the days of the Roman empire in terms of this capital punishment, we don't understand the shame of the cross as the most wretched of deaths. Murderers, robbers, mischief makers and deceivers were:

Punished with limbs outstretched, they see the stake as their fate;
They are fastened and nailed to it in the most bitter torment,
Evil food for birds of prey, and grim pickings for dogs.
(Pseudo-Manetho in his *Apotelesmatica*)

The *crux*, the cross, was a vulgar taunt and a virtual swear word amongst the lower classes of society. So disgusting was the immediate effect of the word “cross” that only slaves and prostitutes would make regular usage of this word which conjures the image of hideous torture to death. And if an educated Roman would not use such a word out of his common sense of decency, so much more was the offensiveness of the word to a learned Jewish person who knew the Scriptures condemned those who were hung on a tree or stake. Across the cultures of the Roman Empire, one quickly could reject the use of the words “cross” and the “Messiah” or “son of God” in the same sentence or thought. Its irrationality would offend any person with common sense.

So to even speak of the cross was to violate the boundary of social acceptability and to enter into that zone which was considered so obscene and offensive that most ancient writers would not hurt their reputation by dwelling on this particular form of capital punishment. Its obsessive cruelty ruled that out. Heroes in the novels of the day might be martyred, showing their ultimate heroic nature. But such a martyrdom would never be by crucifixion simply because it was too gross.

Crucifixion was not merely being nailed to a cross, if that were not enough. Often it was preceded by torturing by whipping, impaling, mauling by dogs, placing the victim in wild beast skins, and some set afire, as in Nero's time. Hanging was considered much more merciful and quick than the slow torture of the cross. If you had any status in society, the sword or the noose would be accorded to you if you were a person of any standing.

The cross as the Roman supreme penalty (*summum supplicium*) would be reserved for only the lowest of classes, primarily slaves. It served as a warning to other slaves if you murdered your master, ran away or stole or incited rebellion of fellow slaves, they would nail you to the cross as a billboard, usually on the most crowded highways, for others to read what would happen to them if they considered similar crimes. Romans considered the cross a horrific, disgusting business. It was a last resort for the worst and lowest of criminals. In Latin, it was the strongest of swearing, a supreme curse, “May you get nailed (to the cross).” It was a common sight in every large city in the Roman empire. Most would hurry by and try to ignore the cross, and the scavenger birds and beasts that would tear at the bodies.

And the Jews were scandalized by the cross, because they understood Deuteronomy 21:23 and the curse connected to anyone hung, impaled, placed on a stake or a cross. A Jewish person who knew the Scriptures knew God had clearly abandoned that person and had shown them to be accursed.

Jesus took the curse and penalty of our sin on himself.

“He had...nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. Like one from whom people their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgression, he was crushed for our iniquities; peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53: 2b-6)

This is the basis of our relationship with God. Hopefully we can appreciate what Paul says in Philippians 2 where Jesus accepted the death penalty for us, even death on the cross. The cross was the symbol of extreme humiliation, shame and torture. As we consider Jesus' courage to face the shame of that which he did not deserve, so many of us also receive courage to face the shame of that which we did not deserve in many instances of sin against us. So also many of us face the humiliation and shame of our own sin against ourselves, against others and against the Lord. As we struggle with sin, so we must remember Jesus' choice to remain faithful and his promise to always provide a way of escape when we come under temptation. God is faithful. (1 Cor. 10:13)

We don't understand the Cross because we underestimate this ground zero place of spiritual power. The Cross is the place of Jesus' victory which the devil thought was his place of victory. So too in our lives, the place or places that appear to be in the grip of the devil in our lives, the dark secrets, the unsavoury parts of ourselves that we hate to admit can become the places of God's greatest victory in our lives. Where are these places in our lives?

When we are feeling most broken, most vulnerable, most in need of some of kind of big change in our lives, where do we go? Where are you? In the Bible, the first prayer conversations we hear are in the garden of Eden, where God asks "Where are you?" to Adam. Do you think He did not know? He was asking so that Adam could reflect on the fact that he was hiding, hiding from God, hiding from his spouse, naked and afraid. The fig leaves were a symbol of the false self that we put around us, so that others might see us as better than we are. "Looking good" is a big human pastime, and Christians are not exempt.

The Good News is that we no longer have to pretend to be good. What Jesus did for us at the Cross, was to give us a place to acknowledge our sins and rebellion, so that He might change us. The first change is simply to have relationship with Him, to acknowledge Him as Lord and Master, who went to the Cross to forgive the penalty of my sins. The second change is to acknowledge that even as Christians, we are still being saved, being transformed into the persons God wants us to be. This takes courage and honesty to acknowledge the dark side of our personalities, our faults and sins. But as we confess our sins, and truly turn from them, God gives us grace and transforms us. The third aspect of this Good News is simply that we can be who God intends us to be. The changes in my life are not about how smart or lovely or creative I am. The changes in my life will be about the One who created life itself.

So the major stumbling block in accepting the Good News of Good Friday, besides the simple gore of it all, is that we have to confront ourselves anew, and ask where we are holding back from God, where we are deceiving ourselves into thinking we give ultimate priority to One we serve, when in fact we serve ourselves and have many defense mechanisms against God's transforming grace and love. Today is a day to lay down those defense mechanisms at the foot of the Cross, and say anew, "God, have your way in my life. Change me as you desire. Not my will be done but Yours."

And continue to listen to God, as you pray.

Let us pray.