

THE PULPIT OF THE CROSS - PART II

“The Pulpit”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Luke 23:33-46

It was a magnificent pulpit -- the pulpit of the cross -- for on its angular frame was enacted the greatest sermon the world has ever known. Unlike most sermons, whose significance lies in what is said, this sermon was important because of what was done.

A number of years ago when I was quite young, a play called “The King of Kings” was filmed in Hollywood. It covered the life and death of Jesus Christ. Even though I was a child at the time, I can remember the controversy which raged over whether or not the film should be shown. As you know, those who felt it should be seen by as large an audience as possible eventually won out, and the picture went down in history as one of the most important ever filmed.

Well, just this last week I came across a rather old clipping which carried one journalist's report of the audience reaction to the film. He wrote, “I stood and watched the city folks coming in, joking and laughing like any other crowd of amusement seekers: and two hours later I saw them come out silent and thoughtful, awed and subdued, with a look of wistful inquiry in their tear-stained eyes.”

Now why did that reporter see such a change in so short a span of time? Because in those two hours, the audience had relived the greatest event in the annals of time. They had witnessed a re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ. They had caught a fleeting glimpse of the cross in all of its stark reality, and somehow they knew that what they had seen, at least in part, was “the mightiest of all God's mighty acts.”

This morning I want you to take a long, hard look at the cross. I want you to see it for what it is and for what it does so you not only have a Great appreciation for the preacher of Golgotha, but

for His pulpit as well: the Pulpit of the Cross.

To begin with, when looked at vertically, the cross is a means of communication for in its downward thrust it is, in a sense:

The Voice of God Speaking to the World.

So very often we think of the cross as an event in history. And it was. But it is much more than that. It is much more than “a fact that men may discuss and about which they can spin their theories.” It is the voice of God. It is a clear articulation of the truth that God is love, and he so “commended His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

We sometimes say the Bible is the word of God. And it is. There is also a sense in which we can say the cross is the word of God. And it speaks, not in holy words, but in one mighty and magnificent holy deed. It speaks, not in platitudes, but in one great proclamation that “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself” (II Cor.5:19).

There are no gray shades of half-understood truths in what it has to say. It speaks distinctly and it declares in no uncertain terms that the world was badly in need of reconciliation. So badly, it took heaven's best to redeem man's worst. It also makes it plain that God hates sin every bit as much as he loves the sinner.

When Moses stood before the burning bush, he was so touched by the power of God's revelation he took off his shoes for he felt the ground upon which he stood was holy ground. It is with that same sense of reverential awe that we must stand before the pulpit of the cross. For here we are in the presence of divine revelation once again. And, as we face the cross, we see that in its downward thrust, it is not just an inanimate object standing there. It is the voice of God declaring that He is active and redeeming love. “Love so amazing, so divine, it demands my soul, my life, my all.” Yes, when we view it vertically, we see that in its downward thrust the cross is the articulation of the voice of God.

But there is more to that vertical dimension, for in its upward reach, it is also the revelation of --

The Wisdom Of God.

In I Corinthians 1:18 we are told that “The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” It’s strange, isn’t it, that mortal men would set themselves up as judges of the wisdom of God. And yet, how many there are who boldly parade their puny minds before the wisdom of the Infinite and declare in no uncertain terms that, as far as they’re concerned, the cross as a means of salvation is a bunch of foolishness. And because people have thought they could improve upon God’s plan of redemption, for 1900 years we have been building our philosophies of salvation by human achievement and natural development. The result is a world which is suffering from moral and spiritual bankruptcy.

Instead of saving ourselves, we have only succeeded in giving sin a wider berth. It simply wears a new look. We call it by a different name. It appears in fresh, enticing forms. But it is still sin. Its decay has not been arrested. Its power has not been curbed. Its disease has not been cured.

And though people have called themselves wise as they have reclined in what they thought was their superior intelligence and have rejected the cross and called it “foolish,” the record of history would show that it is they who were the fools and not God. It was they who were the losers and not He. The gospel of the cross which declares that salvation is a free gift from God, has proved to be sufficient for all who are willing to submit themselves to its disciplines. Indeed, Paul was right when he wrote, “The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men”(I Cor 1:25). Yes, in its vertical dimension, the cross is both the articulation of the voice of God and the revelation of the wisdom of God.

Then, may I suggest there are powerful implications to its horizontal dimension. For as it stretches outward, we have a clear presentation of --

The Person Of God.

And, Christianity is, after all, a person! Without that person, Christianity as a religious faith is nothing. That's why we began this series of three messages on The Pulpit of the Cross with a sermon on The Preacher. We must ever and always begin with Him, for the heart and soul of the gospel is Jesus Christ who alone can save us from our sins.

Paul put it this way, “I am determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (I Cor 2:2). And, in the last analysis, that's the position we all must take for Christianity confronts the world with God incarnate in human flesh hanging on a cross. And, it is our relationship to that One on that cross which really counts. Because, as we said last Sunday, Christ was and is the supreme paradox of history -- the God-man -- the coming together of deity and humanity, without Him there is no hope of salvation. He and He alone is God's way to man and man's way to God. Therefore, without apology, we make a beeline for the cross. For we know that the most important Person in time or eternity is the Person who hangs upon it.

The Bridge Of The Cross.

The Bishop of Durham said, “A Savior, not quite God, is a bridge broken at the farther end.”

And, in a remarkable bit of poetry entitled The Bridge Of The Cross, Annie Flint Johnson said,.

“Man fain would build a bridge to God
Across the fathomless abyss
That lies between his earth-bound soul
And heaven's perfect bliss.

“He takes his knowledge, small and vague,
The great inventions he has wrought,
His mightiest efforts, finest plans,
And his profoundest thought:

“He binds them with his strands of straw,
His strings of tow, his ropes of sand,
With all the power and the skill
Of cunning brain and hand.

“Through swirling mists he strains his eye,
Above the unseen torrent’s roar
He pushes forth the makeshift thing
And hopes to touch the shore.

“But when he seeks to cross the chasm
With eager heart and step elate,
He finds his bridge too short to reach,
Too frail to bear his weight.

“Oh, baseless dream! Oh, useless toil!
Oh, utter and eternal loss!
For God has laid, to span the void,
His Son upon the cross.

“And when man’s broken bridges fall,
And sink into the gulf at last,
Still wide and long and safe and strong,
The bridge of God stands fast.”

Annie Johnson Flint

Vertically, the pulpit of the cross is the articulation of the voice of God and the revelation of the wisdom of God. Horizontally -- at least in one direction -- it is the presentation of the person of God. But even that is not all. For as it reaches out in another direction, it is a demonstration of:

IV - THE POWER OF GOD.

Now, thus far this morning, I have been talking in somewhat impersonal terms. Let me use the few moments which remain for some direct-line, heart-to-heart communication: It is the cross as a demonstration of the power of God which most intimately touches your life today. The reason I say that is because the cross is first of all --

The Power Of God Unto Salvation.

One of our missionaries who has served many years in India tells how one day he saw two men returning from an Indian religious festival. He stopped them and struck up a conversation. In the course of their visit, they told him they had just come from the shrine of their God. “And what did you do there?” the missionary asked. They answered, “Well, when the Idol Car came by, we took hold of the rope to help pull the car along.” “What else did you do?” the missionary asked. They replied, “Well, when we got to the shrine, we cut off a lock of our hair and deposited it there.” “What else did you do?” “We left an offering for the priest.” “What else?” “We broke a coconut and poured out the milk.” “What did you do with your sins?” asked the missionary. “Oh, we confessed them at the shrine.” “Did you leave them there?” the missionary inquired. With a look of sadness that revealed their inner discontent, they answered, “Oh, no. We could not leave them there.”

You see, my friend, the unique characteristic of the Christian gospel is that it's cross not only receives our sins, but it keeps our sins. They are taken from us as far as the East is from the West. To be lost forever in the abyss of God's forgetfulness. To be remembered against us no more. For when we take our burden to the cross, we leave it there! Indeed, the cross is the power of God unto salvation. But it is also

The Power Of God Unto Transformation.

When Charles A. Darwin, the progenitor of the doctrine of evolution, was alive he made several scientific expeditions on his floating laboratory “The Beagle”. On one of them, he visited the island of Tierra del Fuego. There he found a race of Patagonians so low, so depraved, so

immoral, he thought perhaps they might be the missing link.

Years later when he returned to the very same island for further study of these people, he discovered to his utter amazement that where once there had been vice, cruelty and ignorance, there was now virtue, sensitivity and enlightenment. When he questioned the natives as to what had caused this remarkable transformation, he was told simply that the missionaries had come and had preached the message of the cross. Charles Darwin was so tremendously impressed by the remarkable change, from that day forward until he died, skeptic though he was, Darwin made an annual donation to the Patagonian Missionary Society.

I say to you the cross is the power of God unto transformation. If you don't believe it, take a look at yourself. Even though you may never have been a fugitive from justice or some sort of social misfit, it is nevertheless true that the cross has made a difference in your life.

A slow process of spiritual evolution has taken place as “the old man“ has gradually given way to “the new“ so you can look back at what you were as compared with what you are, and you can see that through the cross, God has worked a miraculous transformation in your life.

New attitudes have been, and are, being formed. New habits and disciplines have been, and are, taking over. New loyalties have arisen, and are arising, to command your allegiance. New dedication of personality and possessions has grown, and is growing, until you now find that the sharing of your time is a privilege, the giving of your tithe is a joy, and the using of your talent for the kingdom cause is a source of constant delight. All of this -- because of The Pulpit Of The Cross -- which is the power of God unto transformation. And then, finally, may I say not only is the cross the power of God unto salvation and transformation, but it is also --

The Power Of God Unto Consolation.

A poor old woman whose life had been hard was brought into West Suburban Hospital to die. Like so many of those who comprise the downtrodden, she had been so busy keeping body and

soul together in this life she had little time to think about the next. But as the twilight hours of her journey here upon earth approached, she suddenly felt a great concern for her soul. Reaching for the buzzer, she called her nurse. It so happens West Suburban Hospital is the school where nursing students from Wheaton College, a strong Christian school, go for their practical training. The girl who responded to the buzzer was a girl from Wheaton.

Somehow the old woman seemed to know she was a Christian. Perhaps it was because of some manner in which she had been of service. I don't know. At any rate, the old woman rose up on her elbow and said, “Nurse, tell me straight. Do you think God cares for the likes of me? Do you think He can forgive me? Do you think He will receive me into heaven?”

The young nurse leaned close so she might be one in spirit with this poor, lonely, broken heart, and then, lifting her soul to heaven as if to receive confirmation from God, she answered, “Yes, I tell you straight. God cares for the likes of you. And if you'll make room in your heart for Him, He will make room in His heart for you.” The old woman leaned back in her cot and, as her tired head touched the pillow, it seemed as though the lines in her face were softened and there was quiet peace in the hush of death. You ask: Was that soul saved or lost? I can't answer. But I can tell you this -- and you will never convince me otherwise -- there was a golden thread connecting that hospital cot to a barren hill beyond a city wall. A hill on which stood the pulpit of the cross which had been her consolation.

One thought and I'm through. When the preacher of Golgotha mounted his pulpit, He forever changed the cross from a thing into an experience. No longer is it enough to put it on a steeple. No longer is it enough to wear it about your neck. No longer is it enough to look upon it as some sort of symbol.

The cross has become something far greater and deeper than a cold, lifeless, gilded thing. It has become a vital experience. Therefore, if you do not have it in your heart, there is little value in feasting on it with your eyes. If you do not live it in your life, there is little value in wearing it

around your neck. For though you gild it, shine it, protect it, even revere it, unless it is stamped indelibly upon your heart, you can never know the salvation, the transformation, and the consolation which is the power of the cross.

Do you know that old, oft-quoted Christmas verse:

“Though Christ a thousand times
In Bethlehem be born
If He's not born in thee
Thy soul is still forlorn.“

Well, there's another stanza to that poem, equally true, but much less known and much less quoted:

“The cross of Golgotha
Will never save thy soul,
The cross in thine own heart
Alone can make thee whole.“

And that's what Jesus meant when He said, “If anyone would follow me, let him take up his cross”
And what is that cross? It is the cross of personal experience on which you are crucified to self, in order that you might be alive to God, forever!.