

# *the supreme parable*

a sermon preached on

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the lections: Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12; Psalm 22; John 18:1 – 19:42.

In the cross two kingdoms clash. The ruler of this world, the lie that infects all cultures and societies, confronts the truth of another king and another kingdom. Who and what is being judged? In crucifying this man—this Jesus, who, in the name of the one true God, had offered our humanity a life without end in union with God—the self-destructiveness of sin and evil is revealed. The powers of darkness go into a final spasm, seeking to rid our common conscience of what so fundamentally disturbs it. In the midst of this darkness, a love not of this world continues on its own terms. It works only in the power of what it is, revealed as love, that keeps on being love, no matter what the rejection it suffers.

The cross was an obscene reality in the ancient world. It was a mode of execution reserved for slaves and subverters of the empire, designed to deter any threat to imperial peace. Only when crucifixion as a form of execution had been abolished by Constantine three hundred years later would the cross become a Christian symbol. Any of us today who would gladly wear a cross as an emblem of Christian commitment, can hardly imagine the degree of emotional revulsion resulting from connecting divine revelation with such a hideous form of death. That the divine being could reveal itself in such a way had to be experienced as religious scandal and a philosophical folly—‘a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles’ (1 Cor. 1.23). The cross of Christ was the most radical form of culture shock. Surely God could not be, could not act, like that. Surely God could not come to us as a criminal executed by imperial Rome.

Yet precisely at this point of utter dismay and revulsion, the sheer excess of divine mercy and compassion was displayed. In the cross of Jesus the excess of our human capacity for evil was outwitted by that excess of love on God’s part, which not ‘anything else in all creation’ (Rom. 8.39) could counter. In the providence of love working in and through all events of our history, the most demonic gesture of human evil is used to dramatise the ecstatic extravagance of God’s mercy on sinful humanity: ‘Christ died for the ungodly... God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Rom. 5, 6-8).

The love of Christ goes to an unimaginable limit, to reach us at that point where our history is found to be most against God, most enclosed in a vicious circle of violence and despair. For those who would be united in the new humanity living in the deathless life of this other kingdom, no matter who they were or how ever great their sins, here was the divine breakthrough into the world at the furthestmost limit of its alienation from God: ‘to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1 Cor 1.24).

The impossible possibilities of divine love are manifested in this most innocent of the world’s victims. Let the powers of this world do as they will, let evil display its most demonic intensity, this truth will stand: when he is lifted up, he will draw all to himself. For here was ‘God’s wisdom, the secret hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory’ (1 Cor. 2:7). So surprisingly hidden is the wisdom of love concealed in this crucified man that ‘none of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory’ (1 Cor. 2.8). Evil hides from itself, it is closed in on its own defeat. But there is

another, a divine imagination at work: ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ (Lk. 23.34).

In the decades that followed the crucifixion, the first generation of Christians had their own experience of weakness and persecution. They lovingly contemplated the cross as the disclosure of the wisdom of God. By unmasking our capacities to destroy and deface our true selves, it brought about a great reversal. It stood for a new beginning. God would not add evil for evil by wreaking divine vengeance on sinful humanity. For, through the cross, a greater good would use this evil for its own loving purpose; and a way would be opened to turn the sin enclosed world to God.

Jesus knew our evils: The Word had truly become flesh and dwelt among us. As a mortal man he suffered death, to be swallowed up into the silence, darkness, poverty, powerlessness and separation that mark all our dying. In his death there were further intensities of suffering: agony of mind and body, betrayal, abandonment, condemnation, torture, mockery, failure, execution... He suffered death as one put to death, with everything wrapped in the greatest darkness of all, the sense of the terrifying absence of God in an impenetrably God-forsaken world.

The cross is the climax of the power of darkness. God appears to have been banished from his good creation, just as creation appears shut in its own malice and hopelessness. In condemning the Son to the cross, the injustice of the world appears as just; and the crucified Son, far from being accepted as a bringer of the kingdom and the true form of our humanity, appears as a criminal. He has become ‘a curse for us—for it is written ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ (Gal. 3.13). When John’s gospel invites its readers, in Pilate’s words; to ‘behold the man’ it implies a judgment on our standard versions of humanity. The cross of the Word incarnate explodes the inflated projections of human pride.

By dying on the cross, the man of parables becomes the supreme parable – of how God undoes the evil of the world, and forms our humanity anew.