

THE CROSS ... THE POWER OF GOD!

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Our journey through this Lenten season has had a very definite destination – the Cross of Calvary. We’ve been headed there right from the outset. On the way, we have had the opportunity to review the sad case of Israel, a rebellious nation, and to discern some disturbing parallels in our own North American culture.

We have also seen that long ago God determined to make a “highway” through the wilderness of human sinfulness and lostness, and we saw that this “high” way is the way of holiness. It is the way that marks out God’s people as belonging to Him. God’s true followers are increasingly Christlike as they progress along the way of holiness.

Last Sunday, we heard God say, “*Comfort my people!*” We saw that the seeds of comfort often take root in the soil of adversity. Yes, God punishes and disciplines us, but never with the intention of destroying us. Rather, He wants to restore us, to heal us, and to make us holy. But restoration always begins with repentance! We ought not to have been surprised, therefore, to have heard the voice of one calling, “*In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.*” That was a call for us to clear our hearts of any obstacles that threaten to keep us away from Christ, and a call to turn from spiritual and moral paths that are crooked to ones that are straight.

Obstacles! One of the great obstacles confronting us today is the message of Christ itself. To many unbelievers, Christ is a major stumblingblock, and the Cross of Calvary is an offence. As a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I think it is very important for me to acknowledge how my message is perceived in our culture. I doubt if there is any more recognizable symbol than the Cross. It casts its shadow across the peaks and valleys of time, covering the entirety of the human landscape.

This fact in itself is extremely noteworthy. After all, crosses were commonplace in the Roman world of the first century A.D. Literally thousands of people were crucified by the Romans, as many as 3,000 on one occasion alone that history records (the Maccabean Revolt).

Why, then, does history remember one cross in particular, the cross of Christ? The answer is stunningly simple, and yet it is ever-elusive to legions of people. The world remembers the cross of Christ after 2,000 years because it is the *only cross in history on which God died*. It is a unique cross because it symbolizes both the worst and the best of all possible realities. It symbolizes sinful man at his worst, nailing his Creator to a cruel instrument of torture and death. But it also symbolizes God at His best, voluntarily laying down His perfect, matchless life for those who were His enemies. So the Cross shows us man at his very blackest, and God at His most glorious! The great paradox of the Cross is that it is at once ugly and beautiful. It is a symbol of absolute depravity on man’s part and absolute purity of love and holiness on God’s part.

When Paul wrote those words in 1 Cor. 1:18-25, he knew that the culture of his day would take offense. They would feel insulted by them! They would object on a number of grounds: intellectual, religious, personal, moral, and political. I think that our world today is just as hostile to the gospel. The message of the cross is seen as being: (1) too condemning in our age of permissiveness, (2) too humiliating in our age of self-righteousness, (3) too simplistic in our age of rationalism, and (4) too narrow in our age of pluralism and “tolerance.”

1. Too condemning in an age of permissiveness!

The cross says that there was something terribly wrong that needed redeeming. It says that there is a holy God who cannot and will not tolerate sin and wickedness. This kind of message does not resonate with our permissive culture, a culture that prefers to legalize wickedness, slap a “sin tax” on it, and promote it to death. It doesn’t resonate.

When I was a child, I would sometimes be told, “Let your conscience be your guide.” We all know what that meant. But today that would be bad advice to give many people. As one writer has remarked, “Conscience has become nothing more than a “writer of permission slips.” To say that our culture is permissive is an understatement.

2. Too humiliating in an age of self-righteousness!

The cross makes it clear that we are guilty before God. It brings into the light of day the depths of human sin and the consequences of our pride and disobedience. We have lost sight of the fact that God’s purity and holiness are such that nothing tainted with evil can live in His presence. The fact is that God hates the sin in people, but He loves the people. Hence the cross! The cross is the place where the justice of God and the love of God collaborate to purchase our redemption. Our self-righteousness evaporates in the face of the cross!

3. Too simplistic in an age of rationalism!

When you think about it, the message of the cross is so simple that even a small child can understand it. Of course it is! Little children have not yet succumbed to the allurements and illusions of hyper-sophistication.

We are much better at formulating convoluted arguments and rationalizations in our denial of who God is and why the cross was necessary. That is why Jesus said, “*Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt. 18:3).

The simplicity of the cross lies in the fact that God has taken the initiative in solving the problem of human sinfulness and lostness. In fact, He has met all the requirements of His holiness and justice by taking the punishment for our sinfulness upon Himself. But that is an affront to our culture’s sense of pride.

Human pride says, “I don’t need anyone interceding on my behalf. I’ll do it myself. I will meet whatever standards of acceptability are deemed appropriate on the basis of my own efforts. I’ll do it my way!”

So the message of the cross seems like foolishness to our culture. In fact the Greek word Paul uses for “foolishness” (*moria*) is the same word from which we derive our word *moron*. You must be a moron to believe that one man, crucified between two criminals, is the Saviour of the world! Right? No! But our intellectual and moral pride can keep us from accepting God’s free gift of salvation. To merely repent and believe is too simple for many.

4. Too narrow in an age of pluralism!

Finally, the message of the cross is too narrow in an age of pluralism. How often have we been told that all religions are the same and that there are many roads to God and many paths to enlightenment? And yet, there is no other religion on earth that makes the claims of Christianity. Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me*” (John 14:6).

Why do we find it so difficult to believe that God could love humanity so much that He would come among us, take on our humanness – unfallen humanness – and finally offer Himself up in our place? There are human beings who manage to exemplify qualities of self-sacrifice. Why is it so hard to believe that Jesus did that? If Jim Elliot, a dedicated missionary in Ecuador, who was killed by the Auca Indians in 1956, was willing to give his life for their reclamation, why should we find it so hard to believe that our Lord willingly gave His life for our reclamation? What about Arthur Tylee, who was murdered by the Indians of Brazil? When he was warned by his cousin that, “These Indians may kill you,” he replied, “Suppose they do? I have nothing to do with how long I shall live. I am in the will of God. If He sees fit to let me live to complete the language and to present the Lord Jesus and His power to save, I shall be happy. If not, His will be done.”

What about men like Polycarp, who was burned at the stake in A.D. 155, John Huss, the Bohemian reformer who was also burned at the stake in 1415, or Bishop Hugh Latimer, who was martyred in 1555? All of them willingly died for Christ. Why? Because they knew that He had first died for them! According to David Barrett, 41 million Christians have been martyred, 26 million of them martyred after 1900. They were all willing to lay down their lives for Christ because they knew that He first laid down His life for them. Again I ask, “Why do so many find it so hard to believe that God would come to earth and sacrifice His life for those He created?”

To prideful, fallen man, the message of the cross seems so implausible that it would never have been concocted by human beings. We never would have thought of it. It doesn't appeal to our sense of pride and self-sufficiency. Such a reality as God sacrificing Himself on a cross could have come to us only from the heart of God Himself. The cross of Christ reveals the boundless love and the amazing grace of God towards those who do not deserve it and never could. Try as we might to tilt the ledger of debits and credits in our favour, the fact remains that there is no salvation by *balancing* records.

There is salvation only by *canceling* records. The record of our bad deeds, along with the just penalties that each deserves, must be blotted out – not balanced. That is precisely what Christ suffered and died to accomplish. And it is on the basis of our Lord's sacrifice that God is able to say, “**Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool**” (Isa. 1:18).

In the time of Jeremiah, the Lord looked into the future and gave this promise to His people:

“In those days, at that time ... search will be made for Israel's guilt, but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but none will be found, for I will forgive the remnant I spare” (Jer. 50:20).

Now the Lord gives this assurance to all who put their faith and trust in Christ:

“When you were dead in your sins ... God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:13-15).

Christ was a suffering Saviour! Statues and pictures of the Buddha show him sitting fat and contented in the lotus position, eyes closed, detached and blinded to the pain of this world. Mohammed is admired as he rides, sword in hand, inflicting wounds on the world through Jihad or “holy war against the infidel.” But Christ alone suffered and was wounded for our transgressions. He is the only Saviour with wounds. He is the crucified God! The message of the cross is not foolish. It is fabulous! And to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

- Is it too condemning? No! But those who continue to reject it will indeed find themselves condemned.
- Is it too humiliating? No! If it wasn't too humiliating for our Lord, who was perfect in His absolute sinlessness, why should it seem too humiliating for us?
- Is it too simplistic? Not at all! But it is simple enough for even a child to understand.
- Is it too narrow? No! If you were sick, would you take just any medicine, believing that all medicines lead to the same medical outcome? To the sin-sick soul, lost and dead, there is but one medicine that leads to the outcome we call eternal life. It is the Cross of Christ. He has become our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, and our redemption. The Cross of Christ – the very power of God!