

The Glory of the Cross



In the Roman Empire during the first century, people who were not Roman citizens, could be sentenced to death by crucifixion. Their wrists would be tied or nailed to a crossbeam, which would then be raised, and attached, along with their feet, to a vertical post erected in a public place. This enabled passers-by to see, and maybe mock, the person dying slowly and in agony on a cross. In all four gospels in the Bible, we read that Jesus was killed by being crucified on such a cross.

Knowing that Jesus was fastened to and died on a cross in such a horrific way, one could expect followers of Jesus to despise and reject crosses, but this did not happen.

We Christians are very familiar with the sign of the cross. Crosses adorn church spires, are in prominent positions inside churches and are usually carried aloft to lead church processions. Also, Christians often wear a cross around their necks, and at times trace its shape on their bodies. A cross or a crucifix, (a cross with the form of Jesus attached to it), has become for us, not a hateful sign of torture and death, but a symbol of God's great love for us, and oneness with us.

However, a cross can become so common-place in our lives that we take it for granted. In this case, if we pause, and link the meaning of the cross to our daily lives, it may deepen our faith and change our view of suffering.

Pain is hurtful and to be avoided if we can. It is not something to seek or delight in, but because of Jesus' obedient death on the cross, and subsequent triumphant resurrection to eternal life, the suffering that we cause or shrink from, has been transformed into glory. We believe that Jesus suffered on the cross out of love for us, and that his love defeated the *power* of evil, offering us a way to be free to grow into the people God created us to be.

As followers of Jesus, we are to love all people, as Jesus loves them, including those who hurt us or whom we hurt. This involves caring about them, trying to understand their behaviour and then discovering that we can overcome our anger, forgive them, accept their forgiveness and relate with them for the well-being of all.

If we turn to the account of Jesus' transfiguration in Mark 8 and 9, suffering and the glory of God come together. Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain and was transfigured before them. The disciples saw the reality of the glory of God's love in Jesus when his clothes became dazzling white, and Elijah and Moses talked with him. Six days before this event, Jesus tried to teach his disciples, not about glory, but about his coming suffering, rejection and death.

At the end of the transfiguration, God spoke to the disciples out of a cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him." In Mark 15:39, we read that at his death, Jesus gave a loud cry and died. The watching centurion responded by exclaiming, "Truly this man was God's Son!" Both God, *and* the centurion, affirmed Jesus' divinity, again linking the glory seen radiating from Jesus on the mountain top, to his painful death on a cross.

When we think of the suffering in our world, such as the thousands of adults and children being killed in Gaza, people we know struggling with a painful illness and the harm being caused by climate change, can Jesus dying on the cross connect to this suffering?

Because of God's selfless love, Jesus shared human suffering in his earthly life

and shares our suffering today, directing us to also share something of the pain of others, and so have a closer bond with them in Jesus. In this way, we may begin to glimpse God's glory, not just in the beauty of nature and the joys of life, but in suffering and the cross.

Suffering is not just the result of our sins or the sins of others, but is also part of human life. On the cross Jesus could have closed himself off from his surroundings, and focused only on his own pain. But he did not. In John 19:26-27, Jesus spoke to comfort his mother and the disciple he loved, and in Luke 23:42-43 he responded to the criminal dying next to him who asked to be remembered when Jesus came into his kingdom. To this man Jesus proclaimed words of immediate acceptance, understanding and forgiveness, "Truly I tell you, today, you will be with me in Paradise."

When we are suffering and see others in need, can we also respond with such love and understanding?

I suggest that for humans, the glory of God is a visible expression of God's self-giving love revealed in Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Such love can transform a cross from being a sign of a painful death, into a reminder of God's love and glory. As members of Christ's body, I believe we are called to reveal something of the glory of God's love and presence in our relationships with others.

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