

That Foolish Cross

✠ Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. (from Psalm 19:14)

"But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23)

Oh the cross, the cross. Why do we have this foolish cross? I mean, what was wrong with the Ten Commandments? Think about it. If we just followed the commandments, everything would be right with the world. It's not as though the New Testament came along and they somehow became unimportant. Jesus teaches them (*Matthew 19:17-19*). Paul affirms them (*Romans 13:8-10*). They're in [our prayer book]/ [many Anglican prayer books]. Many churches begin their Lenten Sunday worship reciting the Commandments.

If only we would follow them. But, as God said about the Israelites, we are a stiff-necked people (*Exodus 32:9*). Stubborn, haughty, willful. The fact is, the Ten Commandments almost didn't make it. As Moses came down from Sinai and beheld the Israelites reveling in their golden calf religion (*Exodus 32:19, 34:1ff*), he flew into a rage and smashed the stone tablets on the ground. God had to write them a second time. No, the Decalogue wasn't enough for us. We kept replacing God's guiding words, not to mention his mighty act of liberation and his providence, with religions of our own making.

It's as though century after century, week after week, God gave us these great sermons about how to live. But we gave his words scant attention, or we bent them to our own liking, fashioning our very own golden calfs. So God needed to show us. Really show us.

Distilled to their essence, the Commandments are all about love. Loving God, loving our neighbor. So in the fullness of time, God gave us the cross. What more powerful way to show us the meaning of love than for God's own Son to die, suffering and abandoned, on that Roman cross? Christ crucified is the true Word. Paul says that to those who are being saved, Christ crucified is the power and wisdom of God.

The question is, are we being saved? Is even the Son of God descending from heaven to die on the cross enough to transform our hearts from stone to flesh? Is the cross enough to bring us alive to the power of love to redeem the world?

The challenge of the cross is that it is a paradox. The power and wisdom of the Almighty God lies in becoming weak and vulnerable, his blood poured out. It just doesn't make sense.

Christ crucified is a stumbling block. How can the one I am counting on to save me willingly undergo the agony and shame of crucifixion? Does the cross mean that I too must become vulnerable? Accept my own suffering and reach out in compassion to the suffering of my fellows?

Christ crucified is foolishness. There is no reasoning to the cross. As the political debaters and worldly powers of every age know, real power comes from strength, from

resilience, from a show of force. Does the cross mean that I too must become weak? Let go of my power, my willfulness, my stubborn drive to go after what I want in life?

Until his conversion, Paul himself was unable to pierce the paradox of the cross. As a fervent Jew hoping for the restoration of Israel, a crucified Messiah was a stumbling block. As a Pharisee, he believed in the wisdom of following the rules, enforced by persecution if need be. You might say that Paul's religion got in the way of his experiencing the power of the cross, of feeling the loving embrace of a God who gave his all for him.

This is one of the messages in Jesus' cleansing of the temple. Jesus overturned the infrastructure at the very heart of the Jewish religion factory (*Rowan Williams*). Matthew, Mark and Luke place the event right at the end of Jesus' public ministry, a final, outrageous act that led to his condemnation by the religious leaders and subsequent crucifixion.

John though, tells the story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It's as if John is inviting us to cleanse our own temples as we enter his Gospel. Set aside our preconceptions about religion. About all the ways we make meaning. Clean out the temple we have been building for 46 years or 65 years or whatever years you have. And just absorb who Jesus Christ really is. The Word made flesh, the light of world. Because the real temple isn't the church building, the religion it represents, or any of the other trappings we hold dear. Our true temple is Jesus' broken body, sacrificed on the cross for me and you, and in three days, risen up.

It took me a long time to begin to grasp the paradox of the cross. I got God the Father. And I sort of got the mysterious idea of the Holy Spirit. But I didn't really grasp the flesh and blood Jesus. I'm a thinker. I need to make sense of things. Which is OK up to the point where I use my intellectualizing to protect my heart. To avoid being vulnerable.

But the cross is all about vulnerability. And it's all about relationship. It's about coming to know that I'm lovable. That Jesus loves me so intimately that he actually gave his life so I might have mine. And it's about wanting to go forth and love others as I have been loved.

I don't know exactly how I came to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and accept him as my Lord and Savior. I wasn't knocked to the ground like Paul. Somehow, in the fullness of time, I was loved into loving Jesus. Amazing grace. Not sure how else to say it. And while I certainly did not leave religion, I find my religion daily being rebuilt and re-centered around Christ.

As part of our ongoing Lenten practice, may we cleanse our temples of all that is not Christ-centered. Let go of "*the wisdom of the wise and discernment of the discerning.*" (1 Corinthians 1:19) Let go of the thinking and beliefs that make a foolish cross a stumbling block instead of our salvation. And may we take the risk to fall ever more deeply in love with the one who is already in love with us. Which considering it's falling in love with God, is really no risk at all. Amen.