

Going to the Cross

Truly the greatest evidence for the existence of God of the Bible is the mere fact that Christians even exist, that today, in British Columbia, Canada, we have on display in our sacred space a replica of the world's most terrible instrument of public execution, something dating back to the Roman times. Why does the cross even matter? Any thoughtful unbeliever who comes here would be forced to ponder *why* seemingly rational people, would be in anyway concerned – let alone make the focus their entire life, a man who not only lived in such a distant past, but also died in such an ignominious way. And the mere fact that today we even know about Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas the High Priest or Herod King of the Jews, that these men even managed to become footnotes to history, can only be explained by their *connection* to this Jesus who died on a cross. So why is Jesus still central to so many lives?

Have you ever heard of the “*butterfly effect*”? In this mental exercise, we are asked to contemplate how the flapping of a single butterfly wing somewhere in the depths of a tropical rain forest could set off a complex chain reaction, moving in the atmosphere, influencing other forces, building momentum until somewhere on the other side of the world, a tornado rips across the plains. The butterfly effect: could one man's crucifixion in the distant past possibly have set in motion a process what will eventually result in the total eradication of all evil from all creation? Could the cross of Jesus really have been the ultimate expression of God's love and forgiveness? Or, on a personal level, how could Jesus be said to have “died for our sins?”

Now, no one has come to know God's love and forgiveness by figuring out the exact theological meaning of the crucifixion. There will always remain an enduring mystery about the cross. Nevertheless, every Christian will tell you it is the centre of their faith. But what happened as Jesus went to the cross? *That* is a question we *can* know something about because we have the Scriptures and therein some idea of how *Jesus himself* understood what was happening as he went to the cross?

As Jesus drew near to Jerusalem, he *laments* over the city. To put this lament in Luke 13:31-34 into context we, have to go all the way back to 9:51: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face towards Jerusalem.” For Jesus, going to the cross, was no sudden unpredictable, uncontrolled event. It had been his steadfast direction for quite some time And he started sending his disciples out as to prepare the next locations where he would show up to teach. And they didn't just go around putting up posters! Wherever they went they ministered with kingdom power. And when they came back to Jesus, they told him how amazed they were that they had power to drive out demons. His response was, “Yes, I know. While you were doing that

“I saw Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.”(10:18).

Remember that curious statement because it's a key insight into how Jesus understands the cross. He's in a dog-fight of cosmic proportions, and he's shooting the devil out of the sky.

As he moves steadfastly towards Jerusalem, the battle lines of God's kingdom are advancing unthwarted towards the centre of enemy power. The god of Israel is about to lay siege to where the Satan that is holed up – Jerusalem. And it's clear that Jesus' audience saw it in a similar light. They are, after all, *Jews* awaiting Messiah the king to free their land, cleanse their Temple, dislodge the power of evil from its stronghold. He is Messiah, and they see his coming in terms of spears and swords and thrones. But what Jesus has in mind in going to the cross, is something so completely and utterly beyond any conception within the Jewish mind. And *this* great *disconnect* between Jesus' and all others that is apparent in . . .

The question of inclusion

The saying of Jesus we are about to look at arise out of a particular conversation. Some one asks, "*Lord, will only few be saved?*" (23).

This is a question that speaks to the Jewish vision of end of the age. When Messiah takes his throne to judge in the name of Israel's god, should we think of the glass as being half empty, or half full?

It's a question that really goes to the heart of how one sees God. How should one understand God's redemptive plan. "*Lord, will only few be saved?*"

Jesus responds by saying, *No!* Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the original ancestors, who have long since died are in glory, are right now setting the table and getting things ready for the great celebration. And on that day they will welcome the widest range of people imaginable into God's kingdom. But at the same time, he warns them that many of *ethnic Israel* will be thrown out. (28)

The cross will not only be the place of defeat for Satan, but also as the in for all the Gentiles. The cross brings all people inclusion within the people of God. But Jesus sees the cross as . . .

The point of access control

V 24 "Strive to enter the narrow gate." We Christians have tended to see this 'gate' language of Jesus in terms of our behaviour – lazy, loose living will lead one to self-destruct whereas a strict and straight set of *behaviours* is what properly orders life and brings one through to God. But for Jesus, this language about a *gate* is not about *behaviour* at all; but about the way one *may enter a relationship with God*.

The other day watching Olympic coverage they showed the spectators sitting behind a steel barrier and the sign on the gate through the barrier said "*point of access control*." That gate is not intended to keep anyone out *who was supposed to be there*, but is nevertheless the only way through a very real barrier. If anyone tried to go through it they would have found a couple of strong Mounties would grab them and throw them out.

And when sin had left an impassible barrier between God and us, Jesus said, "I am the gate." (John 10:7) The cross as the point of access *for all* into a real relationship with God; and one enduring quality of the gate is that it is . . .

Narrow

But although the gate *is* narrow, on the *other side*, there are people from east and west and north and south. Although the gate is narrow it is by no means *exclusive*. Many people both ancient and modern have been offended by the narrowness and exclusivity of the Christian message. How can you say that Jesus is the only way to God?! Such a message has no place in a modern pluralistic society, they say. They call it, *narrow-minded*. But it's *not*.

If only one could see things from Jesus' perspective. If only a person could set aside for the moment the confusing world of so many competing philosophies and religions and just consider what was going on in the mind of that Galilean rabbi so long ago. As he faces the cross, Jesus must have understood that the long story of Israel had studied in the Scriptures all his life was finally coming to its ultimate crisis moment.

And that story began *narrow* – with just one, solitary man, Abraham whom God appeared. One man entered into a genuine relationship with God. And his descendants became a *nation*. Narrow no more, but. . .

Wide!

Soon whole *tribes* of people knew this God. And through their many experiences and centuries they struggled to *maintain* a genuine relationship with God. Yet despite the difficulties, they were *unique*: the *one nation on face of the entire earth who could truly claim a knowledge of God the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth*. Someone had to come first, and God chose Abraham. And this set Israel apart and at odds with the world.

“For,” as the psalmist says, “the gods of the nations are *idols*. (Ps 96:5) This idea of one God was truly *revolutionary* in the ancient world. And that must have seemed really narrow in a world of many gods; but Israel made no apologies.

And nor should we.

And as the story goes, Israel was often tempted *away* from the one true God towards idols; nevertheless there was always a faithful *seed* – *Abraham's seed* that continued to struggle to grow in the soil of corrupt and antagonistic world. But no matter how bad it got, the prophets assured them of the enduring promise that a holy remnant, a small bag of seed – however few, would always remain into each new generation. It would flourish in times of renewal, but, more often than not, the holy seed would yield smaller and smaller harvests in each generation. It would cross-pollinate with pagan seed and lose its identity, or fail to germinate well within the cultures in which it was planted. . .

And now, what had started with just one man and had become a nation, existed once again in one single man.

Christ, the seed of Abraham.

When the disciples fled and Jesus faced the cross *alone*, he would be the sum total, the only Israel left. One man on the face of the earth to be God's Covenant partner. That's how *narrow* the gate actually was! That's how high the stakes were on the cross. There is no Plan “B”.

And *this* is how Jesus saw it. He is the gate, and the gate is indeed narrow, but the Good News is it wouldn't *stay* narrow for long, for though the victory of the cross, a *New Covenant* and a New Covenant *People* would emerge and the scope of God's redemption would widened out evermore to take in every tongue and tribe and nation on the face of the earth: north, south, east and west.

But what we come to now is the reaction to this. This was threatening Satan's establishment of power. Jesus is a threat to an entire world system that stands in opposition to God. And the challenge that Jesus has been issuing on a daily basis in towns and village, in synagogues, in open fields, from hilltops and even from the prow of at least one fishing boat, has now brought about . . .

A reaction from the corridors of power

So we read, in v 31, "at that *very hour*, (right in the middle of Jesus telling people about God's love and forgiveness being extended through Israel to the whole world) guess what happens? "some *Pharisees* come and say to him, "Get away from here, for *Herod* wants to kill you." . . ."

The fact that Jesus had not been arrested *sooner* is probably due to the fact that he kept moving around, avoiding any large centres, and not staying anywhere long enough to be apprehended. But that doesn't mean that his presence and message had gone undetected. King Herod, the local tyrant, the puppet king of Rome, has heard about Jesus and is aware of the claim he is making which threatens him. "Get away from *here*", they say. And where is *here*? Herod's domain, Galilee and Perea. Jesus has entered the arena. He is . . .

Taking up the challenge of the powers

He says to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.

Satan and his kingdom has no existence apart from their embodiment in flesh and blood principalities and powers. Herod was an *evil man* who even murders those within his own family.

So what must have been going through Jesus' mind as he made his way ever closer to Jerusalem? How did he see this direction? He's taking on the "fox" Herod, who is the very embodiment of the Satan. He's come on to his turf. He's uprooting Herod's kingdom today and tomorrow, and on the third day, he will *finish his work*. Finish on a cross.

The dog-fight is on. The battle is with the Satan; the Satan that had made its home in Israel, and with in her cherished national institutions not the least of which was the royal palace now occupied by Herod. He's heading towards "*Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets.*"

Ancient Jews, especially rabbis spoke in Scripture quotes, and suggests to me that as he contemplates his approach to the gates of Jerusalem, he may have been quoting from . . .

A Bible Story

Very briefly, this story goes like this: There was once in Israel a very wicked Queen named Jezebel. Her husband Ahab was Israel's king, but she was a pagan, a worshiper of Baal and known for killing off the prophets of the LORD (1 Kings 18:4). "Jezebel, the woman who kills the prophets" But the prophets of the LORD steadfastly withstood her in the power of the Spirit: first Elijah, and after him Elisha his successor. Then finally, after the death of wicked King Ahab in battle, Elisha the prophet anoints a mighty young warrior named Jehu as king in Ahab's place, and sends him to take care of the unfinished business of Jezebel: "avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the LORD." (2 Kings 9:7)

And as Jehu approaches the city where Jezebel is holed up, this is what I think Jesus may have had been in mind as he approached Jerusalem: 2 Kings 9:30,31

"When Jehu came to Jezreel, Jezebel heard of it; she painted her eyes, and adorned her head, and looked out of the window. As Jehu entered the gate, she said, "Is it peace . . ."

Like Jezebel trying to seduce Jehu, Jerusalem is now trying to lure Jesus into making the same mistakes Israel had done. Jesus knows he is entering into his time of greatest temptation, as if it were possible that the Satan could either try to scare him off or kill him off ahead of God's appointed time. If we can see Jesus approaching the city from this point of view, as it were, walking in the shoes of Jehu, it's meaning is clear. He is Israel's anointed Messiah, but moreover he is also the Prophet of the LORD and as such he is facing. . .

A prophet's fate

Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. . . .

He is truly speaking and acting as Israel's god would speak and act. But as such, he is untouchable by death except in Jerusalem and not until he gets there. Then this city famous for stoning the messenger would refuse God's offer of salvation and seal it's own fate. And it would *not* see *him* again until it said "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." "

Jesus is speaking prophetically. In other words, it's *Israel's God* speaking, Israel's god hiding his face from his people, Israel's God in disguise as a humble rabbi until his people are ready to welcome him as Messiah.

Behind the riddle of Jesus coming to Jerusalem as Messiah lies a deeper meaning: if Herod's Jerusalem is the embodiment of all that is against God, then Jesus is the embodying the return of Israel's God. And yes, there will be blood. Yes a battle will be fought. And yes, the city that kills the prophets and stones those God sends will do so once more with Jesus. But what will be different this time than with any other prophet that has come before is that this time it will be . . .

A Saviour's dying love

Jesus says that Jerusalem is about to experience the equivalent of a devastating barnyard fire: a Temple abandoned, a city ravaged by fire, looted and its inhabitants scattered. Jesus has longed to do what a mother hen would do in such circumstances, but the chicks are refusing to come and be gathered under her wings for protection .

What a powerful image of how Jesus had desired to take upon himself the sins of Jerusalem, to absorb into his own body all the power of the evil embodied in that place, to draw it away from this city's inhabitants and on to himself. But they had *refused*. Their chance has come and gone.

Jesus is going to the cross. And they have no idea why.

But we do.

And it's why in Creston British Columbia 2,000 years later we have in our sacred space a *cross*. Because on the third day, he rose again. And we believe that because that cross of Jesus was the butterfly wing that flapped. It was the victory of God over all evil. And it set in motion a process that can't be stopped. The cross of Jesus has brought God's love and forgiveness to millions even *billions*. It has become the tornado that can rip apart all the powers of evil we encounter every day. But to know that power in our lives. . . .

We must go to the cross.

Let me ask you: who is your "Herod"? What corresponds to "Jerusalem that kills the prophets?" What seeks to silence the prophetic voice within our society? What principalities and powers do we interact with in our daily lives that bring us into open conflict with that which opposes God? What intimidates you? What oppresses you? What tries to scare you off from doing the truth God has put into your heart? Those questions are probably not too hard for any of us to answer. But harder question is what should I do about it? For the answer can only lie in the forgiving power of love. And that kind of forgiving power of love can only come from the cross.

Scott Peck in his book People of the Lie passes on the words of an old priest:

"There are dozens of ways to deal with evil and several ways to conquer it. All of them are facets of the truth that the only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living, human being. When it is absorbed there like blood in a sponge or a spear in one's heart, it loses its power and goes no further. " . . . The healing of evil – scientifically or otherwise – can be accomplished only by the love of individuals. A willing sacrifice is required. The individual healer must allow his or her soul to become the battleground. He or she must sacrificially absorb evil . . . I do not know how this occurs. But I know that it does . . . *Whenever this happens there is a slight shift in the balance of power in the world.*"

(M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie, pp 268,69)