

## Why did Christ die?

A sermon on Romans 5:12-15

In this season of Pentecost we've been asking: What is the problem? And then the two answers people give which are not answers; they are one: "Good works," and two: "Everybody is saved anyway."

In Romans 5:12 we have the basic text: "All have sinned." This is used for the basic understanding of how we are all caught in sin. With that comes in verse 15 the contrast between the first Adam and the second Adam, between those who are caught and lost and those who are in him. That verse as well as the following which says: "As in one all are lost, much more in Christ are they saved." That is the basic message: That we are caught in sin, but we are raised up through this second Adam. It is meant in a strong, decisive way. They understood that Adam is the big person, the head of the race, and in Ephesians 2:20 he is the cornerstone, the keystone. Ephesians 1:10 is even more dramatic: ". . . a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." He "recapitulates," he "reunites." Both of these are weak translations because it really means: "He puts a new head on the top of things." He is the new Adam, the new head.

Why the cross? Luther is famous for having said: "The cross alone is our theology." He is really paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 2:2: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

In the four Gospels we have the story of Jesus but the main thing is his passion, the cross. A New Testament scholar named Lohmyer pointed out that the Gospels are like tadpoles. A tadpole has a big head and then there is a tiny tail reaching back. The Gospels have a long tail that leads to the head: the passion story.

If we go around proclaiming "the cross, the cross, the cross," is that what it is about? What is the cross about? There are all kinds of things that are attached, that people think about. It becomes a slogan; it can even become a fetish. There are, of course, places around the world where people claim to have a piece of the true cross, a relic. In fact there are more pieces of the true cross than there possibly could be. There are those who call themselves "The Society of the Holy Cross," and there is "the perpetual adoration of the Holy Cross."

Traditionally Catholics have had a cross with a body on it and Protestants have not. Some Christians today wear a cross on a chain around their necks as a piece of

jewelry. Some years ago in Vermont a man wanted John 3:16 on his license plate. The State of Vermont argued that the license plate was inappropriate because it constituted government endorsement of religion. But a federal appeals court ruled that an individual has the right to use license plates to express religious beliefs even on license plates that are government issued. What does "the cross" mean?

In the movie, "The Passion of the Christ," Jesus receives 39 lashes because the maximum punishment at that time was 40 lashes minus one. The movie focused on the terrible pain and agony of the crucifixion as if to say: "That's what is about, a terrible death. That's what it was really like."

But, of course, there are worse deaths, like being skinned alive. Basically crucifixion was dying by asphyxiation and thirst.

Even so, is that what it is all about? What kind of a God would require that? That is the question that has been asked for two thousand years. What kind of a God is this? Hebrews 9:22 states: ". . . without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." Is this a God who is bound by such a rule?

In the course of history people have struggled with all this. Some feminists have argued that the cross is child abuse. When the movie, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* came out, a British reporter said that the death of Aslan, the Christ figure, was a form of animal abuse.

There is a graffito in Rome from the Second Century that shows a cross and hanging on the cross is a donkey because in the eyes of the world the cross ridiculous and stupid. What is this about? Over the years there has been a lot of literature asking: How do we sort it out? Is there a way of saying: "This is what it means"?

Back in the 1930's a Swedish theologian, Gustav Aulen, wrote a book called, *Christus Victor*. He said there are three ways the cross is looked at. One way is sacrifice (Hebrews 9:22). The second is Christ as the example (1 Peter 2:21). In the third way, he is the victor, the conqueror (Luke 10:18; 20:43; Philippians 2:11). "Christus Victor" is seen especially in the Gospel of Mark where it says he is the one who conquers the evil one. He is the Victor, as we find again and again in Mark and Paul.

In 1954 F. W. Dillestone wrote a book in which he describes twenty different interpretations of the cross in the New Testament. Finally at the end of the book there is an appendix in which he says: Really all you can do is throw up your hands

and listen to Bach's Mass in B Minor. Or turn to Negro Spirituals because we can't analyze or understand the cross so we can explain it and say this is why it was. There are many different ways, many different metaphors in the Scriptures.

Is there then no explanation? No way of sorting it out? Some people say there had to be a payment and a substitution for others. The problem is: To whom was the payment made? How does this work? It's God against God.

The difficulty with all the explanations is that we put something above God and say: "He had to do it this way, and we can explain him." At that point he is no longer Lord.

What can we learn from the New Testament about this? It is fascinating as we see it in various places. First of all, in Romans 3:24-25: ". . . they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood . . ." In these two verses there are three of the basic doctrines or metaphors: He is our justification. He is our redemption. He is our expiation (which is a big word for sacrifice). The metaphors are all tumbled together in two verses, not sorted out at all.

It is said in a different way in 1 Cor 1:22-24: "Jews seek miracles (We're like that.) and Greeks seek wisdom (We're like that, too.), but we preach Christ crucified, a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, but to those who are being saved, Christ the power of God, Christ the wisdom of God." For the weakness of God is stronger than men and the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

It is summed up in two verses (and they are not based on saying: We've got an explanation of why this had to be, and this is what it is about). The first one is 2 Cor 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who know no sin, so that in him we might become the holiness of God." That is not an explanation. That is not a metaphor. It is simply saying he took our sin; we take his holiness. It is the best deal there ever was.

Second, in Romans 8:34 Paul writes and puts it in the form of several questions the answer to which is "Yes!": "Is it Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised from the dead (Yes!), who is at the right hand of God (Yes!), who indeed intercedes for us? (Yes!)" Not only did he change everything by what he did to conquer sin and death, but he continues to intercede for us and is not long ago and far away. For that reason we have confidence. (If we pretend to understand it, we've got it wrong.) But there it is. The key, the center, the basis for our faith. Amen