

## THE CROSS OF CHRIST

### *THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS, 3-5-17*

Before I get going today I need to do something to prepare us for what is ahead. Later in my message today I'm going to ask for somebody to shout GLORY! But I'm afraid, that what with us being mostly white Presbyterians that nobody will do it. So I'm going to get a volunteer right now who will promise to shout *Glory!* for me when the time comes. Is there somebody who will do that for me - who will make sure I get at least one good shout out of the group? Now, when the moment comes - and there will be no warning, you have to be ready - the rest of you are welcome to help. That would be great. If a lot of you really shout it that would be great but I just couldn't stand it if we got no one.

This morning, having already taken the Lord's Supper, I want us to continue meditating on the cross of Christ. Now, when we talk, in the church about the cross, we refer to something far greater than a meaningfully shaped piece of wood. We use the term in a very pregnant sense that encompasses all the significance of the atoning death of Jesus. We could speak just as easily of the death of Jesus. But in using the term "cross" in an inclusive way we are one with the apostle Paul who did the same. Galatians 6:**12** *Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.* There he means the message of salvation thru the atonement. **13-14b** *For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh. 14 But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.* There again he speaks of boasting in the cross - by which he means the glorious gospel about what Jesus did for his people so many years ago. That cross represents to us all what Jesus has done on our behalf and it would be good if we took a few minutes this morning to look together at the centrality of the cross.

Imagine if you will, a man who is thoroughly ignorant of Christianity. He's not uncivilized, but he's never been exposed to a Christianized society much less to the gospel. And this man, let's call him Chuck, is on vacation in London and he is taken to visit the magnificent St. Paul's Cathedral. He is impressed by the building's proportions and marvels that Sir Christopher Wren could have conceived such an edifice. As he takes it all in he cannot help but notice the huge golden cross which dominates the dome. He enters the cathedral and stands at its central point, under the dome. He becomes aware that the shape of the entire edifice is cruciform. He walks

around and observes that each side chapel contains a table on each of which is prominently displayed a cross. He then goes downstairs into the crypt to see the tombs of famous men such as Christopher Wren the architect, and Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington and there, engraved or embossed on each tomb is a cross. Returning upstairs he decides to stay for the service which is about to begin. The man beside him is wearing a little cross on his lapel, while the lady on his other side has one on her necklace. His eye then rests on the colorful stained-glass east window which, he notices contains a cross. Suddenly, the congregation stands. The choir and clergy enter preceded by somebody carrying a large cross. They are singing a hymn "*In the Cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time.*" What follows is the service of Holy Communion. Chuck realizes that this focuses on the death of Jesus. The service ends with another hymn, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross on which the Prince of Glory dies my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride.* Chuck, having no guide, would likely leave the cathedral impressed but puzzled. The repeated insistence by word and symbol on the centrality of the cross has been striking. Yet questions have arisen. What is the meaning? What is behind this concentration on the cross of Christ?

Chuck's question is one we will answer, in part, today with our look at the centrality of the cross. We will see that the cross is central in four things. First it is central in the symbolism of the church. Every religion and every "ism" has some kind of visual symbol which illustrates a significant feature of its history and beliefs. The lotus flower, for example, is the symbol of Buddhism. Because of its wheel shape it is thought to depict either the cycle of birth and death or the emergence of beauty and harmony out of the muddy waters of chaos. Sometimes you will see the Buddha portrayed as enthroned in a fully open lotus flower. Ancient Judaism strictly avoided symbols and signs, concerned not to break the second commandment but modern Israel has adopted the Star of David which speaks of God's covenant with David that his throne would last forever. Marxism is symbolized by a hammer and sickle which represents industry and agriculture uniting to overthrow oppression. We aren't quite sure of its meaning but the Nazi regime of Hitler embraced the symbol of the swastika. Christianity is no exception here. Our faith has its visual symbols and chief, by far, among them is that of the cross. It could have been a manger whereby Christ came into our world. It could have been a tomb, or a throne, or a dove. But Christians have wished to commemorate as central to their faith the death of our Lord on that old rugged cross. More than ever did this become the case in the year 313. In that year, Constantine, the first emperor

ever to profess Christianity, on the eve of the battle of Milvian Bridge claims he saw a cross of light in the sky along with the words *hoc signo vinces* – “by this sign conquer.” Constantine immediately had the cross emblazoned on the standards of his army. Maybe their theme song was *Onward Christian Soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before*. But since that hymn is in English and was written in 1864 it probably wasn't what they used - but I bet they had something similar to sing.

Now, the Christians' choice of the cross as the symbol of their faith is on the surface rather astonishing. Crucifixion, in the day it was practiced, was viewed with horror. Paul notes in I Corinthians 1 that his preaching of the cross was viewed by Jews as foolishness. They could not see how their king, the anointed one, could also be a crucified one. In a letter to Justin Martyr, Trypho the Jew wrote, “*Whether Christ should be so shamefully crucified, this we doubt. For whoever is crucified is said in the Law to be accursed, so that I am exceedingly incredulous on this point... Prove to us that he must be crucified and die so disgracefully and so dishonorably by the death cursed by the law. For we cannot bring ourselves to think this.*” Why so difficult? Because crucifixion was the cruelest method of execution ever devised, for it deliberately delayed death until inflicting maximum torture. The victim could suffer for days. When the Romans adopted it they reserved it for criminals convicted of murder, or for armed robbers, and then only for slaves and foreigners. Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion. Cicero, the Roman senator condemned it, calling it a most cruel and disgusting punishment. Some time later he said, “*To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to kill him is an act of murder; to crucify him - is what? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed?*” Can you imagine? Cicero spoke as one who had been there. He later said, “*The very word 'cross' should be far removed, not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, for such is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.*” The Jews had no higher view of this death. Deuteronomy 21:**22-23** *If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.*

Christianity, the religion of the cross, was born and then grew in a Roman and Jewish culture. My friend, you cannot explain that in sociological terms. In this sign, not Constantine, but Jesus conquered the Roman world. At the end of the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, there is a

powerful scene at the war cemetery in Normandy, France and it struck me as I saw it again a couple of weeks ago. What does it look like there at that cemetery? A manicured lawn and a sea of crosses. The sign of unspeakable horror has come to beautify and sanctify cemeteries and hospitals and churches and schools. It is the most recognized symbol in the world, for it is the central sign of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we move on to understand that the cross was central to the mission of Jesus. There is a famous painting by Holman Hunt entitled, "The Shadow of Death." It depicts the inside of an ancient carpenter's shop. Stripped to the waist, Jesus stands by a wooden trestle on which he has put down his saw. He lifts his eyes toward heaven, the look on his face is one of ecstasy or pain or both. He also stretches, raising both arms above his head. As he does so, the evening sunlight streaming thru the open door casts a dark shadow in the form of a cross on the wall behind him, where his tool-rack looks like a horizontal bar on which his hands have been crucified. The tools themselves remind one of the fateful hammer and nails. In the left foreground a woman kneels among the wood chippings. She looks startled at her son's cross-like shadow on the wall. Holman Hunt painted that in the 1870s from a rooftop in Jerusalem. Though the idea for his painting is fiction it is theologically true. From Jesus' youth, indeed even from his birth, the cross cast its shadow ahead of him. Not that He spoke of it often. The early ministry of Jesus almost ignores the coming crisis, but there came a point when it became prominent in his teaching, at least the teaching he did with his inner circle. Look with me at Mark 8. It was in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" **Mark 8:29b-30** *Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ."* **30** *And He warned them to tell no one about Him.* But now that His identity was plainly stated the Lord opened up for His men what was coming. **31-32a** *And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.* **32** *And He was stating the matter plainly.* Plainly, freely. He continued to teach this. Mark records the teaching three times in three chapters. The third time is in Mark 10:**32c-34** *He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to Him, 33 saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles. 34 "They will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again."* Jesus was a man with a mission. He knew what it was and He was determined to accomplish it even though nobody ever

faced a death like His. John's gospel refers often to the Lord's hour. The trip to Calvary was the hour of His destiny as the Lamb born to die for the sins of the world. At the end Jesus said, "My hour has come." And with courage unknown and incomprehensible He gave Himself up for us. Jesus came to preach - yes. He came to heal - yes. He came to perfectly keep the law - yes. But preeminently He came to die. The cross was central to His mission.

Thirdly, see that the cross was central to the teaching of the apostles. In his first letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul wrote, I Corinthians 2:**2** *For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.* Paul would often refer to the gospel as being the message of the cross. Those who opposed the gospel were called enemies of the cross. In I Corinthians 15:3 Paul offers us a summary of the core teaching of the apostles. **3-4** *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.* And when, a few years later, he developed this outline into the full gospel manifesto we call "Romans" his emphasis is the atoning death of Jesus for sinners. The Apostle Peter's testimony is equally clear. In I Peter chapter 1 he describes our redemption thru the blood of Christ. In I Peter 2:**24** *He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. 3:**18** For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God.* The author of Hebrews emphasizes the priestly work of Jesus who offered Himself in our place. Hebrews 9:**14** *How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?* And at the end of it all we come to the Revelation of John in which Jesus is most commonly referred to as the what? The Lamb. Revelation.5:**9** *They sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.* And those redeemed ones wear robes of white that have been washed and made clean it says, in the blood of the Lamb. Are you beginning to see, my friend, that if you don't understand the death of Jesus, if you don't get the importance of the cross, then you have no clue what Jesus and His religion are all about? You are, spiritually speaking, still in the starting block and I invite you to come out, to learn of the cross and to get in the race.

Fourthly, this morning, let's see that the cross is central to the heart and faith of every true Christian. I am not saying that we make an idol of the image, only that the cross reminds our hearts

of unspeakably great mysteries of grace. George Bennard wrote that old hymn that says, *“On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame; and I love that old cross where the dearest and best, for a world of lost sinners was slain. O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world, has a wondrous attraction for me; for the dear Lamb of God left His glory above to bear it to dark Calvary. In the old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine, a wondrous beauty I see; for twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died to pardon and sanctify me.”* That hymn speaks of the cross being despised by the world. The world’s second largest religion, Islam, rejects it altogether. The Koran denies the possibility of a substitute to pay the debt of sinners. They even deny the reality of the crucifixion, claiming that the Jews only thought they put Jesus to death. But even among Muslims the messengers of good news cannot be silent. Samuel Zwemer, missionary to Arabia, and editor of Muslim World magazine writes, *“The missionary among Moslems is driven daily to a deeper meditation on this mystery of redemption, and to a stronger conviction that here is the very heart of our message and our mission.... If the cross of Christ is anything to the mind it is surely everything - the most profound reality and the sublimest mystery. The cross is the pivot as well as the centre of New Testament thought. The more unbelievers deny its crucial character, the more believers find in it the key to the mysteries of sin and suffering. We find that although the offense of the cross remains, its magnetic power is irresistible.”*

In the west, Christians may face the ridicule of the secularists, the Nietzscheans and the Darwinists who find the notion of God on the cross contemptible. The modern academic would scoff at us for believing in such ancient legends about a blood sacrifice for sin. Why then do we continue to hold on to the cross? Why must we proclaim the scandalous, and glory in the shameful - as some would see it? We do so out of simple, God-given integrity. We have heard the message of the cross. We have learned the lesson of its centrality in the mission of Jesus, the teaching of the apostles, and in our own lives as well. Stephen Neill wrote, *“In the Christian theology of history, the death of Christ is the central point of history’ here all the roads of the past converge; hence all the roads of the future diverge.”*

Malcolm Muggeridge is one of the most brilliant authors of the last century. Brought up in a Socialist home, he became familiar with the Marxist version of Jesus, the Jesus of good causes - but some of the truth did seep through. Muggeridge writes, *“I would catch a glimpse of a cross, maybe two pieces of wood accidentally nailed together, on a telegraph pole, for instance, - and suddenly my heart would stand still. In an instinctive way, intuitive way I understood that something more*

*important, more tumultuous, more passionate was at issue than our good causes, however admirable they might be. It was an obsessive interest. I might fasten bits of wood together myself, or doodle it. This symbol, which was derided in my home, was yet also the focus of inconceivable hopes and desires. As I remember this, a sense of my own failure lies heavily upon me. I should have worn it over my heart; carried it, a precious standard, never to be wrested out of my hands. It should have been my worship, my uniform, my language, my life. I shall have no excuse; I can't say I didn't know. I knew from the beginning and turned away."* Later however, Muggeridge turned back, as each of us must who has ever glimpsed the reality of Christ crucified. It is central to the heart and life of every true Christian. Why? Paul says it this way in I Corinthians 1:**18** *For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* Have you felt the power of the cross? Have you come to see it as the vehicle of salvation for all who believe and not just that, but as the way of salvation for your life? Do you understand what Jesus was doing there? Have you grasped the significance of it all? The wonder of it all? Oh my friend, I hope you will not rest your heart and mind until you get a grip on the truth about the cross and until the truth about the cross gets a grip on you. For there is power in the cross - even the power of God unto salvation. Now, will somebody shout, "Glory!" Let's pray.