

In the Cross of Christ I Glory

Galatians 6:12-17

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“In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o’er the wrecks of time” may be my favourite line in Christian hymnody. Not my favourite hymn mind you, but I delight in that image—the cross, an accursed symbol of torture and pain, a symbol of defeat really, standing victorious when all else has been wrecked.

This week I did a little reading on this hymn, particularly its author, Sir John Bowring, who had a quite full life. Bowring knew 200 languages and could speak 100. Besides writing his own poems, he translated a vast quantity of world literature into English. He was also a political reformer, a friend of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of liberal causes. He was also an early railroad man, succeeding in that business enterprise. He was a member of the English parliament and a diplomat, rising to serve as the Governor of the British colony of Hong Kong. He also knew adversity. While governor of Hong Kong, his household was poisoned by arsenic and his wife did not survive.

“Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure, by the cross are sanctified,” he wrote. Bowring was acquainted with both.

This hymn imagines the cross as immediately relevant to pastoral care—“when the woes of life o’ertake me, hopes deceive, and fears annoy, never shall the cross forsake me: Lo! It glows with peace and joy.” When you look at the cross during worship, do any of these emotions register with you?

Today I want to talk about the cross, but not about atonement theories or Good Friday stories, but rather this symbol which stands here at the front of our worship every week. What is its meaning? What role does it play in worship? How is the cross part of God’s shaping ordinary us into something holy and extraordinary?

Let’s begin by looking a little more closely at the text I’ve chosen for today from the closing verses of Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia.

Now Paul the missionary apostle is writing to this early church in order to address a problem that has arisen around who exactly is part of the people of God. The issue here is particularly related to circumcision, the ancient Jewish practice first given by God to Abraham at the dawn of the biblical story. The question for Paul and his contemporaries is--Will God’s command to Abraham still be relevant to the people of God in the first century?

In some ways this early church grappling with this question is very similar to what contemporary churches do. All the time we must deal with questions about how the ancient commands relate to our time and place. Just in my lifetime churches have radically altered their views on marriage and divorce, the role of women, and the inclusion of LGBT people. We should be guided in how we address such questions by the way Paul and the early Christians handled their questions—with creativity and innovation listening to a Still-speaking God.

For Paul the practice of circumcision is no longer necessary to identify who is part of God's family and who isn't. Paul advocates for a broad and inclusive vision of the family of God. No one practice, like circumcision, identifies us. Our identity has been radically altered by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus which has revealed God's cosmic plan to include all creation. According to scholar N. T. Wright, "the crucifixion of the Messiah means that everything has been turned inside out, not simply his own self, not simply Israel, but the entire cosmos."

And so the issue is actually much bigger than the problem the Galatian church was having. God is changing the entire cosmos and we are all invited to become participants in that change.

Paul, therefore, boasted in this letter in his new identity as one victorious over everything. He wrote, "From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body."

But why the cross? Why would this symbol become the symbol of cosmic victory over all the forces that would trouble us?

The cross is, prima facie, a symbol of pain, suffering, failure, and death. The Hebrew tradition was that anyone who died hanging upon a tree was cursed. The Romans used crucifixion as a means of terrorizing and controlling occupied populations. And cross imagery has remained constant as symbols of pain and death. For example, the poem "On the Cross" by the Polish writer Anna Kamienska imagines the hospital bed as a crucifixion:

He was dying on the cross
on a hospital bed
loneliness stood there by his side
the mother of sorrows

And there are parallels with the cross in 20th century images of lynching. For instance the powerful song "Strange Fruit"

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees

Or Elton John's song "American Triangle" about the anti-gay hate crime murder of Matthew Shephard:

I've seen a scarecrow wrapped in wire
Left to die on a high ridge fence
It's a cold, cold wind

And so we decorate our altar with a symbol of pain, death, terror, murder, and lynching.

Yet we do so because the Christian story is that at the moment of deepest pain . . . death and suffering have been defeated by the compassion and grace of God. The cross is the symbol of hope and courage that we can and will defeat all that oppresses and troubles us by participating in God's new creation. We take a symbol meant for one thing and convert it into something else in a profound act of courage, creativity, and chutzpah.

Let me give you another example to illustrate. I have a lot of what I call "activist bling"—pins, buttons, wristbands, etc. for all sorts of causes. Over the years as I've attended rallies and vigils, spoken before governmental bodies, participated in panels in classrooms, I've looked through my bling to see what to wear that fit that occasion. Sometimes I wear my God is Still Speaking red comma, for instance, or my gay pride rainbow wristband.

The most powerful piece of bling I own this small lapel pin—a pink triangle on top of a golden cross. The pink triangle is the badge that the Nazis compelled gay men to wear during the Third Reich, similar to the yellow star of David worn by Jews. But in the era of gay liberation the pink triangle was reclaimed as symbol of identity and the struggle for freedom. Out of a painful past a new age would be born.

I find the cross and pink triangle combination to be particularly poignant. Two symbols of imperial injustice, two symbols of torture, two symbols of affliction creatively and courageously reclaimed as symbols of liberation. I am a Christian and I am a gay man and remembering the pains of the past I look forward in hope to a new creation. To quote Paul again, "Let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body."

Every Sunday, then, this cross sits here as a reminder of pain, yes, but also of pain's defeat and our hope.

Worship is the place where God calls us to become fully human, to become holy, and extraordinary. For this hour, at least, let us taste of that victory and experience our fullness in the people of God, so that we might carry our triumph with us every day.