

The Centrality of the Cross

In our second reading, we look at what was perhaps Jesus' final public message before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. In our text, some Gentiles had come to Jesus' disciples asking for an audience with him. In reply, Jesus tells the purpose his incarnation, which was to suffer and die on a cross. Follow as I read **John 12:20-37**:

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.²³ Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.²⁸ Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.³⁴ The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?"³⁵ Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going.³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."

My oldest grandson is a long-distance runner on his high school track team, and also is a bold witness for Christ. For his 16th birthday gift from me, his Opa, he asked for a chain with a cross to wear around his neck. I was happy to give it to him, knowing he would faithfully witness to its meaning in his life.

Jesus states the centrality of the cross, both for his life and mission and for our lives today. The cross is central, not just in Christian symbolism and architecture, but in our lives and in our witness, in our message and in our mission. The centrality of the cross is not guaranteed by placing crosses in the worship center and/or around on necks. The cross is to be central in our thoughts, our living, and conversation.

Jesus has just replied to the inquiry of the Greeks who wanted to have an audience with him that the hour was coming when he would glorify himself in a way that would be difficult for them to understand. It would not be through a triumphant overthrow of political powers, but through his death. And his death would become a pattern for the lifestyle of his followers. In that kind of living and dying defined by a cross, he would draw these Gentile Greeks as well as all sorts of people to himself.

As Jesus anticipated his death on the cross, he began to be greatly distressed in his spirit. As we've seen so clearly in John's Gospel, the God/Man Jesus had both a human and a divine nature.

Even though he retained the fullness of his deity in his incarnation (Colossians 2:19), he nevertheless in his humanity remained subject to temptation and human feelings (Hebrews 4:15). He was literally thrown into confusion in his mind and spirit.

Jesus was greatly troubled over his looming execution on a cross, not because of the physical suffering, which in itself was horrible, but because of the spiritual anguish, which was unspeakable. As Paul said, he who knew no sin would become sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus knew he would in his crucifixion receive the curse of God and the punishment of holy God, who must punish sin (Galatians 3:13). As in the Garden of Gethsemane, here Jesus in his human nature dreads the suffering of the cross, and struggles against the necessity or possible averting of the cross (Mark 14:32-36; Luke 22:40-46; Matthew 26:36-46). This anguish caused him to sweat what were like drops of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22: 44). Yet he surrendered to the will of the Father, knowing the cross was a necessity for our salvation.

Some of you perhaps have been privileged to see the famous passion play in Oberammergau, Bavaria/Germany. Legend says that villagers were spared from a plague in 1633, and in gratitude vowed to reenact the passion of Christ every ten years. In 1979 there was a dispute between Jews and Gentiles over the fact that the play incited anti-Semitic feelings such as occurred during the Nazi Third Reich. The same type of dispute took place years ago with the release of the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. The fact is, we're all guilty of Jesus' suffering and death. Regardless of who led the trial and drove the nails into his hands and feet, it was our sin, yours and mine, that crucified him.

Jesus said the cross would also spell the defeat of Satan as the prince of this world, who had held a death grip on the world (31). The suffering and death of Jesus would first break Satan's stranglehold on the world, then would draw us to the Savior. Jesus spoke of this magnetic attraction of his cross and resurrection: "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*" The uplifted cross would draw people to conviction of sin. John, in chapter three of his gospel, compares the lifting up of Jesus on the cross to Moses' lifting up the bronze serpent on a pole, that gave healing from the poisonous snakes in the wilderness (John 3:14; Numbers 21:8, 9).

Some great men leave a lasting influence and legacy, but in almost every case, every person's death diminishes his/her influence, particularly with the passing of time. But with Jesus Christ, his suffering and death was his greatest work, and because of the resurrection, the power of the cross continues to transform lives. Jesus' death was the primary reason for his life.

The cross wasn't a glamorous but rather was a shameful form of execution. Ironically, though the cross is offensive to the world, and its presence would ruin many a liberal or therapeutic sermon, it's also attractive to those whom the Spirit of God is drawing to himself. It's in the cross that we're able to see God's glory most fully, that is, his very heart and nature of perfect holiness and love. The cross shows the holiness of God, in the necessity that someone, some perfect sacrifice/substitute, be punished for sin. The cross also reveals the perfect, undeserved love of God for sinners.

Jesus referred to his following resurrection, which was a "lifting up" (32). All of us children of God are being saved by Christ's drawing power. The Holy Spirit draws us to Jesus, awakening our hearts to believe (John 6:44; 16:8). What Jesus says is not universalism but it is a statement of universality. Jesus draws to himself all whom the Father has given him from all ranks and strata of

society, and eventually from all corners of the globe. One of the offenses of Jesus' ministry was his total acceptance of all categories of people. Jesus was called the "Friend of Sinners," which, though intended by self-righteous Pharisees as an insult, was a great term describing his unconditional love for all people (Matthew 11:19).

The universality of Jesus is also without regard to nationality or background. I wonder what kinds of people Jesus would reach out to in our society today? No doubt he would draw to himself those who would feel least comfortable in religious society. He would seek after the categories of people who're most overlooked by churches perhaps. And his followers would probably be representative of all races and social classes.

Jesus spoke about the crisis/judgment he was bringing to the earth (31). Satan's power and stranglehold upon the world would be broken with his coming crucifixion and resurrection. From now on, the world is divided on either side of the cross. Everyone faces the choice of the cross. Some first are drawn perhaps with a degree of curiosity or mild interest, like the Greeks who came seeking an interview with Jesus. But the Holy Spirit soon confronts the seeker with a choice, and this we call conviction that leads either to repentance and faith or to rejection and lostness. No one can remain neutral. The cross demands a choice.

Karl and Marilyn are missionaries serving in Ireland. In a newsletter some years ago Marilyn told the story of her friend, Carol. This young mother shared with Marilyn that "for the past twenty years she has quite happily been gathering bits and pieces of various forms of spirituality, trying them on for size and then keeping them or discarding them according to how effective they were in making her feel better."

She was satisfied with her approach," says Marilyn. "Feng Shui, Buddhism, yoga meditation and many other pearls were in her collection. She sought not just any pearls, but fine ones that would truly feed her soul and satisfy her longing for spiritual wholeness. I met Carol," says Marilyn, "in the midst of her journey about 4 years ago as we walked our sons home from nursery school. She had just come home from a week's retreat at a Buddhist center and told me at length about how it had helped her. As fate (i.e., the sovereignty of God) would have it, Carol lived one block from us and this was to be the first of many conversations to follow about spiritual things as we walked to and from the school and began doing more and more things together socially. Carol is like many around us," explains Marilyn, "post-modern in her thinking. Spiritually aware with no conviction of absolute truth. What's right for me may not be right for you. Experience is everything. A few short months ago Carol gave the classic description of how she thinks one finds God: 'God is like the trunk of the tree and the roots are the many ways there are to find Him. Everybody will eventually find him in their own way.'"

Marilyn continues, "The Lord began to use a series of events over the past couple of months to get Carol's attention. She was less satisfied with her approach to spirituality." Marilyn says, "She told me that she was starting to realize that something was wrong with this piecemeal method and that there was a missing link. She agreed to come to a series of talks and discussion groups set up to give unbelievers a chance to explore Christianity. Perfect timing," says Marilyn, "for someone who has a collection of pearls that don't seem worth so much anymore."

In her e-mail Marilyn reported with excitement, "Carol gave her life to Christ a couple of weeks ago! She (Carol) is showing signs of someone who is born anew—a hunger for the Word and keen

awareness of its relevance to her life; a desire to communicate with God like she's never had before; a sense of contentment like she's not known for a long time."

Carol came to see the necessity of a choice, either Jesus Christ or someone or something else, not a smattering of everything that makes one feel a bit better. This is a generation that is enamored with a plethora of choices, yet regarding the cross, many would rather not have to decide, but rather keep it in the background as a later option after other avenues are explored. But the cross calls for the crisis of a choice. Jesus says we must put our trust in him, the light, while we have that light (verse 36).

Marilyn concluded that the new life for Carol is not all easy. She says the new life is for Carol is like wearing a new pair of shoes, not all that comfortable though preferable to the old life. Marilyn says these "new shoes" will take Carol to some difficult and challenging places. "The victory has been won for this new child of God but the battles are far from over."

Jesus says that those of us who would follow him must also follow his example and take the way of the cross of self-denial (24-26). We don't know what following Jesus means for us until we begin to follow him.

Recently I've come to a deeper understanding of our calling as believers to the cruciform life. As a pastor, I realize I'm not fully equipped to preach and minister pastoral care unless I know something of the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. I'm also convinced that the way of the cross includes also a resurrection, even in this life. If we continue to trust, the Lord will, in his time, lift us up and enable us to experience his deliverance and vindication. The way of the cross is the way of death to self, and even to our most cherished dreams. It's the way of trust, however, that in his time God will restore us.

Living the way of the cross leads to the discovery of eternal life, life that has meaning and purpose now (John 10:10) and promise for eternity to come. We're called to enter the narrative of Jesus' cross, what Paul referred to as "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10). Jesus promised that the unbelieving world would hate and persecute us, but that he would be with us (John 15:18-16:4).

I lend support to an organization that ministers in places of severe persecution of Christians, and the title of their email message several years ago was "Killed by ISIS for Being People of the Cross." We, unlike many in the Middle East, may not suffer overt persecution, but we're called to follow the way of the cross. The cross is central to the life and mission of Jesus and to our life and reason for living. As people of the cross, our calling is to lift high the cross of Christ, that others might be drawn to Jesus and join with us on our journey.

Like my grandson wearing his necklace with a cross, may we boldly give evidence that the cross is central in our lives.