

The Cross in History and Human Experience

A Lenten Devotional Article by

Richard A. Rhem
Minister of Preaching and Theological Inquiry
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

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History unfolds under the sign of the Cross; its shadow lies over all human experience. That is a rather somber note, standing in stark contrast to the triumphant sound of the Christian proclamation. Yet it is true, and unless we reckon with that fact we will at some point in our lives encounter an experience which cannot be understood in terms of our faith. History has its darker hues, human experience its valleys of shadows, but a Christian stands undismayed before them because he looks out at the world from a vantage point from beneath the Cross.

The Cross is not God's final act, and tragedy in human life is not the final word. The brilliant revelation of triumph in Jesus' resurrection reveals to us an ultimate victory beyond the limits of history. The splendor of that victory shines brightly, giving us courage and a solid base for hope; nevertheless, for us, that resurrection preeminently is future. To be sure, we have been raised together with Christ to newness of life, but we remain a part of the old order, and the sign over the old order is the Cross. The suffering, tragedy and death of this present age touch all of us at some point. None of us is immune to the misery that stalks the steps of the children of men.

The Christian faith does not gloss over the reality of human experience. Jesus Christ never covered up the difficult, the dark, the tragic. Prior to his death, he prepared his disciples for the fact that they would very soon be severely tested. He prepared them for the fact that their dreams were about to be shattered — that their high hopes were about to be crushed — that their aspirations were to evaporate into thin air. He prepared them for his crucifixion — a crucifixion so excruciatingly painful to him that even he cried out in the midst of it, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" He prepared them for the hard realities of life. He said, "In the world you will have tribulation." Anybody who comes into the Christian faith or into the haven of the Christian Church thinking hereby to avoid the harsh reality of human experience has not read the Gospel. In the

mystery of suffering, nothing makes the Christian unique except that he has the resources to overcome it, and finally to prevail.

Look at the Cross. What does it really say? Look at the one who hangs there — Jesus Christ — the only life that has ever really been played out in the course of human history. Look at how he gave of himself, ministering constantly on behalf of those in need. Listen to his words of wisdom and compassion. Note his healing touch. Behold his self-forgetfulness. Watch him as he goes through the days of his life in perfect obedience to the Father. Look at him as he lives that life of righteousness, of service, of love, of obedience. And where did it end? On a cross! Jesus Christ was too good for this world!

Much suffering and tragedy in the world comes through our own negligence, foolishness or irresponsibility. But there is some suffering and some tragedy in life that come precisely because a man is good. The righteous suffer. The only man who fully incarnated the love of God in human flesh ended up on a cross. That is the best commentary we have on human history and human life.

Righteousness crucified. Is it not significant that he was condemned by the Roman government, by Pontius Pilate, the representative of the greatest legal system the world has ever known? Even today when one thinks of Imperial Rome, one thinks of the magnificent system of justice that it gave to the world. It was man's highest achievement in jurisprudence that impaled Jesus on a cross.

But not only Rome. What about the Jewish leaders — the leaders of the one religion that had an understanding of the true God and were prepared for God to intervene in human history? It was those who stood in the line of Abraham and David and Isaiah who cried out, “Crucify him! Let his blood be on us and on our children!”

There you have it. Rome and Jerusalem, the highest achievements in human justice and religion, barbarously murdering Jesus Christ on a cross. That's what life is all about. Righteousness crucified. Love condemned. Self-sacrifice hanging on a tree. The only conclusion that one can come to is that human life is tragic — that goodness suffers — that love is crucified — that righteousness is of no avail.

We may, at times, be tempted to cry out, “Why me?” But then we remember Jesus. Why him? Why anyone? Because there is a tragic element in human existence, a mystery of evil in the world that crucifies righteousness and justice and love. Jesus was too good to be in this world, and if a person tries to live as Jesus lived, he will find himself suffering as Jesus suffered. If he loves too much, or cares too much, or gives too much of himself, he may end up broken and crushed and disillusioned, looking in vain for a vindication of his human experience.

Now, there is another side of the coin, of course. God can transform tragedy into triumph. God can use the excruciatingly painful experiences of life as stepping

stones in building a beautiful life. And in the midst of human tragedy where there is submission and trust in God there comes a strength and a grace that is poured into life which makes of a person a most beautiful instrument in the hands of God. Jesus found, even in his darkest hour, that victory was possible because he was able to look at his spitting, jeering tormentors and say, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He found out that the power of love can overcome the worst of human tragedy. But it was only beyond Calvary that his righteousness, his love, his obedience and his trust were vindicated.

This means we may suffer all our lives and die without having the sunlight break upon our path. It means we may live in tragic circumstances all our days despite obedience and submission. The Cross is the one symbol in all human history that tells us that we cannot ask the question "Why?" Oh, we can ask it, but we cannot answer it. There is no sure justice.

Tragedy is everywhere; evil rears its ugly head everywhere we turn, and the righteous suffer. And those who love are crushed. What then? Is that the last word? No, it's not. Because of Jesus, the final word is not crucifixion, but resurrection. Not the blackness, the darkness of Calvary, but the brilliant light of Easter morning. We live in hope because a life was lived that ended in tragedy, but was vindicated by a mighty act of God. Jesus, who died in trust, was vindicated by the Father in his resurrection.

We, however, are still under the shadow of the Cross, because our own resurrection is in the future. Its light has already broken in on us in Jesus, the first fruits of them that sleep. Its power is already ours because his Spirit lives within us. We already have a foretaste of the victory and triumph to come. Although we still look forward to our own resurrection, the new age has invaded history in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ assures us, in the face of inexplicable human tragedy, that we can continue to trust him because beyond the limits of history is resurrection. Within history — no answer. Beyond history — the risen Christ and victory.