

We are an Easter people



Part one: Living the Cross

'We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.' 1 Corinthians 1.23

In part one of a two-part article, Philip North explores how we are called to live as Easter people and what differences that should make to our lives.

Right at the very heart of the gospel is a hanged God. It is a scandal, a disgrace, a disgusting claim to make. How can God be crucified? How can the eternal one die? Just as it was for Paul, so today the cross is a stumbling-block. It is the major point of theological division between Christians and a profound challenge in our dialogue with the wider world.

For many Christians, the cross is the gospel. The power and centrality of this sacrificial act – in which Jesus bore the death we deserve because of our sins – is, for many, of such all-consuming importance that it is almost as if God's entire saving work could have been achieved in a long weekend. The danger of this approach can be a lack of balance which causes us to downplay the incarnation, the public ministry, the meaning of the miracles and other aspects of the work of Jesus.

However, much more alarmingly, increasing numbers of Christians go to another extreme such that the cross barely seems to matter at all. Many of the potential candidates for ordination I speak to are really strong on the inclusive love of God revealed in Jesus, but when I ask why Jesus died, they fall strangely silent. I almost get the impression that they wish all that blood and gore had never happened.

The result of this is a tendency to view the cross as something to debate and understand rather than to believe in and respond to. And perhaps this is the reason why so many people avoid the cross when it comes to work with children and young people.

Lacking confidence in their own grasp of its meaning, they assume that the theology of the cross is way too complex for the young – stick to the good Samaritan and we can leave out all that blood and nastiness until they are older!

What I'd like to do in this article therefore is reflect on the cross not as a historical event or a theological idea but as a contemporary lifestyle. 'Take up your cross and follow me,' is the challenge that Jesus lays before the disciples. The cross should not just be something we think about and theorise over. It should be something that we live. And it's as we live the cross that we learn how to teach it to the young. So, what does it mean to live a life formed by the cross of Jesus Christ?



Humility

First, the cross calls us to humility of heart and it does so because it confronts us with the reality of sin. Many Christians are fearful of the language of sin, and it certainly can sit ill in a culture where self-esteem, self-respect and personal resilience are meant to be what we are all searching for.

In contrast to this, I am always intrigued by the power of personal confession with the young. At the Walsingham youth pilgrimage, urban teenagers will queue through the night to unburden themselves of all that is getting in the way of their relationship with God and with other people. They are at least half aware of two things: first, that there is sin in their lives; and second, that on their own they are powerless to do anything about it.

The answer to human sin lies in the cross, because by offering his life to the Father, Jesus makes himself the sacrifice that deals with sin for all eternity. The Christian who takes the cross seriously is therefore drawn to a rich humility because they know that they need Jesus Christ in their lives to be whole and healed. A Christian will never look within themselves for solutions to their problems because what we find within ourselves is pain, failure and greed. They will look outside, to Jesus. They will let go of self to find themselves in him. That is the meaning of Christian humility.

That humility can then demonstrate itself in a variety of ways. It is humility that enables us to serve, because we seek the lowest place rather than the place of honour. It is humility that enables us to learn from the children and young people we teach, because we know that Christ is present in everyone. It is humility that enables us to lead lives centred on obedience to Christ, because we know that we are nothing without him.

Conversion

Second, the cross calls us to conversion. When Jesus is presented at the Temple by his mother Mary, old Simeon speaks a word of prophecy that seems to be laden with doom: 'A sword will pierce your own heart also.' For a long time, I thought that this was a prophecy of the cross, but it's more than that. In much of the Old Testament, the sword is the symbol not of pain but of decision. The sword means you need to decide, take sides and choose where your loyalties lie. Simeon is not just looking ahead to the cross. He is also calling on Mary to decide: who is this child? Is he indeed God's own Son whose death will set people free?

The Bible talks of the cross as a 'scandal' and a 'stumbling-block', and that's because it forces us to decide. You cannot sit on the fence about the claim that God has died for you in Jesus. Either he did – in which case we must offer him the whole of our lives – or he did not – in which case we need to find other answers to the questions about the purpose of our humanity.

The cross therefore calls each one of us to conversion. If Jesus died for us, our whole lives need to be turned round and oriented towards him. The Church cannot be a social club, or an optional extra, or the thing to do on those dull winter weekends when we need a bit of a lift. Every decision we make, every pound we spend, every relationship we enter into should be driven by our faith in the Christ who has given away his life.



This brings home the vital importance of our work with the young. At some stage in their lives, children and young people need to be confronted with the choice that lies at the very heart of the gospel. We cannot make that choice on their behalf, nor

should we manipulate children and young people into making it. It must be their own decision. But at the same time, we would be failing in our responsibilities if we did not lay out the implications of that choice. Who is Jesus? Why did he die? In our answers to these questions lies our salvation.

Self-giving love

Third, the cross models self-giving love. It can be very tempting for those who find the cross awkward to reduce the gospel to a simple message about love. But remember the words of 1 John 3.16 – 'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.' For a Christian, there is no point in speaking about love unless we also speak about the cross. We know love because we know the cross.

Jesus did not need to die for us, to endure the nails and spears and spitting, to be whipped and spat at and hung up to die. Nor have we done anything that deserves such an incredible act of self-giving. The love we see in Jesus is undeserved, which is why we give it the special name 'grace'. Love therefore is not an emotion or a feeling (which are fragile and fickle things). Love is self-giving. Jesus loves us in that he gives his life for us.



And the challenging thing is that the love we see in Jesus is the love we are called to live out in our own lives. We are not just called to love the people we like: family, friends, those who think the same things as we do. Our love is to be poured out above all on those who have done nothing to deserve that love. We love the homeless person, the sex worker, the drug addict, the sinful and the unrespectable. We love the troubled families, those burdened with debt, those whom others can only blame. This love is not mere affection. It is a conscious decision to give ourselves away for the benefit of the other.

It is this self-giving love, rooted in the cross, that is the hallmark of the Christian life. In a greedy, selfish world where everyone is out for what they can get, the love that gives itself away as gift is what makes us distinctive.

So, don't get too bogged down *thinking* about the cross. Instead pick it up, carry it, live it. It's as we get on with putting the cross into practice through humility, through conversion and through self-giving love that we uncover its true meaning. And it's only when we live the cross that we can begin to teach it.

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