

Why the Cross?

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What do you say about a story like this? There's nothing particularly savoury about it. We wouldn't want our children to watch it or, perhaps, even to think about it. It depicts humankind simply at our worst and it's the kind of thing that most want to turn their back on and forget because it pains us to think that our race could act like this. The problem is we have not been able to escape from the same forces that drove these men and women to commit such a ghastly act of injustice.

Time and again throughout history men and women have repeated in greater or lesser degrees acts similar to these. And whether these acts have been small personal betrayals or great public horrors the very same motivations are involved. We want something we can't have by fair means so we seek to obtain it by foul ones. We grow jealous of others so we seek to damage them in revenge. We live by the law that the end justifies the means. Our history is punctuated by this sort of ugliness, this much we must say.

But why contemplate these things. Why remember them in such clear and shocking ways? Moreover, why have them at the centre of our writings? Could we not more profitably concentrate on the positive things, the healings, the feeding, the helping? Why have the graphic details of a kangaroo court committing an innocent man to die in perhaps the most painful and gruesome manner included in our central story?

Many down through the years have raised this complaint. In a so called civilised society it seems somewhat pointless to repeat the mistakes of the past and to proclaim them to each new generation. It seems brutal and pointless so why do we do it?

We do it for one simple reason, at least, for one main reason – this is the truth about who we are, about what we've become in rebellion to a loving God. Jesus said the Truth shall set you free but to do that we must know and be confronted by the truth about who we are both personally and as a race. It is a very uncomfortable truth. It is not a truth we want to own nor is it a truth we can ever be proud of. It is a truth which acts only to humble us. And that, precisely, is why we preserve it at the heart of the story which defines we who believe.

It is tempting to believe that Easter Friday – Good Friday as we call it, is only a preliminary event – that it is not central to the story of Jesus or, if so, then it is perhaps not as important as the events of Easter Sunday. But that is not what the Gospels tell us. They emphasise this event so that we cannot mistake its importance. The Cross is not a rather nasty auxiliary to the real thing.

The Cross is the real thing. Suffering is at the heart of our story and we dare not think anything else. And it is so because suffering has become an integral part of the human story and since Jesus came to share our life, to be human, He too shared our suffering. He knew what it was to be human.

It's fascinating to do a little Church history and to note how many heresies arose precisely because it was thought absurd to have God suffer like this. Arianism believed that Jesus was human and suffered but did not share God's nature so that God did not share in that suffering. Docetism which engulfed huge parts of the Christian church in the first couple of centuries after Christ's death believed that Jesus was an apparition and that His crucifixion was also an illusion. Gnosticism also preached a supreme God behind the God whom we could find in the Bible's pages. Of this God we could know little but the divinity of Christ was certainly only an illusion or, at best, an imperfect emanation of God. And we could go on. The truth is, the ghastly events of Good Friday have always been hard to stomach not only because of what actually happened but also because of how they reflect on we who are human. Philip Yancey tells this story in his book 'Disappointment with God.' Author Henri Nouwen tells the story of a family he knew in Paraguay. The father, a doctor, spoke out against the military regime there and its human rights abuses. Local police took their revenge on him by arresting his teenage son and torturing him to death. Enraged townsfolk wanted to turn the boy's funeral into a huge protest march, but the doctor chose another means of protest. At the funeral, the father displayed his son's body as he had found it in the jail—naked, scarred from electric shocks and cigarette burns, and beatings. All the villagers filed past the corpse, which lay not in a coffin but on the blood-soaked mattress from the prison. It was the strongest protest imaginable, for it put injustice on grotesque display. Isn't that what God did at Calvary? ... The cross that held Jesus' body, naked and marked with scars, exposed all the violence and injustice of this world. At once, the cross revealed what kind of world we have and what kind of God we have: a world of gross unfairness, a God of sacrificial love.

Let's spend a quiet minute dwelling again on this amazing sacrifice.