

They Met Jesus At The Cross: “I Was There Too.”

Galatians 2:19b-20 (NRSV)

We’ve considered the many roads by which the people implicated in the death of Jesus Christ travelled to his cross. Another task now awaits us. **We also, must make this journey.** Every man or woman, or young person, must come, sooner or later, to the cross. The meaning, the power and the precious nature of it will elude us unless we see that we ourselves were involved in it too; unless, in short, we can honestly **say with the apostle Paul**, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:19b-20).

Yet that’s the hard part of understanding the cross for multitudes of people – **how to get “me” into it -- how to see that it matters to each of us** personally, enormously, eternally. Countless generations separate us from those who gathered that first Good Friday on that “green hill far away [outside] a city wall.” Sure, **Paul was our Lord’s contemporary**, living at the same time and conversing with those who knew him well. So after he met Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road, he could say with some intelligence and with conviction, “The Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” But how can you and I say that? You and I weren’t even thought of then – not humanly anyway – the slow unfolding of many ages was to elapse before the opportunity of life should be ours. How then, can it be said, with truth, “he loved me, and gave himself for me?”

And yet **the crucifixion is powerless without that personal note in it.** If you and I cannot honestly see its reference to us, if the pronouns are misconceived and irrelevant, then it’s just an event of ancient history, **like the death of Socrates**, which is of interest to the historian, but cannot truly be said to matter much today and much to you or me. How can we say with all sincerity, that “he loved me and gave himself for me”?

Nevertheless, **it was this getting of the “me” into what the cross was all about** that made all the difference to every great figure of evangelical faith. It was that realization that made them the men and women that they were. It was true of Peter and Paul, and all the rest of the disciples and apostles. It was true of St. Patrick and St. Columba and St. Francis of Assisi, who were each able to bring the church back to its basics. It was true of Martin Luther and John Calvin, who – in spite of the church’s on-going sense of its own

self-importance -- came to rediscover and insist that the gospel was meant for ordinary Christians. And so, thank God, it has been time and time again throughout church history.

Certainly, then, if we are to enter into the wonder and the living power of the cross, we must **get the “me” into it**. Let me try, therefore, to answer some of the difficulties that people have expressed to me about this personal reference to the cross.

1. **How could Christ die for my sins?**

This is my answer: **he not only died for my sins; he died by them**. You know what I mean by that. Earlier in these studies of those who gathered around the cross, I’ve stressed this solemn, neglected fact: Jesus Christ wasn’t “done to death” by a few particularly wicked sins, committed by a few horrible monsters of iniquity. He was crucified by an accumulation of ordinary sins, the same sins that you and I have committed, and that some are, maybe, still committing. Of course, we never understood what those sins could do until we saw the cross. It never broke on our minds that that kind of thing could lead to that kind of consequence. But it could, and it did.

Maybe you feel, even as you listen to me today, that you are basically a good person, and have never done anyone else a bad turn. But that is only because the consequences of your ordinary sins have never come home to you. Does it come home now? Do you see that that is one of the purposes of the cross – to make us see plainly what is normally hid, the foulness and the deadly nature of our common, everyday sin. Next time you see a crucifix at some wayside memorial, or a plain cross on the wall of a church, pause and think, and say, “I did that.”

2. **How could something be done for me over 2000 years ago?**

Because something was done for you and I ever before we were born, it isn’t done any less for us, if in point of fact, we benefit by it in the hour of our greatest need. I mean this. Have you ever had an operation – a major operation? Do you remember the chill stab in the heart when the doctor said, “it must be an operation?” Did you ever feel, before that solemn half-hour when the doctor broke it to you, how important anesthetics are? It isn’t so very long ago that there were no anesthetics.

I've read a while ago of the work of the surgeons on board His Majesty's Ship "Victory" at **the Battle of Trafalgar** when there were no anesthetics. It was almost too much to read. I couldn't even hint at it to you – the awful amputations and the carving of human flesh, without anesthetics. We heard a bit of what that was like as the surgeons tried to help **the injured people of Haiti** in the weeks following the catastrophic, 7.0 magnitude earthquake which occurred on January 12 of this year. But when we had our operations, we had anesthesia. How grateful we were.

Of course, even if anesthesia was discovered before we were born, and if it helped others before us, **it was discovered for us as well, wasn't it?** We certainly must have felt this in the moment we had need of it, didn't we? We didn't argue with ourselves in the moment we had to have an operation that it wasn't discovered for us alone. We didn't say **Sir James Simpson**, when at last he found chloroform, wasn't thinking of us as individuals. We didn't reason in that shallow way. In the hour of our great need, as we remembered the great help we had with anesthesia, "It was for me, for me."

No serious theologian has ever taught that when our Lord hung upon the cross and died for us, he thought individually of the teeming millions who would later "claim an interest in his blood" – but, still, **it was for them, and for you, and for me.**

3. Why was the cross necessary?

There are **many people** today – and some are in the church – **who feel the cross was quite unnecessary.** Mind you, they don't pause to explain why Christ should endure as God something that was quite unnecessary. Perhaps they've half accepted the idea that his humanity required him to endure whatever human beings would sink to, and that he had so emptied himself of divine power that he could do no other than to bear whatever came his way.

Some of them support their view by quoting Christ's own teaching. They take **the parable of the prodigal son**, for instance as a complete picture of God's relationship with his wayward children, and they point out that when the prodigal was penitent and came home, his father ran out and forgave him. **There was no talk of atonement in this story**, they say. The elder brother didn't have to bear some punishment before the prodigal could be forgiven (although he might tell you that he did simply because he worked and worked and never had a party!) The father, they say, simply met

penitence with pardon, and that is a picture of God's dealings with sinners ever since the commerce of heaven and earth began; and to put to truth of their contentions beyond all doubt, they say that that is how they would deal with any wayward son and daughter of their own. If they were sorry and said so, that would be the end of it; they'd forgive them on the spot, without reservation.

I'd like to think that that would be true, but I know that this rarely happens. Further, I'd like to remind you that the parable of the prodigal son cannot be a complete picture of God's relationships with his wayward children. The story of broken and healed relationships among a human father and his sons, being the relationships of sinners to sinners, isn't and never could be, a perfect and complete parallel of the relationships between a human sinner and a holy God. Besides, I think there is more to be seen between the lines of this story. **What do you think it cost the father** to be able to freely offer the grace of total forgiveness to his wayward son? His heart had been broken by his son's rebellion. He had to swallow his pride. And his forgiveness actually cost him the agonies of his own heart and life and soul.

Sin always takes its price and someone must pay it. Yet, even "paying the price" isn't enough. The foul principle of the thing had to be broken. It had to be met in its innermost nature, and its power and its life had to be taken out of it. The reality is this: the consequence of sin is death – not just the punishment of it, but the consequence of it. Death is in us. Infected with this foul disease, the whole human race has trod the path to spiritual death. Nor is there anything any one of us can do about it. The fact is that even the most advanced saints and seers share in this infection. Some may understand a little more than others about this dire calamity of the human race, but the problem is completely beyond anyone's solution. Only Jesus Christ can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The Bible tells us that that is exactly what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross:

And when [we] were dead in our [old sin-dead life, we were incapable of responding to God, but], God made [us] alive together with him when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. [Christ] set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the [false spiritual tyrants of their sham authority], and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it (Col. 2:13-15, adapted with Peterson's The Message version).

Jesus Christ not only “paid the price” that sin exacts – he died, even as we will die – but he also triumphed on the cross; he broke the power of sin; he defeated it; and so he reigns from the cross; and in his resurrection, he remains supreme over anything sin and death could accomplish. It was no pathetic, beaten figure that cried from the cross that first Good Friday, “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30). It was and is God’s own Son, royal, priestly and sovereign. He alone could do it. He did it. Hallelujah, wondrous Saviour!”

4. What must I do if the cross is to benefit me?

I will remember that the sins that nailed Jesus Christ to the wood were in part at least, part and parcel of the same sins as I have committed. In that sense, I can truly say, I had a part in crucifying the Son of God. I, too, was there when they crucified my Lord.

It doesn’t matter that countless generations separate my great need from Jesus Christ’s gracious act of salvation. When I knew the depth of my sin, I knew the provision of my Saviour for me.

I certainly cannot save myself. I am a leaky vessel. I often do what I do out of my own sense of need. The truth is that there is sin even in my good. There is something to be forgiven even in the best things I do. I need to realize the impurity of my motives even in the holiest moments I know.

Clearly, the cross was necessary. My own blunted conscience has point enough to tell me that sin must be punished and dealt with. Of course, I would be wrong to pretend I understand the cross, even now. It outruns my reason, though I am glad it does not contradict it. It has meaning for millions; it has meaning for me.

“And was there then no other way, for God to take I cannot say, I only bless him, day by day, who saved me through my Saviour.”

It is glorious to know that Jesus Christ’s sacrifice covers the sins of the whole world. All may come to him. It is also glorious to know that the back of sin has been broken, and that the central, eternal righteousness on which alone a righteous order can be reared is secure.

What then must I do now?

I will go and sit before the cross. I will attend to it. I will be concentrated and unhurried, and let it speak to me.

Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand,
the shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land,
a home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
from the burning of the noontide heat and the burden of the day.

Upon that cross of Jesus mine eye at times can see
the very dying form of one who suffered there for me,
and from my stricken heart, with tears, two wonders I confess:
the wonders of redeeming love and mine own unworthiness.

I take O cross your shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of his face;
content to let the world go by, to know no gain nor loss;
my sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.

(Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane)

Here is cleansing, security and renewal. Here the past is dealt with, the future is secured, and all the present is peace. Here I take strength for service, patience in waiting, and healing for any wounds that may come. Here I find hope for myself and for the whole world.

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC,
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