

Preaching the Cross in Our Context

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We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to the religious and foolishness to the intelligentsia. (*1 Cor 1:23*)

Let me come right to the point and say that I think that preaching the cross in *our* context is perhaps the most difficult thing a Protestant pastor is called to do. Given the religious and political climate in much of North America today, it could even be seen as an act of disloyalty—maybe even apostasy. All the same, it's the only kind of preaching we need, and there's precious little of it!

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'Context' is the operative word in this title. Contexts vary, sometimes markedly—even when they're part of the same basic (e.g. 'Western', 'developed', etc.) world. My closest friend is a German pastor and theologian, Friedrich Hufendiek of Berlin. We studied with Reinhold Niebuhr and the other exceptional teachers at Union Seminary in New York fifty years ago, and have maintained a remarkable friendship over the years. I have learned a great deal from Fritz—not least of all how very *different* expressions of Protestantism can be.

Years ago, when we were first getting to know one another, Fritz told me: "In Westphalia, where I grew up [not far from the Niebuhr farm that Reinhold's father fled to seek his fortune in America], what happened on Good Friday was this: All the Protestants went to church, very solemnly, and all the Catholics stayed home and quite deliberately and conspicuously worked in their fields." And I had to tell Fritz: "With us in southwestern Ontario it was the exact opposite. We Anglo-Protestants regarded Good Friday observance as a Catholic [i.e. practically a pagan!] practice. We told one another, rather smugly, 'Well! Jesus rose from the dead, after all! The cross is *empty*.' The closest we came even to acknowledging the existence of Good Friday was hot cross buns!"

The popular spin-offs of the liturgical movement of recent decades, such as the inclusion of (often ostentatious) crosses in even the most WASPish of Protestant church sanctuaries have altered very little in this respect. With the exception of some Anglicans and Lutherans, the cross for most Protestants in Canada and the U.S. is still pretty *empty*—and I don't just mean devoid of the Christ-figure, but empty symbolically. We still see it as something that has been surpassed, superceded, relegated to the past tense. Hence, while hoards of North American Protestants and neo-pagans show up on Easter Sunday (How they love to sing "*our* triumphant, holy day"!), most of our feeble Protestant attempts at Good Friday worship bring forth pathetic little bands, many of whom, I suspect, wonder whether they are not doing something just slightly clandestine so far as true-belief is concerned. Why this difference? Why should Protestantism in North America manifest a manner of observing the events at the centre of our faith so different from that in the Germanic homelands of the Reformation?

One reason is historical: the main influences on our ‘New World’ forms of Protestantism were Modern ones—and I use that term in the technical sense, meaning post-Medieval, Renaissance- and/or Enlightenment-inspired, given to the kind of linear thinking that (in the words of an old song) accentuates the positive, eliminates the negative, and doesn’t mess with “the ambiguities of history.” Whether we are speaking about Zwingli, Calvin, Oecolampadius and other figures of the Reformed tradition, most of them educated in the new “humanist” approach to learning, or about Methodists and others influenced by the pietistic reaction against rationalistic orthodoxy, they all manifest a tendency to stress the victory of ‘the third day’ in such a way as to empty the cross prematurely. Whether in doctrinaire (Calvinistic) or in sentimental (pietistic) ways, the cross of Christ becomes little more than the necessary prelude to its overcoming, thus losing its power as a point of reference for creaturely pain and rejection.

Luther, by contrast, kept at least one foot in the Medieval world—not its scholastic but its mystical side, the side that came to the fore after the collapse of Christian scholasticism in the late Middle Ages. Unlike Modernity, the late Medieval mystics who were Luther’s antecedents did not indulge in idealistic fantasies about the triumph of the good, especially where this world is concerned. In this life we can expect a continuing interplay of good and evil, light and darkness, the divine and the demonic—and in ways that make it difficult to distinguish the one from the other. The gospel, for Luther, is not that everything that threatens life has already been quite visibly put to flight, but that the darkness of our ‘fallen’ world has been visited by the Source of a light that cannot be extinguished: therefore we, by grace alone, may learn the courage to live faithfully *despite* the continuing assaults of temptation, despair, the demonic, death, and the whole host of negating realities out of Pandora’s box. The cross remains the *central* focus of Luther’s theology, as of Paul’s, because it represents the point of God’s own solidarity with us (“Emmanuel”)—God’s determination, neither to abandon the world prematurely (Bonhoeffer) nor to overlook its terrible wrongness, but to go right to the heart of its darkness and initiate its redemption from within the deep, entrenched structures of creaturely estrangement. The resurrection does not shift faith’s focus away from the cross; to the contrary, it *establishes* the cross as the decisive event in God’s costly compassion for, movement towards, and reconciliation of the damaged creation. As Ernst Kaesemann put it, “the resurrection is a chapter in the theology of the cross.”

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It is obvious to anyone with a minimal knowledge of the European ‘experiment’ called [North] America², that the bright vision of a ‘New World’ at the heart of that experiment is supported more straightforwardly by the first (Reformed, pietistic) than by the second (Mystical, Lutheran) type of Protestant pre-understanding. One could almost say that Calvinism (not to be *equated* with Calvin) and Methodism (not to be *equated* with the Wesleys) were made *for* as well (to a considerable extent) as *in* America. Lutherans, with few exceptions, not only came to these shores later, but they came with a significantly different story to tell; and those forms of Lutheranism most readily adaptable in the U. S. and Canada were eighteenth and nineteenth-century pietistic revisions of that tradition that, in their doctrine and morality if not their liturgies, had more in common with Methodism and other post-Enlightenment forms

of pietism than with the Lutheranism of the sixteenth century. A society as determined to banish the darkness and create a “new Eden for the new Adam” (S. Ahlstrom) as was America positively needed a religion that would spur its citizens on to greater and greater achievements.

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No one would deny that much *has been achieved* under the impetus of such a triumphant socio-religious *mythos*. But something was lost, too. And, though we ought not to have needed September 11, 2001, to highlight *what* was lost, that horrendous event has shocked many thoughtful people into realizing that something is profoundly lacking in America’s combination of political bravado and religious self-assurance. The dominant white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class Protestant culture of this continent has never known what to do about the “bad things” that happen to “good people.” Our way of dealing with personal tragedy and death, by comparison with older civilizations (or with our nearest neighbor, Mexico, for instance) can only be described, charitably, as pathetic—in the serious, non-pejorative sense of that word. We approach every obstacle to ‘the good life’ as a problem that we just haven’t solved—yet! Our faith in solutions, especially technological, economic, and military ones, is far more impressive than our widely trumpeted “trust in God.” In fact, God, for most of us, turns out to be the ultimate Problem-Solver, with organized religion as ‘His’ answering service. A God who, like Job’s, *asks* the questions, is largely a stranger in these parts.

Along with such an interrogating God, we’ve banned from our vocabulary whole *anthropological* concepts that our foundational traditions, Jerusalem and Athens, took very seriously—ideas like destiny, necessity, tragedy, limits, the strange interplay of opposites: ideas based on centuries of experiencing the reality of restraint, ontological and moral complexity, and nature’s ruthless circumscription of human possibilities. Anything that smacks of ‘negativity’ bothers us enormously. One very thoughtful U.S. president lost his job, partly, because he dared to speak openly about a “crisis of confidence.” We prefer leaders who “don’t do nuance,” and distinguish sharply between good and evil, carefully locating the latter beyond our borders or in questionable (liberal-intellectual, ‘eastern’, homosexual) elements within. We are so imprisoned in our upbeat-ism that we are ready to listen to fantastic lies and nonsense about the state of the world if only they enable us to hold onto our fabled optimism (which is no true optimism, in fact, but the rhetorical optimism of the frightened)—and, by the way, also our shining bathrooms.

We are surrounded by the data of despair. It’s in the air we breathe, the food we eat, the god-awful television we watch. But with the help of ‘bread and circuses’ more diverting than anything the ancient Romans ever came up with (consider the role of so-called ‘Spectator Sports’ in this society!), we turn off reality as easily as we shift channels with our remote control wands or surf the internet. We are a society of instinctive and skilled repressors the like of which has never before existed. And if we can’t repress some manifestation of the darkness we thought we’d overcome (as we can’t repress the awesome vision of the falling towers in Manhattan), we do the next best thing and attribute it to . . . *them*. And we’re going to fix *them*, too—i.e. quite unabashedly by hunting them down and killing them, or the bad eggs among them, and liberating the rest of them for our kind of Freedom. And you wonder why anyone

would find it difficult to preach the cross in our context?

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To ask well-fed, well-heeled, well-meaning North American Protestants to look at the cross of Jesus Christ (as Medieval peasants and mystics did, or as the chorus in Bach's passions does) without the dubious benefit of the kind of instant resurrectionism that wipes away all the blood and tears before they've been seen close up—that's an affront to the cult and the culture we've worked so hard to establish on these shores. A Christ who really suffers is as much a *skandalon* to the religious and foolishness to the clever of our society as he was to Paul's. So, pause briefly, if you insist, to notice the beautifully poignant face of the Christ as he asks God to forgive his executioners and motions his dear mother towards the waiting arms of his beloved disciple. But do not linger there—if you know what's good for you, mister/miz preacher!

That was Mel Gibson's problem: he lingered. Now, I disliked the film of Mr. Gibson as much as any other self-respecting Protestant (and for better theological reasons, too, I'll wager!); but lately I have wondered if the real offense of *The Passion* according to the old-style Catholic Gibson was not his nearly-Medieval need to fixate on the horrors of all that torn flesh and spilt, sacred blood. To be sure, he did that out of an ultra-Anselmic belief in the absolute efficacy of sacrificial substitution: the more violence and gore, the greater the treasury of merit. But even that awful film could be—*could be*—a much-needed corrective to our bland and passionless Protestantism that rushes past all that 'negativity' to recover, as quickly as possible, the gentle Jesus who, if he suffers at all, suffers as one whose lips are silently mouthing the words, "No Problem."

I say it *could be* such a corrective—if viewers of that film, or hearers of *The St. Matthew Passion*, or readers of the Gospels understood (as on the whole, it seems, they do not!) that the crucified Christ is not just the crucified Christ, an individual 'back then' who suffered heroically, but *our Representative*. And God's.

The cross is our Christian reality-check, and unlike a lot of other religious symbolism (much of it associated with Christmas, alas) the cross doesn't lie about reality. As Luther put it in the twenty-first thesis of his Heidelberg Disputation, while "the theology of glory" [religious triumphalism] has to lie about life, calling good evil and evil good, the theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is—it calls a spade a spade! It says: "Look! There's a great deal that simply wrong with this world! Innocent people suffer, and many guilty ones prosper. Look at all that injustice, that war, that degradation of nature, that death! No, don't turn away from it! Religion may tempt you to shut your eyes and just 'enjoy', but faith wants you to open them. Until you do that, you'll never be in a position to understand the pain of God—or God's way of healing pain, either."

To isolate the cross of Golgotha from all the other crosses, from the cross that is creaturely life itself, under the conditions of historical existence, is to miss the point entirely. Good Friday isn't just about the crucifixion of Jesus. Never was. It's about the human condition. And it's about the God who, wishing to be *our* God and to be "with *us*" has to take that route—that *Via dolorosa*. So the cross of the Christ is not just an arbitrary symbol. There's a discernible—even a "necessary" logic in it (remember the "musts" of Christ's "Predictions of the Passion"): If the Word God sent was drawn irrevocably to a Jerusalem that was 'out to get him', and to the Garden of

Sorrows to meet his betrayer, and to the Place of the Skull to die as one forsaken, it is no accident but the consequence of a decision, God's decision, informed by an all-but-unbelievable *love*. To be "with" the beloved, pathetic, or maybe even tragic creature, the loving Creator must become the suffering Redeemer.

But this means that when we contemplate the cross of Jesus Christ—if we contemplate it truly and do not turn it into a "once upon a time" story-with-a-moral (You can't keep a good man down!)—we are obliged to look, not only on the wounds and the tears of Jesus but of those with whom and for whom Jesus suffers—including God, in whose heart there was a cross, as someone put it, before ever there was one on Golgotha; including all the alienated and abandoned souls of earth; including the whole "groaning" creation. *And* including ourselves, sitting there in church looking for all the world as though we were happy, well-adjusted men and women, but underneath it all knowing ourselves to be "living lives of quiet desperation" (Thoreau). I know: that's a lot to ask of people like us, who spend most of our waking hours trying to forget all that, and whose very presence 'in church' is in all likelihood a part of our desperate attempt to avoid being desperate.

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And yet . . . And yet there's another thing going on in us today, don't you think? Perhaps it's always been there. Certainly it's been there in times of great historical crises, like the plague century, the fourteenth, when some artists (like Matthias Grünewald) depicted the crucified Christ as a victim of the plague. In many individuals today, and perhaps in some strange way in our society at large, there can be noticed something like a need to stop fooling ourselves. It's hard to carry on the fiction of "all's right with the world"—at least *our* world!—when so much is patently and conspicuously *wrong* with it. Surely we've lived with the images of those falling Manhattan towers long enough to stop explaining them in the naïve, grade B Hollywood movie mythology of a world of good guys and bad guys. Haven't we grown weary of hearing ourselves whine, "Why do they hate us? We're nice people!" Isn't there a kind of longing among us, by now, for something like the sort of truth-orientation that could look at the scandalous discrepancy between rich and poor, and the reality of 45 million with AIDS, and a similar number in our own backyard without any medical insurance, and a dangerously heating-up globe, and our own inevitable death, etc., etc.:—in short, haven't we come to the limits of repressive culture and repressive religion, and don't we long for *truth* more, even, than for the "happiness" of ...going shopping again?

Only those who long for *that* kind of truth may come to know the truth of Easter, too.

Notes

1. Author of *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).
2. I am always reluctant to include Canada in this kind of generalization—not because Canada is less culpable where Modern delusions of grandeur are concerned, but because, being small and vulnerable, Canada never gave credence to anything as pretentious as 'the American Dream'. It still doesn't; and therefore it also resists the present-day ambition of U.S. leadership, which appears to think that America has the right and the duty to export its brave vision to other peoples, whether they want it or not! The

Canadian perspective is at best a “pale version” of the American Dream (though modern communications and the ubiquity of American pop-culture have had the unfortunate effect of blurring this distinction). There are important historical, geographic, and religious reasons why Canada never dreamt so big—among them the fact that we have had to live too close to other empires (Britain and the U.S.) ever to dream imperial dreams of our own; as well, our vast land space and climate have been marvelous ‘reality checks’. But it should also be remembered that Protestantism never held sway in Canada in the manner of American Calvinism and Protestant pietism: Roman Catholicism, which has accounted for at least half our religious history and outlook, probably more, shared with classical Lutheranism a lasting suspicion of Modernity. Such a suspicion has not always been admirable, of course; but it has at least constituted a built-in critique of Modern *hubris*.