

Crossed

Jesus, Atonement, and the irredeemable Cross

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Good Friday
Matthew 26:31-27:66
April 14, 2017

He warned them. Three times he said what would happen when they got here. To Jerusalem. Three times.

Just like the three times Peter would deny him. And the three times they fell asleep waiting.

They knew what was ahead. Jesus told them! But they weren't prepared for this. Not the cross.

The Cross

It's strange to see these crosses around us all year long and not notice them. Where they are or when they're missing.

How can a cross be so inconspicuous?

In Jesus's time, the cross was the height of conspicuous. They wanted them to be seen. The Romans placed them on hills, outside the gates of the city so that everyone coming to the city and everyone inside the city could see them. See the suffering, struggling as death awaits.

And they struggle as part of their fate. How the wrists and ankles are bound ensures a struggling death. From inability to breathe, shock, or system failure, whatever it is, it isn't quick. It takes hours, days even.

This is the sign of what it means to cross Rome. Not just stealing or writing bad checks. But preaching dissent, fomenting rebellion, or taking up arms. The cross is the ultimate statement punishment.

It says *This is our power. We are willing to do this to you.*

Our Crosses

We cover our crosses in black today. We hide them. Strange as it is the one day the cross is most conspicuous. But they are also conspicuously absent. Until they aren't.

There are other cross options for display, of course. There's the crucifix, a cross with a dying Jesus, spiked and bleeding. We often display them high for all to see. The crucifix reminds us what crosses are actually for. So we display them to remember what the cross of history means. That it's a sign of torture and death. It's the way our Lord, our God was murdered. As a statement by the state.

If we could see the dying Jesus, we could see what we did.

There are other options for us, too. If we gaze upon a Christ coming off the cross, the Christ of Victory, (like they have out at the Woods) we see that God isn't finished here. That the end of the story isn't Jesus's death. There is more!

A plain cross, which doesn't bear Jesus, is empty. Jesus isn't there! The cross cannot contain him!

What we are left with, however, in his place is the torture device and killing machine by itself. No matter how much we attempt to redeem it, this is a machine of death.

Like a noose, a gun, a bunker buster or MOAB, an electric chair: machines of death

expressing our power. Imagine Sparky or the Enola Gay or showing the tree in our garden with a noose hanging from it. Imagine if we made that our symbol. Empty. Just the machine alone, for us to gaze upon or wear around our necks.

And then say *This is a symbol of peace.*

Irredeemable

The cross is irredeemable. We cannot turn the device humans used to kill God into a source of love. Not like Christians want it to. Not as we've spent 2,000 years trying to make the cross sanitary and simple. *The greatest act of love, we say. How God redeems the world. He gave his son as a sacrifice.* His own son? Child sacrifice. Filicide.

God isn't a murderer. God is love. The cross isn't a symbol of God. It's a symbol of us. And it is irredeemable.

The cross is our weakness. It is our desperate pursuit of power, the sort of thing, as Tony Jones notes, is really easy to put on a shield as Constantine did to send it into battle. And the sort of thing we can wear into the world to convert and hurt in what feels a lot like "turn AND burn".

The number of friends who have shared with me the pain of the cross is many. They tell me of the zealous converter or the angry shouter claiming to bear the love of God. These friends don't *hear or witness* the love of God, but the fire of Hell. Often told about how much God hates and who God is furious with. Who God leads us to oppose or destroy or even murder.

To them, the cross continues to torture. It's a constant reminder, not of the love of God, but the hatred of humanity. The sign of how willing we are to destroy what we oppose and reject what we refuse to love. Even as we preach a gospel of love.

The cross itself is irredeemable. It's the electric chair still horrifying the imprisoned and those we struggle to include.

The Cross isn't the end.

Thank God the cross isn't the end. Nor is it the summation of Jesus's existence. Jesus wasn't born to die. Jesus was born to reveal God. God came into the world to know us and to be known by us. To re-member the world.

The Cross reveals who **we** are, not God. It reveals our fear and quest for power, not God's. We are not obligated to suffer or cause the suffering of others, beholden to our urges to reject and hate. To dominate or control.

The Cross is the ultimate statement punishment **from** humanity, not **for** it.

And Jesus's life, teaching, his suffering and death, and even his resurrection prove that we don't need it. No matter what we think, we don't need to fear God or death. We don't need to fear each other and fear re-membering. We are being called into one, a united kingdom of love where the dignity of every person, every living thing, all of creation, is not only respected, but embraced. Called into one.

We aren't meant to be controlled by our urge to fear or hate, but to love. We aren't called to reject, but to embrace. So the love of God is love. Not power, love. Not power, hope. Not power, generosity. Not power, life. Not power, mercy. Not power, faith. Not power, love.

Therefore all of these subvert the cross. They transform not the statement of power itself, but how we embrace it. They change how we understand it. So the cross remains a machine of hate, but it's true nature is revealed so that we know it. And reject it. Not out of fear, but of love.

So that we don't need our protections anymore. Our statements which torture and punish and devices which demean and destroy. That we would beat our swords into ploughshares and regain our relationship to God and creation.

That we might see our neighbors, not as enemies, but family. All of them. The children of God who help us to know God better.

To love and live the kin-dom of God. Re-membered.