

CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL

Fredericton, NB

Sunday, September 14, 2003

Holy Cross Day (Pentecost 17)

A Sermon by Dean Keith Joyce

“The gospel cross”

1 Corinthians 1:18-24 [NRSV]

¹⁸ *For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* ¹⁹ *For it is written,*

*‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’*

²⁰ *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?* ²¹ *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.* ²² *For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,* ²³ *but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,* ²⁴ *but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

John 3:13-17

¹³ *No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.** ¹⁴ *And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.**

¹⁶ *‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’*

¹⁷ *‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’*

Who do you listen to?

In Paul Aiello, Jr.’s words, “The captain of the ship looked into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message”
"Alter your course 10 degrees south."

Promptly a return message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north."

The captain was angered; his command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south--I am the captain!"

Soon another message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north – I am seaman third class Jones."

Immediately the captain sent a third message, knowing the fear it would evoke:
"Alter your course 10 degrees south – I am a battleship."

Then the reply came "Alter your course 10 degrees north – I am a lighthouse."

In the midst of our uncertain times, all sorts of voices are shouting orders into the night, telling us what to do, how to adjust our lives. Out of the darkness, one voice signals something quite opposite to the rest – something almost absurd. But the voice happens to be the Light of the World, and we ignore it at our peril.”

Will we listen to the message Light of the world? That message is the cross which is absolutely central to Christianity; it’s at its very heart.

Ironically, the cross is a sign of weakness, of shame, of death. That’s how the first century would have understood it. Why has such an instrument of death and suffering become so key to our faith? It’s because Jesus Christ died on a cross. And so, **“we proclaim Christ crucified”** which is, **“the power of God and the wisdom of God”** as St. Paul reminds us this morning.

What we take as weakness, as utter loss, God makes into strength and wisdom. Jesus’s dying on the cross is in actual fact the work of God, of God the Father and of God the Son. So when God is doing something which to us seems foolish and weak, it will always be truly wise and truly strong. That’s why Paul also says, **“For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”** The cross is not popular stuff – Christ’s death on the cross substantially is counter cultural.

How odd that God chose a way of painful suffering for the way of life and salvation. This decision is hard to grasp, yet we cannot avoid it, and we can be thankful for it when we face the reality, the mystery of suffering in this world and in our lives. God did not avoid suffering, and through it – namely the agony of the worst of suffering, the suffering of the One who died bearing the burden and horror of the sin of the world – God gives to us his life and love. Martin Luther has said, “A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.”

That’s why we can say the cross is the gateway into the Father’s heart. In his first epistle St. John says we read, **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.”** (1 John 3:16) His death, his body on the cross, is God’s love. That’s why I call the crucifix (the cross with Christ’s body on it) the “gospel cross.” **This IS** the good news. This love is true love, from which every other love takes its meaning and significance.

One would think that the meaning of love is self-evident, but that’s not so. John Stott, in his book, The cross of Christ, tells us that St. John “dares to say that, apart from Christ and his cross, the world would never have known what true love is. Of course all human beings have experienced some degree and quality of love. But John is saying that only one act of pure love, unsullied by any taint of ulterior motive, has ever been performed in the history of the world, namely the self-giving of God in Christ on the cross for undeserving sinners. That is why, if we are looking for a definition of love, we should look not in the dictionary, but at Calvary.”

Romans 5:8 tells us of the nature of God’s love. It reads, **“But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”** This is God’s pure, perfect love. There is no love like it because it was done for those who don’t deserve it – you, me, the world. Yes, human beings will die for others. It’s been done many times before. But usually it’s a sacrifice for others the person knows or who is considered worthy to receive such love.

So, Christ on the cross reminds us of this incredible truth, of the lavish love God has for his people. In the words of Canon Vanstone, as quoted by John Stott, God’s

love “is expended in self-giving, wholly expended, without residue or reserve, drained, exhausted, spent.” Fundamentally, the sign of the cross tells us about the heart of God. It is God’s work, it is God’s glory, while it is also the way of our salvation, the way the world can enter into new life. It truly draws us to God.

It is said that a bishop once came to an old priest sitting on a bench near where the priest lived in retirement. The bishop asked the priest whether he remembered him at all. The answer was “no,” the priest had no recollection of him.

The bishop then told the priest that one day a bunch of rowdy, slightly drunk boys were driving around town and at one point they stopped in front of a church building. For a lark they thought it would be fascinating if one of them went in, as a joke, and make a fabricated confession. One of the boys was chosen and in he went. But outside the other boys were beginning to get restless, wondering what in the world was taking their friend so long!

Finally the boy with the bogus confession came out of the church building. Apparently the priest had asked the boy to spend half an hour in contemplation of the crucifix at the front of the Nave, likely in the Sanctuary. That half hour of contemplating the “gospel cross” had such an impact on him that it changed his life. He went back out to his friends a different young man from the one who went in with the contrived confession.

The bishop then ended by telling the priest that he had been the priest in that church building that day, and that he, the bishop, had been that boy. And because of that priest’s bold suggestion to that frivolous young man he now was serving God as a bishop. The bishop simply wanted to say thank you to the old priest for confronting him with the powerful image of that crucifix, that “gospel cross.” He had been changed by the love of God which spoke so clearly as he contemplated that image of Christ’s death on the cross.

What, then, will we listen to? What voice will we let have life-changing impact on our lives? May it ever be the message of the truth and love of the “gospel cross.”
