

Pentecost 17

September 27, 2020

The Story Of LOVE

Philippians 2:1-13

Paul of Tarsus, the Jerusalem-trained rabbi, the Jesus-schooled apostle, could capture an eon of time in a handful of words. Without embellishment, yet with the distinct cadence of inspired poetry, the man Jesus blinded on the Damascus Road so that he could see spiritually more clearly than Peter or Andrew, James or John...jammed the whole wondrous story of the Incarnation into a nutshell of powerful words.

Listen to his expressive thoughts: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a Cross."

From cradle to grave, from birth to burial, the story of Christ is briefly, but pungently told...and it is the story of the Cross. He does not dwell on Mary and Joseph, the overcrowded Bethlehem Inn, the brilliance of the Christmas star, the exhaustive travel of the Magi...nor the shepherds' claims, not even the angels' song that marvelous Christmas night. Yet Paul captures the majesty of the advent of Christ as sublimely beautiful as did the evangelists. He does not bother with the prophets...not Isaiah nor Micah...but zooms into eternity to declare the Son equal to the Father, yet not jealous or fearful of his equality so that he willingly subjected himself to suffer in our behalf. Paul puts the story of the Cross into profound ideas, but simple, compact words...for it is a message that always must linger at the Cross.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the British journalist, who for a good share of his life was known

as a "vociferous unbeliever," became a Christian. It began when he was filming a series for the BBC on *The Holy Land*. "I may have been on the stage of the Holy Land," he wrote in *Confessions of a Twentieth-Century Pilgrim*, "but the play was Jesus himself."

He went on to explain, "This is what the Incarnation, realized in the birth of Jesus, and in the drama of his ministry, death and resurrection, was to signify. With it, Eternity steps into Time, and Time loses itself in Eternity. Hence Jesus; in the eyes of God, a Man, and, in the eyes of men, a God. It is sublimely simple; a transcendental soap opera...in which there have been endless variations in the script, in the music, in the dialogue, but in which one thing remains constant — the central figure, Jesus."

Yet central to Jesus is the Cross, the awesome, agonizing, life-robbing Cross! Concludes Muggeridge, "In spite of my awareness of the depth to which human beings can descend without God, I firmly believe that we are given the choice of Love or power. The way of Love is the way of the Cross, and it is only through the Cross that we come to the Resurrection."

Yet if we are to deal with the story of the Cross, we must do so in human terms. As glamorous as is the Cross that adorns this chancel; as shiny and glistening as it is when bejeweled or forged of gold and worn upon the neck, the real Cross of Christ is anything but beautiful.

There was no more shameful symbol of defeat and public disgust than a Cross. Only slaves and the worst criminals were subject to crucifixion. Authors refer to it as "gruesome" or "barbaric." We've heard it portrayed as brutal and torturous. It was anything but an honor. The story of Christ's Cross, however, transforms it from a means of execution to an altar of sacrifice. The suffering done there was a gift to God out of love for us.

It was a sacrifice of compassion given by our Lord so that powerless creatures like us might experience power so great that it endured suffering and even death to atone for the

sins of humanity. Jesus, the "Lamb of God," was sacrificed upon the Cross with the same intent of the Jews in sacrificing their Passover Lamb...only now the intention was not merely an obligation, but the consummate act of love.

Thus, when you and I suffer, it is a reminder of Christ's suffering for us. Doesn't Peter write, "Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's suffering, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed." (1 Peter 4:13). Pain is not punishment, but a cue that our suffering is but an inkling of Christ's anguish for us. When Irene, a former member of mine some years ago, died from cancer, those who visited her in her hospital room beforehand marveled at how she bore up under the agony of her pain with good cheer and a credible underlying joy. She told them not to marvel at her, but to look to Jesus on the Cross if they cared to see how Jesus truly suffered courageously and purposefully. In her distress, Irene was reminded of Jesus...and in him she found comfort.

The story of the Cross must go by way of Calvary to experience every crushing blow of the hammer, and every dreadful catcall from the crowd, as well as the excruciating pain of rejection that crucifixion provided the victim. Weighted upon Jesus were the sins of the world. Burdening the Savior was humanity's disobedience to God's law, the weighty guilt and aberrant actions, the thoughts and the words that offended him. Yet nailed to that awesome tree was more than a deserted carpenter, but our Redeemer who "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a Cross." God's Son was atoning for the sins of the world.

But there is another side to the story of the Cross. It is the glory of the Cross, the fact the crucifixion was not merely an innocent man suffering human injustice, for "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself," as Paul says so pointedly in Cor 5:19.

Paul writes to the Philippians after telling us the story of the Cross, "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name

of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (2:9-11)

John Bowring, an Englishman, became British Consul General in Hong Kong. In a trip down the Chinese coast in the mid-nineteenth century, he sailed into the Portuguese colony of Macao, where four hundred years earlier Vasco da Gama had built an impressive cathedral. A typhoon had destroyed the church long years beforehand, yet **the tower** withstood the onslaught and proudly bore an immense bronze cross that was distinctly outlined against the sky. John Bowring was deeply touched, and began to write the words of the stirring hymn, *In the Cross of Christ I Glory*. It was all the more remarkable, since Bowring was a Unitarian, a sect that denies the deity of Christ and ignores the truth of the Cross. Yet he wrote:

In the Cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

"Luther," says Harry Huxhold, "warned that Christians not go out of their way to build their own crosses. We do not have to. God, the devil, or the world are busy enough fashioning the crosses for us. Crosses will come in our lives...We can find strength and hope in the fact that we are sharing in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," acknowledges Huxhold. Therein is the glory.

After the First World War, when Communism swept across Russia into the Baltic states and the Lutheran country Estonia was inundated, a hundred Christian leaders in the city of Dorpat were arrested and sentenced to death. They remembered that on the last night of Jesus' earthly life he instituted the Sacrament of the Altar.

The men asked Pastor Hahn, their spiritual leader, to conduct such a final service for them. Fearlessly, he went to the Red commander and asked to minister to the condemned men.

"If these people are crazy enough to want this, and if you are foolish enough to grant their request, we have no objection. But if you go into that prison you can never come out again. You must suffer their fate." Astounded, the pastor fled to his home, where he agonized in prayer to know what God expected of him. The decision came, and he bid farewell to his wife. Instinctively she knew it was not just a casual goodbye but a final one. She begged him not to leave her. "The brave servant of God freed himself from her frantic grasp as gently as he could and then, with the Spirit-granted majesty of a martyr, went directly to the prison, gave the hundred captives there the Lord's Supper, and was shot down with them."

Friend, the glory of the Cross is not in its shape or size, but in its remembrance of Christ who suffered willingly and lovingly for us. The glory of the Cross for us is in sharing his pain. "The Cross of Christ and the Cross of the Christian belong together," says Walter von Loewenich in his interpretation of Martin Luther's *Theology of the Cross*. The Christian does not shun suffering because we know that "God can be found only in Cross and suffering." "If the footprints of God in our life are all too visible before us, we have no need of faith, and then faith does not come into being. Therefore faith stands in a closer relationship to suffering than to good works. If we are serious about the idea of God and the concept of faith in the theology of the cross," writes von Loewenich, "we are faced with the demand of a life under the cross." Therein is the glory. It is being with Christ in his sacrifice, knowing that he is with us in our suffering. That is the conclusion to which Pastor Hahn must have arrived, so that he could minister to his parishioners even as they together drew their last breaths. It is the conclusion that Malcolm Muggeridge arrived at as he witnessed the working of Mother Teresa, for it was through her and her selfless ministry to the sick and the suffering that that budding atheist melted and found the story of the Cross and the glory of the Cross lived out in compassionate love, suffering with the ailing but without a whimper. There was only a grateful prayer upon the lips of Mother Teresa. She became the living arms of the Cross

extended to Muggeridge, and he could no longer resist it.

How will you, as a living Cross of Christ yourself, stretch out your selfless arms to aid the helpless, and befriend the friendless? How is that you and I will accept suffering, not as a contrived drama, but as participation with Christ in his determination to be God's Lamb upon the altar of the Cross?

Let the cross be a remembrance of your Baptism, for in that Sacrament you were "marked with the Cross of Christ forever," so that it is imprinted upon your heart indelibly. Let that be your story and your glory: the Cross of Christ restores us to the Father and makes us one with him for all time and eternity.