

## **THE CRUCIFIED GOD**

*Good Friday, April 14, 2017*

We worship the crucified God. There are two excellent books of Christian thought whose titles center on those words: *The Crucified God*, by Jurgen Moltmann, and *We Preach the Crucified God*, by Kenneth Leech. I owe much to these two writers in what I share with you here today. We worship the crucified God, and because of it we Christians have always seemed strange to those of other faiths or no faith, beginning with the Romans. Our apparent strangeness could begin with our calling so awful a day “Good” Friday, but we know it’s because of the light of Easter shined backwards onto the cruel death that made the resurrection possible.

The apostle Paul felt the need to acknowledge the peculiarity of following Jesus when he wrote in his first letter to the church in Corinth that “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” But he continued, with proud defiance typical of Paul: “...but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1:22-24)

One of the foundations of our faith is the first Letter of John’s famous brief statement that “God is love.” Where is God and love in the crucifixion, and what does it mean to us? Jurgen Moltmann writes, “What Jesus commanded in the Sermon on the Mount as love of one’s enemy has taken

place on the cross through Jesus' dying and the grief of the Father in the power of the spirit, for the godless and the loveless. Just as the unconditional love of Jesus for the rejected made the Pharisees his enemies and brought him to the cross, so [for us] unconditional love also means enmity and persecution in a world in which the life of man is made dependent on particular social norms, conditions and achievements. A love which takes precedence and robs these conditions of their force is folly and scandal in this world.... The fact of this love can be contradicted. It can be crucified, but in crucifixion it finds its fulfillment and becomes love of the enemy. Thus its suffering proves to be stronger than hate." (248-49)

Jesus' way is hard—it *does* go through the cross. An unconditional love that includes our enemies invites contempt, and usually receives it. We Christians through time have sometimes edged away from the foolishness of the cross, and at other times have thrown down even our small symbolic crosses and run in the opposite direction as fast as we can. Notice how quick we are to claim the mantle of being "Easter people"—or maybe I'm just talking about Episcopalians. People who have comfortable lives prefer their religion sunny side up. We're more about unconditional self-invention and self-improvement than we are about unconditional love.

But the cross is there to show us, to teach us, another, more profound way, a way that sees and feels and lives the connections between Good Friday

and Easter. “It is the fusion of lament and praise which inaugurates true communion,” writes Kenneth Leech. “But it is important that Christians do not try to live constantly in ‘Alleluia time’ and ignore the darkness and ‘the valley’ which are still part of our experience in this world. The cry of pain, the public ritual processing of grieving, the ability to trust in one’s pain and in others’ pain within a solidarity of love: these are all necessary elements in a corporate spirituality.”

Leech urges us to recognize that there are three aspects to following Jesus: servanthood, nonviolence, and love. Our culture is not helpful, to put it mildly, in any of these three areas. Instead of servanthood, our culture preaches selfishness, although we try to emphasize selfishness’s positive sides: self-realization, self-improvement, self-esteem. Just keep your eye on the prize, please, which is our selves.

Instead of nonviolence, our world is steeped in violence: it has dominated our foreign policy, our national culture of guns and violent self-defense, and our entertainment, which offers up plentiful helpings of mayhem in movies, television, video games, you name it. Nonviolence, our culture assures us, is a lovely idea but unsuited to a dangerous world. In this way of thinking, the foolishness of the cross is not a powerful paradox; it’s just foolishness.

Instead of love, our culture is often more about fear, anger, and resentment. We here in this place are among the most privileged people who ever lived, and we live in the most powerful nation ever, but we roil with insecurity about our sources of energy, our porous and unsafe borders, our dangerous streets awash in guns. Our answer is to build barriers, shields, walls, buffers, both human and mechanical. Surely God weeps for the world we have made.

Servanthood, nonviolence and love. All lovely goals for Christians; many of us share them and try to find our way into lives governed by them. Today is the day to look squarely at the scandal of the cross, and try to see the transforming foolishness of following Jesus of Nazareth. On Sunday we can go back to being sunny Easter people.

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