

Sermon for Sunday, July 27, 1980, by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"THREE CROSSES ON CALVARY"

"Plus Sign over the Wrecks"

St. Luke 23:32-49

Text: "And when they came to the place which is called The Skull there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right, and one on the left."  
St. Luke 23-33

In the cross of Christ I glory,  
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;  
All the light of sacred story  
Gathers round its head sublime.

I don't know if you have ever contemplated that verse that we sang a moment ago, but it says, "In the cross of Christ I glory and that cross towers o'er the wrecks of time". Somehow that cross is central because all the light of sacred story, everything involved with religion gathers round its head sublime--gathers round that cross--it becomes the focal point of human history. We date time by that cross and the man upon it. Of all the things in human history that endures, the cross alone is God's plus sign over the wrecks of time.

Several years ago I had the privilege of being in the ancient city of Corinth and I stood in the place where tradition says that St. Paul stood to preach. A large part of our New Testament comes from Paul's experience there with the people of Corinth. It was a wicked, sea-port city and yet as he lifted up the cross of Jesus Christ those men and women responded to the magnetic attraction of Jesus Christ. They became Christians and Paul had occasion to write them ...they are our first and second Corinthians in our New Testament and what a vacuum there would be without these letters from St. Paul. There is the eleventh chapter of I Corinthians which gives us the order of worship that we use in Holy Communion. There is the twelfth chapter that follows that tells us of the gifts of the spirit and then follows chapter thirteen--the love chapter. There are many other great passages that enrich us spiritually. As I stood there in that ancient city the cross and the sacred story that gathered around it was God's plus sign, but it towered over the wrecks of time. The city of Corinth is in shambles and ruins. Why is it that men have recognized that that cross is central to us and somehow all of life seems to revolve around it? As buildings grow old and crumble and cave in and people pass away the only consistent feature is God's plus sign towering over the wrecks. Why?

In order to answer those questions, we need to clarify what we are really asking. Basically two things are an issue around that cross. First, who is the man fixed there? Secondly, what is the significance of his death--why is that death any different from the two men on either side of him? Let's deal with that first question--who was this man on the cross? You simply cannot understand who and what Jesus is apart from going back to the very beginning to Bethlehem. The whole biblical narrative of a virgin bearing a child, the story of the wise-men from the east, the story of the shepherds coming to the manger--all of this is written in order that one thing might be unmistakably clear. It is written that we might understand that this person Jesus is no ordinary person. It is written that we might understand that he is of no common cut, no ordinary figure. As we read the biblical stories of his birth we are made aware that this is the prelude to something unusual, something extra-ordinary, something outside the stream of common things. And what is the message that the events convey? It is the message that this Jesus, this child born under such strange circumstances is the Child of God.

Now that simply staggers the human mind. It is so incredible that it seems unreal. It is so inconceivable that it stretches credulity to the very breaking point. Yet, when you read the nativity scenes as recorded by Matthew and Luke this is the inescapable conclusion to which we must come. We must come to the conclusion that the writers of these two gospels understood that this child was the very Son of God.

There are those who have trouble with the virgin birth. They say that this could not have happened. They say that it is outside human experience, that it is unnatural, and that it violates the laws of nature. That is all very true. There are some who attempt to explain the virgin birth away. They say that it did not really happen that way. Instead, as the early Christians came to realize that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, the early Church invented the story of the virgin birth to convince people he was God's son. Personally, I have never had any problem with the story of the virgin birth. That is only a minor and insignificant thing beside the claim that this person--this human figure, this man called Jesus--was really and truly the Son of God. If you accept that statement--if you can believe that Jesus was in some way really and truly God--then the problem on the virgin birth pales into insignificance by comparison.

Over in the gospel of John we read the astounding words, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." Whatever you might say about Jesus, the fact remains that the men who were closest to him came to the firm conclusion that he was God incarnate. The feeling of those who knew him best was summed up by the Apostle Peter who felt constrained to cry out, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." They came to the inescapable conclusion that in this man Jesus the eternal had been unveiled and that they had had a glimpse into the very depths of God's being. Even in the moment of his death, the Gospel of Matthew records that the Roman centurion who crucified him was filled with awe and said, "Truly this was a son of God!" (Matthew 27:54) Thus it was, when the writer of the Gospel of Matthew came to tell the story of the birth of this man Jesus, he wrote, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel' (which means, God with us)." Yes, this is the testimony of the New Testament, that Jesus Christ is Emmanuel, God with us. As you think about the cross and the one in the middle, the man upon it, the Bible says he was God.

I think I can understand something of why God chose to come in human form to people like you and me. Phillip Brooks, a great preacher of another generation, once wrote something that helps. He asks the question, how can one understand, for example, the 15th century? What was its spirit, the intrinsic qualities of its life? If we read the books of that century, we get a sort of hard, cold picture. If we gather up its events some sort of lifeless map unfolds before us. If we look at its art, listen to its music, we catch only a whiff of the aroma of life in the 15th century. But, suppose out of its millions of graves, some one characteristic man should shake off the dust of death and come among us, all vital with the vitality of four hundred years ago, would we not have something which no page of Dante, no canvas of Raphael, no marble of Michelangelo could tell? All of 15th century life--its prejudices, its hopes, its fears, its sense of honor and disgrace, the aspirations, the fallacies, the good and bad, the virtues and the sins of the dead past--all of these would live again in him. Through such a personality the heart of a departed century would speak to us. In a far grander way, through the medium of human personality, the heart of God is made real to us. As Jesus himself once put it, "He who hath seen me hath seen the Father."

Yes, the cross of Jesus does indeed tower over the wrecks of time...God's plus sign. One of the reasons is because of who was upon that cross. He was a man that other men understood to be the Son of God. He was a man in whom other men understood that they had gazed upon the very face of the Father and that they say into the depths of the heart of God. The second question is not only who was this man, but what is the meaning of his death--what is the significance of that cross in between--what does it mean to see him perish? Here again the testimony of those who were there, the testimony of those who were involved in the event, is indisputably clear. That testimony is that this death was done for men. That testimony is that somehow this man is dying for you and for me. Here again the human imagination is staggered. Is it possible that one can die for many? On a smaller scale, we have about us such examples of one dying for others. Look for example at Howard Taylor Ricketts. He had, at a young age, become a brilliant research scientist and had found the cure for spotted fever. When the dread typhus fever broke out in Mexico City he went there to find its cause. He was successful in discovering the carrier of the disease and the fight was won. Yet, he himself had already been bitten and died of the disease from which he saved many thousands. He gave himself for others. Another illustration comes from one of my favorite stories, the story of the ill-fated expedition to the South Pole by Captain Scott. When they were returning to their home base they were in desperate circumstances when one of the men, Oats, had his feet become so frozen that he could hardly walk. He knew that he had become a deadly burden and his handicap might spell the doom of them all. When they made camp to rest, he said to the other men, "I am just going outside and may be gone some time." He walked as far as he could and then laid down and died. He gave himself in order that others might live.

Yet, when you have used many such illustrations, you still have not quite caught the significance of the death of Jesus Christ. You see, it is unquestionably true that the suffering of Jesus upon the cross had a work to perform in the direction of God. We do not much understand this. Theologians across the centuries have formulated many theories to account for the necessity of the death of Christ. But when we have explored all of these theories we can conclude only that somehow it was necessary in the eyes of God that some payment, some atonement, some sacrifice, be made for the sins of man--your and mine. We can only conclude that out of some divine necessity which we can only vaguely understand, Christ must bear in our behalf the penalty of our sins. Ultimately we are thrown back on the words of the Bible to say simply he died for us.

So it is that indeed the cross of Jesus has towered over the wrecks of time. The cross has remained central in human experience because of the person who was upon it and for what he did there. Thus it has been that across the centuries the church, in the words of St. Paul, has preached Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. There is no answer to the cross. It cannot be explained for as St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "God (sent me) to preach the gospel, and not eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." And then St. Paul added, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (I Corinthians 1:18) No, it cannot be explained. It can only be rejected or believed and there is no middle choice.

The cross of Jesus Christ and the man upon it still presents us with that searching question that fell from the lips of Pilate, "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?" Indeed, what will you do with Jesus. There were three crosses on Calvary that day, one on the left, one on the right, and the one in between. The man on one side railed against Christ we are told, but the man on the other side cried out, "Jesus, remember me..." How will you respond to the cross in between?

Some years ago John Masefield wrote a play on the trial of Jesus. One of the last scenes takes place in the judgment hall of Pilate. The noisy crowds with their shouts of "crucify him" are gone. Pilate himself is gone. Only Procula his wife, remains. She stands gazing across the hills and valleys of Jerusalem, but she looks not at them, but at a hill outside the city gate called Golgotha, the place of The Skull. As she gazes against the darkening sky she sees three crosses even darker, forming their "X" marks on the horizons. As she stands thus, Longinus, one of the soldiers who had crucified Jesus, comes in. She turns to him and asks, "Is he dead yet?" Longinus shakes his head and says: "No, lady, he is not dead." She questions: "But surely he is dead, he has been hanging there so long now!" Longinus replies: "No, Lady, he is not dead. His truth is let loose on the world now and neither Jew nor Roman can stop him."

Three crosses stood on Calvary  
Dark against the sky.  
Roman soldiers laughed to see  
Three ways a man may die.

On the cross in between was a man who men said was the son of God; a man who men said died for you. No, he is not dead, he lives in the hearts of men. His truth indeed, is let loose in the world. And neither Jew nor Roman can stop him now. But you can stop him in your life. What will you do with Jesus, the man on the cross in between?