

The Old Rugged Cross

Today's passages go to the core of what Christianity at its essence is all about. This includes the familiar story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his very son given to him by God to initiate in history the covenantal promise of creating a great nation by which all the families of the earth shall be blessed. This very son was whom Abraham was willing to surrender, realizing that if it is God directing his path, a way will be open through which God will lead. As the story unfolds, God, convinced of Abraham's faithfulness to the utmost, provided the sacrificial lamb in Isaac's place.

This ancient story is not intended to justify human sacrifice nor is it a call to disregard common sense. It *is* meant to highlight the magnificent sovereignty of God and to motivate us to come to the place in our own lives where we can, with some consistency, learn to "trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding." The promise is that if we do "acknowledge God in all our ways," he is more than willing "to direct our paths." In the process we gain a great liberality of spirit by becoming, as paradoxical, as it may seem, what the Apostle Paul refers to as "slaves of righteousness" in working out the destiny of our calling as children and disciples of the living God. This Abraham was willing to, do as was Jesus in his moment of severest testing.

From the vantage-point our faith tradition, the importance of this ancient story as forerunner of Christ's sacrificial atonement is almost too obvious to warrant commentary. Still, to make the connection, let us note that God, through his revealing Angel, said to Abraham, "Do not lay

your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me." Yet, it was this very hand that God the Father mysteriously held from Christ the Son in the depths of his struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, with the sweat of anxiety pouring from his brow.

Let us make no mistake about this, it was a human Christ in every way except in sin itself, who though he was the very Son of God, had to learn obedience through the things which he suffered, for only through such undergoing did he become the author of eternal salvation to all who put their full faith in him. In this great transfer of our sin for his righteousness, we through his blood have become justified by God. Why this is so is a mystery at the center of the Christian understanding of God that we can never fully unravel, to which we are called to put our full reliance upon in utter faith with all our heart, mind, strength, and soul.

For what Christ struggled with that dark and lonely night was the very consequence of taking this burden of our sins and the brokenness of the entire created order on himself upon which nothing less than the salvation of the world depended. It was in this very night where the King of Glory pleaded to God the Almighty to deliver him from this burden, for Christ had no interest in martyrdom for its own sake. Yet, for him to fulfill his very destiny as Israel's Messiah, and more fundamentally, as the savior of the world, that was not to be. For unlike Abraham, the cup of dread—the cumulative result of Adam's disobedience, the sins of the world would not be lifted from Christ, until he drank the dregs of sin itself to the full. For this very reason the Incarnate Son of the Most Holy

God, who "did not consider it robbery to be equal with God," came in the flesh to dwell among us to show us how to live as God intended and to take the burden's of our own self righteousness and defensiveness from us. Thus, did God so love the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

That this deep mystery of sacrificial atonement is a fundamental biblical theme would be hard to deny, for it streams across the entire New Testament. What is difficult to refute as well is how strange and even offensive this gift of God is which is so foreign to our modern way of thinking and living. To put it in the strongest of terms, the sacrificial atonement of the blood of Christ shed for the remission of sins is nothing less than a scandal of the first order, which even we are tempted at least to soften. Yet this we cannot do, for what Christ's sacrificial atonement brings together is both a God who demands righteousness as the price of relationship and a God who is infinitely merciful who will leave the 99 to find the one which has gone astray. Calvary was nothing less than the working out of these seemingly paradoxical dimensions of God's core attributes where God in Christ has become our prophet, priest, and king for the sake of reconciling the world. Let us take the time here to consider these two dimensions of God's character on righteousness and mercy and how they are brought together in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom the Bible describes as the author and finisher of our faith.

On the Righteousness of God

The New Testament presupposes about God everything claimed in the Old Testament on both his majestic sovereignty, which brooks no compromise with unrighteousness of any sort, and his unconditional love for humankind even in its utterly fallen and forlorn condition, as narrated in the recounting of Israel's history and poignantly expressed in the Prophets and Psalms. On this, God's two not easily reconcilable primary characteristics are holiness and merciful love. First, on holiness:

As uttered throughout the Bible, unrighteousness cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. This is a radical law of God that cuts across the Old and New Testaments as expressed in Psalm 119. There we encounter the writer's profound awe for the holiness of God and his well-founded fear of the consequences of falling short of what this requires of him. In the words of the psalmist:

*Teach me, O Lord the way of Your statutes,
And I shall keep it to the end.
Give me understanding and I shall keep you law;
Indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart.
Make me walk in the path of Your commandments,
For I delight in it.
Incline my heart to Your testimonies,
And not to covetousness.
Turn away my eyes at looking at worthless things,
And revive me in Your way.
Establish Your word to Your servant
Who is devoted to fearing You.*

*Turn away my reproach which I dread,
For Your judgments are good.
Behold, I long for Your precepts;
Revive me in Your righteousness.*

Then in the Gospel of Matthew, our Lord tells us that he came not to destroy the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill their innermost intent in giving us a new heart cleansed by the Spirit of God that pierces to the very core of our consciousness, well beyond where any merely external obedience can penetrate. Thus, too, the Apostle Paul reminds us that the wages of sin, which, in its essence, is nothing less than separation from God, leads to slavery and ultimately to death itself. That is because sin, in its many individual and corporate forms is so contradictory to who God is, that it simply cannot become part of the Kingdom of God, which is your true home and mine, however much at times we may resist the small still voice of God's precious prompting.

The Bible also contends that the very desire of humankind is to embody this homeland, whether or not we recognize it as God's realm. This is because God's Spirit is engrafted into the very fabric of humankind, made in the image of God, which Adam's fall marred but did not destroy. The Fall has, however, left its indelible stamp upon us, whereupon in the most radical sense we are at war with ourselves and with God, desiring to be godlike in our own autonomous selves, while simultaneously, just by the nature of our created status, we thirst and hunger for right relationship with the living God, where anything less is false promise. The tension between these two realities is the consequence of our human condition even as our calling is to

press toward the embrace of God's love with everything that is within us.

Because God has given freedom to humankind, he does not arbitrarily impose his will. Rather, through his Spirit he helps us in our weakness in both opening up and searching out those places in *our* spirit where God's intervention can have effect in bringing us to the very place where God desires to abide within us through his Holy Spirit. Yet as Adam's child we still resist, a resistance which in the final analysis God simply cannot accept even as He continues to prompt us to respond in the ways that He desires for us to become. The call to holiness is nothing short of absolute in which unrighteousness itself simply cannot enter the Kingdom of God. This is a gospel truth. Thus sayeth the Lord.

On the Mercy of God

What then of the mercy of God? For in both the Old and New Testaments, God's mercy runs very deep. Thus, Christ does not condemn the prostitute who the Pharisees were only too willing to stone, and she followed him as a devoted servant for the rest of her life. Peter denied Christ three times, and, through Christ's forgiving look, the Spirit of God both convicted and revived him as he set his faith, after Pentecost, on a surer foundation; namely, the Holy Spirit, than his own enthusiasm or his own proclamations of undying faithfulness. All through the four gospels we read of tax collectors, lepers, Samaritans, Sabbath breakers; those who do not follow the strict rules of the law; the lame, the Roman centurion, the self acknowledged sinners who experience their spiritual poverty to the depths of their lives: to these—the broken hearted, the

forlorn, the unloved, the unacceptable— God in Christ speaks, heals, teaches, accepts, and brings into new life. This we experience in our own lives, too, as the merciful love of God breaks into our lives ever afresh, setting us again on the pathway of God's correction course, sometimes despite ourselves. Thanks be to God for his merciful love.

So it was of Israel after the Babylonian captivity in 587 B.C.E. in the nation's humiliated and utterly destroyed state when any triumphal vestige of occupying a geographical promised land was eradicated from the realm of possibility. Despite Israel's backsliding ways, God's merciful love continued to break through in the seemingly most forlorn of circumstances. Let us listen to God's pining for us through the words of the prophet Hosea who compared Israel to a faithless whore, after reaping the whirlwind of its backsliding embrace of other gods:

*How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
My heart churns within Me;
My sympathy is stirred.
I will not execute the fierceness of my anger;
I will not destroy Ephraim.
For I am God and not man.
The Holy One in your midst;
And I will not come with terror.*

In this freely given gift of merciful love, we encounter the reconciling grace of God anew which comes to us on God's own accord and timetable. This indwelling grace we cannot control, but can honor and acknowledge, as bestowed upon us

because of the love and will of God who seeks to bring and keep us in right relationship with Him. In this, God's mercy in reaching out to us is enduring to the end. Yet even here let us listen to the cautionary note of the prophet Hosea:

Who is wise?

Let him understand these things.

Who is prudent?

Let him know them.

For the ways of the Lord are right;

The righteous walk in them,

But transgressors stumble in them.

Thus, let us not grieve the Holy Spirit when it seeks entrance way into our lives through dismissive disobedience, neglect, or simple refusal to give God our all. For if today we hear God's voice let us turn a listening ear by giving this precious Spirit the grateful reverence it so richly deserves both for God's sake and our own. For in this Holy Spirit the very Word of Life made flesh has been bestowed upon *us* to give us both the direction and support to live the life to which we are called by God the Almighty and everlasting lover. Let us strive mightily then, to enter into that Sabbath rest of God's grace, upon which we can cast our entire lives. For this gift of abundant life is freely given through the sacrificial blood of Christ, our high priest upon which no one or nothing else can possibly compare.

Concluding Remarks

Salvation; what the Bible also refers to as justification, has come through Christ's substitutionary sacrifice for the

sins of the world. This is a rock bottom gift of God that no effort on our part can possibly match. As expressed by the Apostle John, if anyone sins we have an Advocate with the Father; Jesus Christ, the righteous, who Himself has taken on the full burden for our sins, and not only for ours, but the whole world's. This Christ is the full indwelling of God himself in human flesh who has come for our sakes and the world's in the form of a rejected servant whose blood was shed for us. Let us embody this mystery to the depths of our being and in our collective worship and give all the praise we can possibly muster to our awesome God!

Through this great transfer, God in Christ condemned sin, our own and the world's, by overcoming it in his flesh. It is this very Christ who shows us how to live at every step of our lives through the imitation of God's radical holiness and everlasting forgiveness. This is an astounding revelation of which we have only a partial glimpse. Yet, through the freely given gift of the Holy Spirit when activated in our lives, we, in our human flesh, are complete in this God in Christ, who is the head of all principalities and powers upon whom every knee shall bow and tongue confess. Through our allegiance, flawed as it is, to the King of Glory, we become ambassadors of fulfilling Christ's mission of reconciling the world in whatever encounters are before us. And in the process, we become reconciled to God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Thank you Jesus!

The full depth of this revealed truth is partially veiled, and therefore beyond our capacity to fully fathom. Yet, on the very foundation of our faith there is no greater beyond the infinite depth of *this* mystery of God's Incarnation in

Christ and atoning sacrifice, which has been revealed to us through the Bible and the Holy Spirit, and is, indeed, a precious gift which simply deserves our utmost in return. Our challenge is less to fully understand this awesome mystery, than in faith, which is the only way we can please God, to embody and abide in its truth, beauty, and moral power throughout all the days of our lives. For the living out in faith of this promised reality, is the very purpose of human existence from which all other realities flow. This is the very nub of the Christian faith.

In the Old Rugged Cross, Christ brought together the need to reconcile God's righteousness, without which no one can see God, with the unfathomable depths of his infinite mercy in God's willingness himself to take on the burden of humankind's sin and to suffer in our place. Through this incredibly merciful transfer we are invited to cast our entire lives upon God's grace with no holding back. God's grace is infinitely free, but it is costly indeed; a price that God himself has paid with the life of his most precious Son; a cross we are privileged to carry, too, in our imitation of Christ, our pioneer, to the extent that with Paul we are at least willing to say to the depths of our being, even in the midst of our own doubts and skepticism, that I have decided to know nothing at the level of ultimacy except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Lord God almighty and loving savior, give us the faith to seek you in a manner that gives you the honor that you so richly deserve and to which our hearts most earnestly desire to worship with everything that is within us. Amen.