

### **“The Confused Cross” – Rom 5:1-11 – June 15, 2005**

Isn't that a lovely, sanitized version of the crucifixion we have? “Jesus died for our sins.” If we say it quickly enough, it can trip off our lips as though someone pushed a menu button on our Christian page. Or, we can say it slowly, roll it over our tongue, draw it out and become really, really sad and depressed – “while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” How did we get here? How did this wondrous message of hope and well-being from Paul's hand get turned so completely into a convoluted and confused (mis)understanding of the meaning of Christ's death? It took a long time, and a lot of people, and the discovery of such a misunderstanding as a tool of oppression and control, and even a kind of knee-jerk automaton robotic parroting of a few glib phrases, but we have finally arrived at a place and time where asking a Christian “what does Christ's death on the cross mean?” will bring you an automatic “Jesus died for our sins” – and often, precious little else.

That's a sadness – even a tragedy – for that is a radical focus on only part of what Paul had to say, and misses, I think, the essence of what Paul was saying, especially here in our reading from the opening verses of Chapter 5 of Romans. What happened? How did we get to such a bumper-sticker appropriation – and not a very good one – of what is arguably the most important question of our Christian faith? Let's go back to what Paul actually wrote and see if we can discover where the train of faith went off the rails.

What situation was Paul trying to address, or counter? Remember that he was not writing scripture – he was writing a letter to people of faith whom he wanted, even expected, to meet. Were those early Christians to whom Paul wrote suffering from taunts of shame? I suspect they were, and I believe so for a couple of reasons. After all, they were identified as those who worshiped a man who had been executed as a common criminal. Not some spectacular holy martyrdom in battle, or a tragic assassination, the death of this man whose followers regarded as holy was on the surface at least no different from that of any other common criminal executed by the local authorities with a little help from the occupying soldiers.

More than that, however, is Paul's references to shame. Remember his “I am not ashamed of the gospel” with which he begins this letter and which we heard a couple of weeks ago? Did you hear in this reading another reference to shame? Probably not, because the New Revised Standard Version translates his Greek writing as “hope does not disappoint us” ... where a better – or at the very least, equal – rendering would be “now this hope does not put us to shame...”

So, to a community of faith persecuted by Jews for corrupting the Jewish religion, taunted by the Gentiles for believing in a messiah who was executed like a common criminal, Paul writes and reminds them to focus not on the death of Christ but more importantly on what his death – and his resurrection – meant for those who had faith.

How then did the Christian faith get lured down a path from “while we were still sinners Christ died for us” here in this text to gory Hollywood films or to people hanging themselves from meathooks or beating themselves bloody with barbed chains? Down a path that developed such weird misunderstandings as “God paid a ransom to Satan, and the price was the death of Jesus”?

That winding path down a blind canyon started in the mid fourth century with St. Anselm of Canterbury, who developed the first full theology of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice for sins – namely for our sins, the understanding that Christ's death was a substitute or replacement for ours. The very fact that this Anselmian theology caught on so quickly and held sway so pervasively for centuries, and is indeed alive and well today, can be understood because of its

popular appeal. That someone, especially one we consider to be one with God, would make such a sacrifice is terribly compelling, awesomely moving, a powerful signal of the worth or esteem in which we are held. There is some sense or logic to that, as well as a great deal of emotional appeal.

But there are some serious problems with that logic, that line of reasoning, and even bigger problems with how the church has misused that understanding over the centuries. Let's deal with the logical issues first. If Christ's death was a sacrifice, a ransom paid for our sins, the first question is "paid to whom?" Who was the kidnapper holding us hostage? The biblical and pseudo-biblical language often used to answer that question is "we were held hostage to our sins." Hmm ... so, we were holding ourselves hostage? With apologies to the Newfies, whom I love dearly having ministered among them, that reminds me of the joke where the Newfie holds the gun to his own head and shouts, "nobody moves or the Newfie gets it!"

Was it God who was holding us hostage? Would this be the same God whom we acclaim as creating, loving, forgiving now demanding a death as a payment for the bad behaviour of we, the children? Would that be the same God who stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, but who now decides that human sacrifice is ok after all? Or the same God who said, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." That it was God who was demanding this sacrifice doesn't fit well with what else we think we know about God.

Who else, then? Almost inevitably the church wandered down the path towards another solution, that there was someone else who demanded this ransom, and found in that personification of evil, Satan, a likely candidate. Even a perfect candidate, replete in Middle Ages imagery of redness, and smoke and fire and horns and surrounded by malevolent little creatures. Who better to tag as the villain, the one demanding extortionate levies and taxes and offerings – well, who better apart from archbishops and kings, of course! And so eventually some corners of the church developed an ugly scene of an impotent God meekly paying an exorbitant ransom in the form of handing over his son to this figure of evil – and leaving the door wide open that there would be need of more payments, not a very peaceful scenario.

Worse even than these meanderings of question-raising theologies were the ways the church discovered to put such this understanding of Christ's sacrificial death to use. Paul kind of kicked it off with his encouragement in this passage that "we boast in our tribulations." To be fair, Paul started with tribulations, worked through building of character to endurance and then to hope, while the church – and all too often people today – only go as far as to say that tribulation builds character ... and forget all about the hope. How often over the centuries has this understanding – or perhaps misunderstanding – of Christ's suffering been used to suppress and oppress people? "There, there, you slaves – suffering builds character, so stop complaining ... your suffering makes you like Christ!" Or, "you wonderfully meek, obedient women are really demonstrating a Christ-like virtue ... keep on suffering now, and you'll develop character!" Or perhaps, "you peasants should be happy that we're keeping you poor and in your place, because in doing so we're helping you to be more Christ-like!"

It seems appropriate then to go back to this text, and see if we can hear a different message, a message about the meaning of Christ's death that fits better with what else we believe about God, a loving God, a creating God, a God who promises hope and restoration and reconciliation. And as we go back to the text, right there in the first verse we begin to find a picture that differs widely from a mean, conniving, caving-in to ransom demands God. "Having, therefore, been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

“Peace.” Paul is not talking here about the soft, sappy, feeling-good, kids-are-out-of-the-house, the-phone-is-on-mute, Greek mind-peace that we think of when we think of peace. No, he is talking about the Hebrew health, wealth, happiness, well-being, good-to-be-alive, smell-the-pine-trees, walk with God kind of peace. This is the blessings kind of peace, as in “the Lord lift up his countenance on you and give you peace.” It’s not an inner sense of well-being but an outward sense of being in a right relationship with – in this case with God. For Paul clearly we have – in Christ – moved into this new right relationship with God, and have acquired the blessings of peace.

Perhaps the greatest of these blessings is hope. Paul begins with peace through Christ, moves quickly to hope ... and ends this paragraph with hope. From hope, to hope, in the peace with God brought only through faith in Christ. If peace is the alpha, the beginning, here for Paul, then hope is the omega, the joyful, blessed end.

How then, if not a caving in to a ransom demand, can we view Christ’s death on the cross? One very powerful image that I have run across recently is presented by Wanhee Anne Joh, a Korean-American feminist theologian, who claims that in our dying to sin with Christ on the cross, we join in an ultimate act of love that responds to Christ’s call for us to love God and love one another. But just as we need to drop our inadequate concept of peace and substitute for it a more robust, active concept of peace, so too do we need to set aside our romanticized too-much-of-the-head idea of love and replace it with a stronger, more active kind of love. The kind of love that she puts forth is encapsulated in the Korean word **정** (jeong), which she describes as a binding kind of love that glues people together. It brings together into one concept our separate ideas of family love, neighbourly love, clan love, national love. Jeong is pervasive, durable, inclusive, unbreakable. For her Christ’s action on the cross is the ultimate act of jeong, drawing us into that event and irrevocably binding us with Christ and with God in that one act. It’s a very appealing understanding, and fits closely with what Paul is saying overall, especially with his understanding of peace and the hope that peace brings.

There is a huge impact upon the way we respond depending on how we understand Christ’s death on the cross. If we continue to see it in the classic Anselmian way of substitution, there is a danger – and a very real danger as we can see lived out – that we can all too easily say, “Christ has done this for me” with the underlying statement just below the surface, “so I don’t have to do anything else.” With Joh’s understanding on the other hand that in our faith we are drawn in to actually participate with Christ in the cross event (“dying with Christ”) and are thus bound in love (jeong) to Christ and God, then it seems clear that we have a continuing obligation to continue to live vigorously in Christ. This will reflect in us joining with God in proclaiming – among other things – “I desire justice, not sacrifice.” How completely opposite is that from “there, there, continuing to suffer will make you more Christ-like”? And the blessings and benefits from such a change in understanding? Of course, peace, and hope, in God, through Christ our Lord.