

In the cross of Christ I glory

A sermon for the Season of Lent

In this season of Lent, each week we are using a particular hymn as the focus. Today we take up the hymn, "In the cross of Christ I glory."

Recall that Luther again and again said: "The cross alone is our theology." He was, of course, reflecting Paul in Corinthians 2:2: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

What do we do about this cross business? Does it mean we use the words "the cross, the cross, the cross" a hundred times in a sermon? Is that what it means to know nothing except the cross alone? No, that's not doing it.

Then when I hear these words: "I decided to preach nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified," and: "We do not interpret the cross, the cross interprets us," I bridle a bit. It sounds constraining. Not sure I want that.

You know a bridle is the headstall, bit, and reins used to direct a horse. It means something is holding you, and you don't like it. What is this cross business all about? How dare you say that I am the one who is interpreted by the cross, and not the other way around, that I'm here to interpret the cross and tell others what it means.

A hundred years ago, an Anglican theologian, Frederick Dillistone, collected all the metaphors and analogies of the cross that had been used throughout church history. He collected over twenty. Here are just a few of what he found.

Fish Hook. In the early church, some church fathers said that the cross is like a fish hook. What really happened that Jesus' body was the bait on the hook and the hook of course was his divinity, but Satan didn't know that so he bit, and he got hooked, and that's what it was about and how it happened.

Reconciled enemies. Another image that has often been used is one found in Romans 5 is of two warring parties, longstanding enemies, and who then find a way to reconcile. The problem with that analogy is that it doesn't work because God is God, and we are human beings. There is infinite difference between Creator and creature.

Slave market. Another image is the slave auction or market. Each of us is there on the block, ready to be sold into slavery, and instead the Lord buys us and frees us. He redeems us. We find this image of ransom and redemption, too, in Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45, 1 Timothy 2:6, and elsewhere. We can try to imagine what it is to be a slave, but we don't really understand chattel slavery.

Sacrifice. Then, of course, there is the picture of sacrifice. Throughout the Bible and especially in the Book of Hebrews, Christ is the final sacrifice. We don't know what that's about. Even today the Samaritans sacrifice a whole bunch of sheep. If you go to the Middle East and watch them slaughter sheep in sacrifice, you would be horrified,

appalled. Another problem with this image is that God had to be bought off by the death of Christ and he was.

Victory over Satan. Another image is that of Christ who is victorious over Satan. Christ conquers him by casting out demons and stilling the storm, which is really understood as Christ overcoming chaos and evil. There's that great verse in Luke 10:18: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." And the poignant Romans 8:37: "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Martin Luther favored this image of Christ, the victor, the one who conquers Satan. This image, however glorious, is sometimes unclear about who or what is defeated by the cross.

Courtroom verdict. There's image of the courtroom. We are the accused and we're justly condemned, deserve to be cast into outer darkness, but the judge says, "All rise," and announces the verdict: "I declare you not guilty for Jesus' sake." And we are free to walk out of the courtroom, walk out of church. Free to live.

Cosmic Christ. There's the image of the cosmic Christ, who reconciles the whole cosmos. This image is based on Colossians 1:19-20: "For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross."

Scapegoat. Another image is that of the scapegoat. Christ is the one who on the cross took the curse on himself. We find this in Galatians 3, referring to a place in Deuteronomy. Paul writes: "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse. . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law." This is something similar to what Luther used: The cross is a kind of business deal, an unbelievable deal, the Happy Exchange. He comes to take our sin and death and give us in exchange his holiness and life (2 Cor 5:21).

Dillistone made a long list of metaphors and analogies for what happened on the cross, but his project was not satisfying. At the end he noticed how all of them had flaws. None of them are adequate. None of them do the job. What then do we do, what do we say about the cross?

Dillistone had a suggestion. He said there are only two things that can be done. One of them is to sing the great Negro spirituals. They express in their music the glory of the cross, of his saving redemption.

Dillistone's second suggestion is to play Bach's Mass in B minor and just listen.

Basically what Dillistone is saying is that none of our pictures or analogies are able to carry the freight, to convey what it is really about.

We might object saying: "But many of these images are biblical images so aren't they good enough?"

Yet, which one is the key one? As soon as we use them, we start interpreting them. How do we sort it out?

We come back to that basic point in 1 Cor 1:22-23: “For Jews seek miracles and Greek seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

We also continually slip fall into those traps that Paul talks about. We want some kind of sign or feeling we can experience. We want some kind of wisdom, some way of figuring out God, of having some superior wisdom.

But we are directed to the cross, a scandal and foolishness. Why is that? That's because when we do our thinking, we always are using our analogies, and this is how we establish what we call what is truth and what is real.

When we come to the cross, we are dealing with something for which there is no analogy. It is an anti-analogy, an anti-miracle, an anti-sign. It's the opposite.

Why is that? That's because we're dealing with matters which do not come within the thinking that we are able to do. That's for one very basic reason. God is holy and we are not. And all we can say about God's holiness is that it's different from us. It's that which we are not. There is no way of defining that holiness of God's because we're sinners and we're unholy.

Or to use another way of thinking about this: He is life. He is the kind of life which does not end, and we're caught. It's true we know about death, but we are not able to deal with him and his way of doing things because it's different.

Thank God he's handled it his way so that we do not interpret the cross; the cross interprets us. We do not deconstruct the cross, the cross deconstructs us.

The cross is the way that the Lord tells us who we are and that he has handled things. He's handled it his way. Only in this way we can be absolutely confident and sure because it doesn't depend on our thinking or our doing.

Its why when we sing this hymn, “In the cross of Christ I glory,” that it says these astonishing things. The cross is our glory, our peace, our joy, our freedom because it is that which is other than we are, and it is that which is given to us to become the ones who are his.

Amen