

The Glory of the Cross

Sermon 4- The Cross and Christus Victor

Passages: Colossians 2:13- 3:3
Matthew 16:21-28

Modern theology is a product of the Enlightenment. It is a scientific pursuit wherein we're taught to break down the story of the Bible into the bite-size chunks; separating, classifying, defining, comparing. As a result, systematic doctrines are created and theological treatises are written concerning the finest details of each segment of the Biblical story.

Today is Easter Day! And so, in keeping with our classic Enlightenment roots, we often limit today's focus to the resurrection...as if it is the only part of the Scriptures that is worth talking about today. Last Christmas, we focused on Jesus' birth. This past Sunday, we talked about the Triumphant Entry. Two days ago, we spoke about the crucifixion. Today, it's the resurrection.

We divide the Gospel into bite-sized chunks. But, as a sad consequence, we have lost our grip on the whole the story; indeed, we have lost our ability as story-tellers...simply because we've lost sight of the *cosmic nature* of the Gospel.

The Early Church didn't have this problem! You see, they never really formulated a *doctrine of the Cross* or a *doctrine of the Resurrection*. Yes, they did argue about *the Incarnation*, but that's only because they wanted to get a better grip on Christ's cosmic identity. Essentially, what concerned them was not the particulars. Rather, their eyes were always searching for the bigger picture of Jesus Christ; a picture beginning in *eternity past* and continuing into *eternity future*. In fact, it's quite astonishing to read their ancient writings and see how rarely did they even mention the words 'cross' and 'resurrection'!

Listen to two examples:

Gregory of Nyssa, writing in the 4th century, wrote these words:

"Purity has stooped down to them that were dead, the Guide to them that had gone astray, that the defiled might be made clean, the dead raised, and the wanderers led back to the right way."

Athanasius, another great theologian of the 4th century wrote these words:

“The Word visits the earth, where he has always been present, and sees its evil condition. He takes a human body, born of a pure virgin in whose womb he makes human flesh his own, in which to reveal himself, conquer death, and restore life.”

As I said, the words ‘cross’ and ‘resurrection’ rarely get a mention! But that’s not because they didn’t matter. It’s simply because these two aspects of Christ’s incarnate life were always understood in the context of God’s far larger act of grace ; one that was initiated before time and which culminated in the glorious ascension of our Lord Jesus.

This Easter, I want to follow the example of the Early Christians. I want to tell the story of the death and resurrection of Christ within that bigger picture...the cosmic story of our Lord...the story of ‘*Christus Victor*’!

Let’s pray.

From the moment God entered our world as a tiny baby, there was a buzz in the air. Those who had ‘*eyes to see*’ were prompted by Jesus’ birth to exclaim that God was about to launch a revolution!

Mary, Jesus’ mother, sings “...***he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty***”.

The old man Simeon declares: “***This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against...***”

Of course, it was 30 years before these things started to happen, but when Jesus began His ministry, one of the first things He did was to direct His attention upon the broken and the rejected... the "throwaways" of our world...

healing them and telling them they were loved (and not forsaken) by God. In doing this, Jesus was deliberately subverting the social and religious powers of His day. By associating with sinners and those considered to be unclean, He

was undermining the authority of the religious institution, actively promoting the subversive idea that no one needed to let the *high and mighty* define their worth. Jesus, on behalf of His Father, called these people

"worthy" even

though the powerful called them "worthless". He called them "beautiful" even though the powerful called them "ugly".

By teaching the people a new view of God, Jesus was directly challenging the status quo of the world's oppressive authority structures (what Paul would later call '*the Principalities and Powers*').

Of course, Jesus knew that this would cost him his life, but He still wouldn't give in! In Matthew 16, less than a year before He was crucified,

Jesus predicted His death at the hands of the religious *Powers*. **Mt 16:21**

"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed..."

And so it was! '*The Powers that be*' stripped him naked, exposed him and shamed him. They crucified him as a common criminal to show that no one can oppose the System.

But here's where their plan backfired. In order to kill Him, they needed some *justification* for it. But they could never find it because Jesus never gave them justification- He offered no resistance, no evil, no argument, no fight. He was perfectly innocent! And so, once the common people saw that the Powers and Authorities had killed Him, they recognized what a travesty of justice this was. The people realized what a sham the oppressive System was. As Love hung on that cross, the *principalities and powers* were publicly exposed, unmasked in their hatred. The illusion was lifted.

This is what Paul is driving at in Colossians 2:15, when he says;

"And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

The key word here is "***disarmed***". Jesus didn't overpower them. He didn't use force to conquer them. They were simply taken by surprise through the fact that He never resisted their assault. Indeed, He allowed them to kill Him. He allowed the whole world to pour out its venom upon Him! Instead of returning evil for evil, this sinless Son of God blessed those who persecuted Him!

That's how Jesus *disarmed the powers and authorities!* **It was as if Jesus**

was dead to them. And once a man is dead, there is nothing more you can do to him. They had no power over Him.

Now, before we go any further, we need to understand what the Bible means when it speaks about the *'powers and authorities'*. You see, although the Jewish religious system located in the Temple is identified in the Scriptures as *the power and authority* that killed Jesus, we can't stop there! Behind them was a *cosmic authority* of principalities and powers.

The Apostle Paul speaks about it in Ephesians 6. ***“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”***

Jesus, also spoke about it. Indeed, not only did He refer to Satan (or the devil) as a real enemy in this world, but He spent a great deal of time casting out demons. Of course, in our modern 'scientific' world, speaking about the *devil* sounds almost superstitious...primitive. But, once again, this comes from the Enlightenment tendency to separate the "natural" world of science from the "supernatural" world of God and spirits. By following this trend, we have lost the integrated perspective of the ancients. You see, in the worldview of the biblical writers, the spiritual realm of angels and demons was not seen as something detached from us, but as an invisible realm *connected* to our own. The earthly realm and the heavenly realm *interacted* and *influenced* one another. Everything that happens on earth was a reflection of the heavenly realm and vice versa. Hence, any talk of the devil arose out of an honest look at the destructive power of evil at work in our lives and in our world.

We must focus on the 'spiritual powers and authorities' if we're going to capture the cosmic dimension to the Gospel! I mean, ask yourself: **Why did Jesus die? Why was He raised from the dead?** In our classic Enlightenment models, all we can come up with is a legal interpretation about God's forgiveness. We've been told that God could not forgive us until our sins were paid for, and so Jesus came from heaven to settle the accounts and die in our place. But do you see the problem with this? It reduces the cross to a legal transaction between the Father and the Son, totally cutting itself off from the rest of the cosmic story. In other words, in true Enlightenment fashion, it cuts up the Gospel into bite-sized chunks which end up truncating the cosmic story!

But...if Jesus' entire **life** was a battle against the *principalities and powers*... a battle to undo them...to unravel their work and disarm them...then, surely, His **death** is part and parcel of that same story! You see, the powers thought they had Him! They thought they got rid of Him. But the cross was not their victory but His! He triumphed over them and made a public spectacle of them. **And the triumph was even that much more spectacular when the Father raised the Son from the grave!**

Christus Victor! *The victorious Christ!*

If you don't have this picture in your mind on Easter Sunday, you will have reduced the Gospel down to a bite-sized chunk that will never satisfy you! But, when you put the cross and resurrection into their proper *cosmic* perspective, you soon discover that here, in the Gospel, is the answer to the human dilemma! Despite what the Enlightenment worldview may tell you, our dilemma is **not** whether God can forgive us our sins or not. That's a no-brainer! Even the OT had the answer to that one-- "***As far as the east is from the west, so far has he taken our sins from us.***" No! Our dilemma is whether we can be free from the trickery and deceit of the *principalities and powers*. Can we be liberated from the Evil One...from the one who, since the Fall, has prevailed over human hearts and minds?

The answer, according to Jesus, is a resounding 'Yes'!

Just prior to His death, Jesus made this claim: "***Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.***"

Jesus obviously believed that His upcoming death on the cross would somehow release the human race from the devil's grip...that through His death we would be liberated from the *principalities and powers*! **How would that work?** Well, it's quite simple! Jesus believed that His death would be such a powerfully attractive revelation of God's love that the human race would no longer fall for Satan's lies. No longer would we believe that God was against us or far away from us. No longer would we believe that we were unworthy of His love or undesirable to Him! The cross of Jesus would finally prove, once and for all, **on a cosmic level**, that God was not only near, but that He loves us more than He loves His own life! Look at how this works on a practical level.

Imagine a girl who's been constantly told by her parents that she is worthless. (Of course, her parents probably learned these same abusive words from their parents—these things are often part of a generational cycle.) In time, the little girl begins to internalize these words and begins to really believe she is worthless. As such, she's a victim of the "Principalities and Powers"...the same system of evil that crushed her parents and is now crushing her. They define her. They control her.

Christ's death on the cross, however, has brought victory to this young girl. How? *He offers her a different story about who she is!* The story of God's love for her has the power to *liberate* this girl from the prison of her mind...from the living hell of her false identity. Not only does Christ's cross *expose* the lie of the devil concerning her worthlessness, but his Good News of God's love is a story that has the power to *heal* her broken spirit and wounded soul.

Now, it's at this point in the story that we must begin to integrate the message of the resurrection. You see, like the cross, the resurrection cannot be isolated and separated from the cosmic picture of Jesus. The resurrection is not an after-thought, nor is it, as so many have said, simply God's '*seal of approval*' on Jesus' death. No, the resurrection flows from the rest of the story and links it all with Jesus' ascension and return to the Father's side. The resurrection is the final stage of this cosmic victory over the *principalities and powers* and *our introduction into a whole new life in Christ*.

Go back to our confused little girl. Although Christ died and was raised victoriously *for her*, before it will truly change her situation, she has to appropriate it for herself. This means that she must say to her old identity of worthlessness and victimhood, "*I am dead to you. I don't belong to you anymore.*" Then, in prayer, turn to the Risen Lord Jesus and find her new identity in Him as God's beloved child.

Paul expresses this necessary step of appropriation in his letter to the Romans: "***For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*** (Ro 6:9-12)

What this means in practical terms is that we need to let God love us into

new life! This is why He came and died and rose—so that our true God-given humanity might be restored to us and renewed in us.

Paul writes these famous words to the church in Corinth: “***Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!***” This is essentially what *Christus Victor* is all about! Jesus has come to declare spiritually and publicly that **all the things that killed us...** the system, the law, false religions (Colossians 2), our own destructive and hurtful behaviors, even death itself... **these things are dead and no longer have control over us.** The cross liberates us from the grip of the principalities and powers while Christ’s resurrection and the gift of His Spirit gives a renewed identity; our true identity, rediscovered in Christ.

As I’ve been saying, our modern, Enlightenment mindset has reduced the cross to a legal formula and the resurrection to a seal of approval. The Early Church, however, refused to go down that path. Instead, they stayed open to the cosmic picture of Christ, the Incarnate Word of God. By telling, over and over, the story of *Christus Victor*, their hearts were drawn -up into the cosmic dimensions of God’ love! They could see how God entered into our world, into the pain of our suffering and sin, in order to free us from the principalities and powers that so long had held us captive.

Listen again to Athanasius:

“He saw the human race perishing and death and decay reigning over them. He saw that the penalty for our sin gave this corruption a firm hold over us, and that until the law was fulfilled this could not be changed. He saw how awful it was that his own work was passing away. He saw the great wickedness of humanity, and how it had grown little by little to an intolerable pitch. And he saw all humanity under penalty of death. Seeing all this, he took pity on our race, and had mercy on our weakness, and lowered himself to our corruption. He could not bear to let death have mastery, to allow these creatures to perish, and his Father’s handiwork come to nothing, and so he took on a body, no different from ours.”

May this Easter be filled with the joy of this **cosmic story**. This is the only way that we can truly take hold of our salvation; not by following a formula or having everything figured out, but rather, by resting in the arms of the one who does.

As Paul said in Colossians 3:1-3, “***Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.***”

Let's pray.

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