

St. John's, NL

March 19 - 23, 2012

Rev. Dr. Jonathan Dent

Monday, March 19

Welcome again to a time where we make time for what is important. Nothing is more important than the time we devote to the Lord. Our daily devotions and meditations are lasting and something important, although our world and culture do not see them as such. They see this as the opposite, a waste of time for nothing and nobodies. How many radio stations besides VOWR even allows time for a few minutes to think about our relationships to God? There is one other radio station in town that points us to God; otherwise, it is rare indeed.

So we are glad you are with us. In this Lenten season we take forty days to consider our faith, our trust in God, our commitment to God and how that shapes our lives. I want to focus on the cross. We usually only take one day a year to focus on the cross of Jesus Christ, that day being Good Friday.

This year, more than any other, we need to know why the cross changed human history. We need to know why Jesus chose to go to the cross. He was not suicidal. He brought life and provision to those he met. He healed the sick, challenged the comfortable, grieved with those experiencing loss and taught the truth with a deep sense of love. He even showed the power of resurrection, of bringing life to the dead. He was not suicidal. So why would he go to the cross?

In Roman Empire times, the cross was an instrument of capital punishment. It involved slowly torturing a person to death on two wooden pieces, as a gruesome billboard to not commit the crime that he had committed. It was reserved for slaves who had committed major crimes. If you had any status in society, you would be killed by the sword. But this slow torturing to death was sickening for those who saw it. Even the Romans refused to write about it in non-fiction and fictional works of literature, it was so disgusting. Those with foul mouths, used "crucifixion" as a swear word, "may you be hung on a cross." No one with any sense of decency would speak of it. Yet Jesus surrendered himself to the cross. Why would he do this?

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The gospel writers and those who wrote the New Testament believed Jesus to be the Son of God, the Messiah, the One who would bring salvation, right standing with God, no matter what tribe or nation you belong to, beginning with the Jewish people. Why would a person of great standing, such as Jesus, a powerful spiritual teacher allow himself to be tortured to death? The fact that he went to the cross to die indicated to many that he had been cursed and was one of the greatest failures to show up among the Jewish people. In fact, no educated Roman or Jew could piece together the reality of what was written as the charge above his head, "the King of the Jews" with the punishment he was receiving. Again, if he had been merely a political prisoner, he would have received a much less painful death. For how could a King or Messiah ever be treated like a slave or worse than a nobody and hung on a cross?

We don't understand the cross, because we don't understand what it meant in ancient times, when Jesus allowed himself to be crucified. We don't understand the remedy of the cross because we don't know the illness of how separated we are from God by our sins and rebellion against God. We have much to learn about God's creative and amazing solution to our inability to have a relationship with God and keep his standards.

Paul puts it this way: ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."^[c]

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of

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God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

We will explore this passage and more this week. Let us pray.

Help us, Lord, to understand why you chose to go to the cross and why we need to follow you there, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, March 20

Hello, and welcome again to Meditation. This week we are concentrating on why Jesus went to the cross. We noted that the cross was an ancient form of capital punishment, where slaves were slowly tortured to death in a public place, usually on the side of a road, or a busy intersection, to basically say, "Don't do what this guy did, or you will get what he is getting."

The cross was so disturbing in that culture, that educated and civilized people would not even speak of it, let alone write about it. Which makes it all the more fascinating why people wear the cross around their necks today as a symbol of that historical event where Jesus died a horrible death. It would be strange to see a gallows or a guillotine or a gas chamber as a piece of jewelry around someone's neck. Yet the cross is a common piece of jewelry. Why is this?

We read the apostle Paul's brief explanation about the cross in 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25: ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ For it is written:

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The terrible human predicament of being estranged from God was met with the revelation of God's standards and Law. God gave his people what they needed to be righteous but they couldn't do it and people today can't keep the law. They keep on rebelling. We keep on saying "no" to God, and basically say we know better than God does.

So God devises a marvelously creative plan to come Himself to be one of us and take away all the blockages in our relationship between us and God. At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus' birth, God becoming one of us. Jesus grows up and starts his ministry at age 30. Three years later, he is tortured to death on the cross. What went wrong?

Most people, including his closest disciples didn't understand that he was building a community, a kingdom, that wasn't like all the other communities or kingdoms. He was taking on himself the punishment for our sins and our rebellion against God. We show up in the Court of Ultimate Justice at the end of our lives, and for all of us who trust Jesus, he takes the guilty verdict we deserve on himself and takes our punishment. He is the Lamb of God who takes away our sins.

This doesn't automatically happen for everyone. We need to say "yes" to this one who gave up the life of a King to become a slave and die a worse death, that we would now have the ability to have a relationship with God, where God sees us as holy and righteous, kind and loving, these being Jesus' attributes; whereas God places our sins and rebellion on Jesus. He gets the worst. We get the best. It is the ultimate exchange.

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But of course not everyone believes this. Paul says that those who are perishing find this ridiculous, ludicrous, unbelievable, even stupid. They don't really want anything to do with someone who will cause them to have to deal with their own rebellion to God, their own sins, their own brokenness and addictions. They are just fine without this foolishness.

Paul also says that for those who are being saved, this is the power of God. The cross is the event where the power of God is poured out, where everyone can say "yes" to God, even if many choose not to.

This is the time to say "yes" to Jesus in your heart. This is the time to turn from your sins and rebellion and acknowledge all that Christ has done for you at the cross and in his resurrection from the dead. Jesus has the power to transform us. Jesus can save us from our addictions, from our lying, from our self-dependence and rebellion against God's ways. He can change us on the inside where we cannot change ourselves.

If you've already said "yes" to the Lord, say it again to him today, to go his way today. If you haven't consciously said it before, now, today is the day of salvation. Love him, and love his cross, for there we have relationship with God and the power to be transformed for the best of all.

Let us pray. At your cross, Lord, you chose the greater way of sacrifice, than getting your own way. You call us all to choose God's way, rather than our own way, and you have led us in the best possible way. Help us now take up our cross and follow you. Amen.

Wednesday, March 21

Hello, and welcome again to Meditation. We have been looking at Jesus' cross this week. We find at the cross an upside down gospel. Some of Jesus' followers thought that Jesus was going to be king of his own new empire. He would kick out the Romans with military miracles, he would

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feed the poor without farming, and would be king on earth for as long as he wanted to be. But this was not Jesus' plan. The popular, powerful, someone and something plan was instead replaced with a shameful, weak, nobody and nothing plan. Jesus as an obscure carpenter's son would sit on no throne, would not use his powers to make the empires of his day bow to him. Instead he chose to call the nobodies of the world, like you and me, to follow him, to love him and all the people who would receive him, would know true life. He humbled himself to being tortured to death on a cross, to say that his plan was sacrifice. One day he will come back as the glorified king, to a new heaven and new earth, a city large enough to hold us all with new physics and new bodies and a new mission. Meanwhile, he calls us to the servant way.

Paul says it this way in 1 Corinthians 1: 26 - 31 ²⁶ Brothers and sisters, 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. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Maybe you don't feel like you are a nobody. Paul says that it is not about how much power you wield in this world, how wealthy you are, or how smart you think you are. Because God in the end will not prize the billionaires or the heads of states or the Hollywood stars. They will give an account to God as we will. All that power, pride and possessions will pass away. But your heart toward God, and loving what He loves, loving others, telling the truth, caring for others. That will last. This is the treasure that does not rust and moth does not eat.

Everything is upside down in God's economy. The nobody among us is a great candidate for being a Jesus follower. The somebody who thinks they

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deserve more, who know how good they are, will most likely miss out. They don't need anyone, let alone Jesus.

In the end, God will use the nobodies to show the somebodies what reality is. This is the God who made something out of nothing. He makes us his own, if we say "yes" to his way and will. **Now** is a good time to do so. **Today** is a good day to desire God's way, even if no one else will notice, even if no one else will praise you. We choose Jesus' way.

In the end, God determines the somebodies and the nobodies. All the other graduations will seem quite dim. All the other world accomplishments, power, money, pleasures and discoveries will be overshadowed by the One audience that counts.

So take the time today to re-understand your strength, your wisdom, your status, your reputation, at the foot of the cross, looking up.

Let us pray. Lord, we did not set up this life, you did. We did not plan out how we would live out our lives. We did not expect all that has happened to us. But we want to give you our lives, our reputations, our resources, our futures, our families, our friends, our ambitions, our hopes, our dreams, ourselves. You can turn that which wrecks life into that which gives life. You can turn our inabilities into your abilities. You chose the way of weakness and foolishness in Jesus. We believe you know better than we do. We trust you anew, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thursday, March 22

Hello, and welcome again to Meditation. We have been considering Christ's cross this week. That cross changes everything in world history. It changes us as we take time to consider the cross. Jesus modeled a new kind of leader, a servant-leader, who didn't go for the fame, for the power, for the prestige of being royal or even of being God. He laid down his own rights and showed us a new politic, a new spirituality, a new way.

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Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2: ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature^[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Lent is a time to humble ourselves, not out of shame, or self-loathing, but out of a sense of our being first of all in relationship to the One who gave himself for us. Jesus gave himself for us. We should be giving ourselves back to him. That is another definition of this Lenten season. As we consider the cross, we first of all give ourselves back to God's way through Jesus.

Many of us have been hurt through abuse, through others taking advantage of our service or of our care. We need to be wise how we serve others, how we consider their interests. Sometimes we need to confront them. Sometimes we need to separate ourselves from them. Sometimes we need to call the police. This is another way of truly loving. But mostly we need to

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come away from our under-responsible, narcissistic selves, or on the other extreme, from our overly-responsible controlling and manipulating selves; and everything in between those extremes. The Jesus-way not only serves, but also is quite aware of one's self-identity and weakness, gifts and mission.

There is a simplicity and complexity in following Jesus. The simplicity is saying "yes" to Him on a daily basis and "no" to the many anti-Christ messages and powers seeking to influence us. We need to be discerning as we listen to the thousands of voices we hear, whether in the media, on the news, in music, in our books, on the internet, in our own heads, memories and bad tapes of people running us down, or hurting us. The simplicity of saying "yes" to Jesus quickly becomes a complicated process of knowing the sources of the voices we hear, asking God to sort what we choose to take into ourselves and where we spend our hours. Whether those hours are in front of the TV, or next to the radio, or on the computer, on social media, with games or work, with crisis interventions or coffee times, we need to know what we are choosing as we expose our hearts to all this around us. We seem to have less and less face to face exposure, and more and more of this other exposure.

Many of us just want to escape the harsh interior realities we face. Many others are using technology to escape relationship.

In fact, we seem to be in a time and generation where everyone is in the room together, with the TV on, with a laptop or tablet in front of us and earplugs on, listening to music. What happened to the people in the room, or can we actually multi-task the way we think we can?

Jesus comes into the foreground of our lives and wants to speak to us about our lives. He wants to first of all assure us of his love and grace. This then empowers us to do the work of truth-telling, truth-listening, and receiving anew the grace to serve. We find it hard to find a safe place and safe relationships to experience this anew.

So we ask God for this today. Let us pray.

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Lord, you know what it means to carry out your life in the midst of opposition, of conflicting messages, yet to stay on track with truth, with love and have a clear sense of identity and mission in this broken world. Help us follow you and know what it means to take up our crosses as we do so. Amen.

Friday, March 23

Hello, and welcome again to Meditation. We are glad you can take these five minutes to think about where you are spiritually, and more specifically this week, where you are in relationship to Christ's cross. The cross has not been understood. It is a place of deep pain and torture. It is a place of public exposure to your crime, and being forced to be seen and the darkest side of you made known to all. Some of us have had these experiences, some have not. Jesus' crime, as written by Pilate, was his being the king of the Jews. Pilate knew that there was something wrong and peculiar about Jesus going to the cross. He was neither a slave nor a person who sought power and position. He was not interested in military conquest. He had aroused the jealousy and murderous intent of those in power in the Jewish community of his day, and whoever else was in the crowd that shouted the obscenity, "crucify him." He was hated and many still hate him, dismiss him or ignore him.

But many of us today feel he is who said he was, the Son of God. He stayed on track with his mission to reconcile to God those who wanted a new relationship, not based on law keeping, but on grace and love. These see the cross as the power of God at work, transforming us from the inside out, urging us to say "yes" to Jesus as Master, Jesus as Center of our lives. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1: ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ For it is written:

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This teaching cuts against those of us with advanced degrees, who have taught in school or who have made a career at the university. We have a certain amount of pride in our learning and education. And education is a wonderful thing. Ignorance is not bliss. Education, however, can blind us to God's teaching so that we think we are wiser than God. Don't be blinded by thinking you already know it all. As a person with multiple academic degrees in Religious Studies, I can tell you many think they know, but in the end it is about humbling yourself before God. God's intelligence and wisdom outshines our own even as the sun shines day by day. The person who is excellent at debating, wonderful in logic, proud and confident still must in the end come before their Creator.

This applies equally to the atheist who contends that religions poison all of life, the agnostic who is confident they do not know and cannot know, the believer who puts their trust in their higher power. All of us come to Jesus, in the end, with the cross in the background. We don't go to Peter at the gate, that's just the jokes we tell. Jesus is the gate. We come to him.

So take time today, even if it is a few moments to reconnect with the One who gave himself for you. If you know him, ask him anew what parts of your life you are feeding and what parts you are starving. If you don't know him, ask him to come in and tell him what you need to say.

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And if you have missed some of these Meditations, the written texts can be found at St. David's Church web cite: www.stdavids.nf.ca/ and go to the sermons tab. I am Dr. Jonathan Dent.

Let us pray. Lord, we will never fully understand how much it cost you to go to the cross for us. But we do understand that we can know your power to change us on the inside, as we choose to follow you, listen to you and learn from your foolishness and weakness, which is greater than our power and strength. In Jesus' name, Amen.