

## The Glory of the Cross

### Sermon #1- The cross and forgiveness

Passages: Ephesians 1:3-8

John 12:23-33

There's an old hymn that I love which says; "**In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time...**" I want to suggest that this is an important attitude for us to have as we go through these last four weeks of Lent; we need to look at the cross with a heart of praise and thanksgiving...to literally '*glory*' in that cross.

For many of us, however, this is not an easy thing to do! For many of us, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is anything but glorious! Rather, it's a tragic story...a story of violence, brutality and extreme cruelty (so accurately portrayed in Mel Gibson's movie, "*The Passion of the Christ*"). But the worst part about it is the way that all that violence, cruelty and brutality has often been interpreted as if it *originated in God Himself!* You see, we've been taught that God is angry with our sin and that His wrath burns against us. We've been taught that, since "***the wages of sin is death***", we all deserve to die. However, we're told that Jesus came to stand between us and God, to bear our punishment and to die in our place...to save us from God's wrath.

Now, quite frankly, it's hard to see any glory in that! It's hard to see any glory in a Father who would kill His one and only Son because there was no other way to deal with our sins. Not only does it portray God as an angry and vindictive deity, but it also portrays Jesus in a way that is relationally detached from the Father. Surely, this way of understanding the cross makes you wonder what sort of God stands behind Jesus! Indeed, we may well wonder whatever happened to the God of Love and that *unbreakable unity* of One God in Three Persons?

Christian feminists, in particular, have found this 'penal' understanding of the cross hard to swallow. Rita Brock writes, "*The shadow of the punitive father must always lurk behind the atonement. He haunts (every) image of*

*forgiving grace.*” Another feminist, Darby Ray, says: “*The very doctrine (of the cross) that attempts to understand and articulate God’s response to evil actually perpetuates evil in the lives of many women...*” In short, rather than being **attracted** to God...drawn to Him through the glory of the cross..., many people are now being **repelled**! Something is definitely wrong!

Is it possible, then, to sing the words... "**In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time...**"??? Is it possible to *glory* in a symbol of such violence?

Well, you know, Jesus certainly tells us that it’s possible! In John 12, Jesus talked about His death on the cross as something of incredible beauty...a moment of *glory*. He said, "*Now, the time to be glorified has come...And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto me!*" Some might think that Jesus was referring to His ascension, when He talked about being '*lifted up*'. But John makes it absolutely clear when he adds; "**He was speaking about his death!**"

In other words, He knew that it would be His death on the cross that would become the place of His glorification...when not only would **He** be glorified, but **His Father** would be glorified as well!

And so, with that as a short introduction, I want to spend the next 4 weeks of Lent pondering '*The Glory of the Cross*'.

Let’s pray.

Why should we glory in the cross? The essential reason for this is because **the cross demonstrates the glorious character of God**. The cross reveals something about God that we could not have known otherwise...the depth of His love for the human race.

But, of course, we need to 'read' the cross correctly. I mean, before we can truly see the full extent of God’s love that was manifested at the cross, we need to have a clear picture of what the cross was all about. So, let's start by reminding ourselves exactly what the Bible does say about the cross.

**First**, the Bible never says that the cross was used by God to punish Jesus or to put Him to death in our place. To the contrary, the Bible makes it clear that the cross was used by Jesus' religious and political opponents to get rid of Him. Peter makes this clear in Acts 2, when he proclaims to the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem:

**Ac 2:23** *...you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*

**Secondly**, the Bible makes it clear that, although Jesus was crucified by these evil men, God was able to use the crucifixion for good. As it was with Joseph in the Old Testament, God could take that the evil done against Jesus and turn it to the good. Hence, Paul can speak about the cross in a positive light, saying that...

**1Co 1:18** *...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.*

For us to believe that God would allow His Son to be crucified by sinful human beings is quite an absurd idea. “*How could God be that weak?*” And yet, Paul says that this *weakness*...has turned out to be the greatest demonstration of God’s power! Hence, Paul goes on in 1 Corinthians 1 to say...

**1Co 1:22-24** *Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*

Paul then concludes:

**1Co 1:27-29** *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. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”*

The cross was the epitome of God’s foolishness and weakness; it was the place where God (Father, Son and Spirit) willingly submitted to the evil and violent forces of humanity. They literally turned the other cheek, walked the extra mile, and blessed those who were cursing them! On the cross, all of Jesus’ teaching about non-violence and forgiveness came

together in one place...in one awful, yet magnificent visual lesson on the foolish ways of God. And to top all this 'foolishness' off, the final words uttered by Jesus from the cross were; "***Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!***"

In the eyes of the world, this was a foolish thing for Jesus to say! After all, Jesus not only had the power to crush His opposition, He had every right to annihilate them. Righteousness and justice were on His side! And yet, He forgave them instead. Why? What did that accomplish???

To fully understand the glory of the cross (and, in particular, the glory of forgiveness), we need to talk about the **Kingdom of God**. Most Jews of Jesus day expected the Kingdom to come through power and violence – through military force. The Messiah would overcome oppression and evil by overthrowing the Romans. But Jesus had a radically different agenda which He regularly repeated in His preaching. His message of the Kingdom taught that when you choose the way of *violence, oppression and destruction* you only become what you hate. And so, Jesus said in Matthew 5;

***"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies ...If you love those who love you, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-44 &46-48)***

Real victory is not about crushing your enemy, but about winning him over from the grip of evil – of breaking the vicious cycle of violence by reacting in the opposite spirit. If someone is arrogant, respond with grace; if someone is panicked, respond with calm; if someone is hostile, respond with peace. According to Jesus, the way of the Kingdom is not to overcome violence with more violence, but (as St. Paul put it) to "***overcome evil with good***" (Romans 12:14-21). This is not just a shift in power but an entire redefinition of what power is about. Power is not about *ruling* over others but about *servicing* others and empowering others to join you in service.

Isn't that what Jesus' taught His disciples in Matthew 18?

*" At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:1-4)*

Have you ever talked with a Muslim about forgiveness? If so, you'll soon realise that they believe that Christian forgiveness is actually a declaration of weakness and cowardice. In their mind, it is only when you have won your freedom or are in a position of strength that you can forgive. Of course, our model of forgiveness comes from the cross—from the Jesus who forgave when he was the most vulnerable and weak! Moreover, we believe that it is only this type of forgiveness...from a position of weakness...that can heal personal and social wounds. Witness the efforts of Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela—both of these 'freedom fighters' called for forgiveness from a position of weakness, *ever before* justice was done. Christian forgiveness is deeper and richer than Muslims can imagine!

Indeed, it is this type of forgiveness that set the Kingdom agenda of Jesus apart from all the other revolutionary movements of his time. His was a revolution of love...the way of *losing to win* and of *dying to live*. Indeed, this way is so shockingly different from our worldly concepts of power and greatness that even many Christians today cannot conceive of this "*strength in weakness*". The wisdom of God seems foolishness to them. The fear is that loving and forgiving one's enemies means being a passive doormat. In the false dichotomy of our worldly thinking we think there are only two choices: either we deal with things "like a man" through violence, or we stick our head in the sand as a passive coward. **But Jesus' Kingdom is about a third way.** It is not about submitting to oppression but about actively combating and overcoming it with good. It is about breaking the back of evil with the power of love. We may think that we cannot do good

to an evil man lest they think we approve of their evil deeds, but in God's economy it is precisely through the pouring out of compassion and kindness that the power of evil is overcome. (The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan only prove this point! Violence seems only to breed more violence.)

The Bible says that it is the *mercy* of God that leads to repentance. Essentially, that is where God's forgiveness originates. In His mercy, God comes to us in the middle of our sin. He accepts us as we are and forgives our sins and failures. Of course, God does not need the cross to forgive us or love us. God does not need the cross to '*balance the books*' before He is able to forgive us. The Old Testament is filled with examples of God's love and forgiveness. Jesus forgave and loved people before the cross. No, God does not need the cross...but we do! We need the cross to understand God's love. We need the cross to believe and accept His forgiveness. We need the cross to really grasp that He is *for* us, not *against* us. We need the cross to be drawn back to Him...back into the fullness of His Life. We need the cross to cut short our cycle of violence and reconsider our false understanding of our Heavenly Father. God does not need the cross—we do! For the cross speaks to us at the point of our greatest need...**the need for freedom!** That's what forgiveness does—it sets us free to start again. And so, to the one wracked with **guilt** God says through the cross, "*I take the blame. I pay the price.*" To the one who is locked in **self-hatred** God says through the cross "*I love you so much I will give my life to defend you and protect you.*" To the one in **rebellion** against life itself, God says through the cross, "*See me, here, arms outstretched. I am not a threat; I am love. Come to me and rest.*"

I was listening to the radio on Friday morning as I was driving to Mitre 10. Richard Fiedler's '*Conversation Hour*' was on and he was interviewing a woman who had been a heroin addict. It was fascinating, particularly because this woman admitted that she was only able to escape from her addiction through *the power of the cross of Christ!* This is what she said: "*Suddenly, I was aware of the fact that I was a bad mother; I was a bad daughter; I was a bad friend; I was a failure! And I knew, above all, that I needed forgiveness!*" It was in this position of great need that she met Jesus —she found her forgiveness in the cross, in the unmerited love of God.

Now, I would assume that, as Christians, we have all experienced first-hand how this kind of unmerited love works. We look at the cross and we see the amazing truth that “...*while we were still God's enemies Christ died for us!*” As we accept this reality...as we accept that we’ve hardened ourselves against God and begin to accept His love and forgiveness... that is when the change takes place. We melt! We crumble in His arms! And, suddenly, we become witnesses to the power of love over evil. We become ambassadors of the radical power of God’s forgiveness to initiate us into a whole new way of life...a fruitful life that promotes life into the world around us.

In this way, Jesus’ words in John 12 are not only about Him- they also include us: ***Jn 12:24-26 “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be.”***

As I said, many Jews of Jesus time expected the Messiah to overthrow their enemies through violence and force. Jesus showed quite clearly that this was not the way of the Kingdom but the way of the world. In the end, combating violence with violence only escalates our problems. **And that’s why the cross is so glorious!** By giving in to the violent forces of sin...by absorbing the abuse and the violence to His own body, and by forgiving the sins of His enemies...Jesus was emptying sin of its power, breaking the cycle of retaliation and vengeance! It was through forgiveness, and not retaliation, that Jesus was reversing the flow of sin, thus bringing good out of evil.

Indeed, that is what we, as Christians, are now included in!

**That is the glory of the cross!**

Let’s pray.

