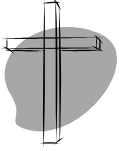


The Way of the Cross

"The Relationship of the Cross to the Lenten Season"

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I would like to begin this short study on noting the relationship of the cross to the Lenten season. Like most things surrounding us, familiarity causes them to lose their significance. We become so accustomed to all things "Christian" that we fail to see beyond the shadow and believe the thing it represents is the shadow itself. It is like the plastic fruit sitting comfortably in the middle of the dining room table. What the plastic fruit represents is real fruit, but the illusion exists to make those who see it for the first time to think it is real. The cross in our "Christian" culture is like plastic fruit. It exists only to represent. In many ways, we have allowed the cross to collect dust as it sits comfortably in the middle of our lives; to become familiar, and in its familiarity, our view of it diminishes and we rob it of its intrinsic value. Albert Mohler captures this idea in his thoughts on, "The Foolishness of the Cross."

Paul's language is familiar to us because we have read and heard these words so many times. In fact, we have probably become too familiar with them, because what Paul says here, as the Corinthians would have heard it, is a revolutionary message, a counterintuitive message, a counter-cultural message, and in all probability, the Corinthians were not quite prepared to hear this. For what Paul says is that the word of the cross is *foolishness* to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God.¹

Although we wear it as a fashion accessory, the cross is an instrument of death and destruction. It is to be abhorred and shunned. Yet in the death of Jesus Christ at the cross, the implement of devastation became a symbol of, not death, but life. The significance of Lent lies in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Lent is positioned for calling us back to what is real. Consider the emphasis the Gospels place on the last week of our Lord Jesus and in particular the last day.

In most biographies, the death of the person concerned is a mere incident at the close of the book. In Hay's life of Abraham Lincoln there are 5,000 pages, but only 25 are devoted to the dramatic account of his assassination and death. There is certainly much of dramatic interest in the passion and death of Jesus, but when we look at the space given to these events in the Gospel writings, what do we find?

All the Gospels declare that Jesus was crucified during the Jewish feast of Passover. John adds the information that Jesus had experienced at least two previous Passovers (John 2:13; 6:4). This, together with other clues, indicates that his public ministry lasted something like two to three years. Matthew's Gospel has 28 chapters. In Matthew 21 Jesus rides into Jerusalem on the Sunday before he is crucified. That means that a quarter of Matthew's Gospel deals with the final six days of his life. An additional chapter deals with his resurrection. Mark has 16 chapters. In Mark 11 Jesus rides into Jerusalem. That means that about one-third of Mark's Gospel deals with that same period.

Luke's Gospel is a little different. Luke has 24 chapters. He gives two chapters to Jesus' conception, birth and childhood, followed by one on the ministry of John the Baptist. Then he gives six chapters to Jesus' public ministry, chiefly in Galilee. At the end of chapter 9 Jesus begins his last journey up to Jerusalem. This means that of the 24 chapters, 15 deal with the final few months of his time on earth, six of these dealing with the final few days and the resurrection.

John's Gospel is the most significant of all in this regard. John has 21 chapters. Half-way through the Gospel, in chapter 12, Jesus arrives in Bethany for that final week. By chapter 13 we have already got to his final meal with his disciples, the night before his crucifixion. Chapters 13 to 18 tell us about the events of that fateful night. Chapter 19 deals with the conclusion of his trial and crucifixion, and chapters 20 and 21 tell of his resurrection. This means that almost half of the Gospel is about the last 24 hours of his life, together with his resurrection.²

The Gospels tell of the Hero's Arrival and of His Work. The Letters of Paul will explain and explore both the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus the centerpiece and emphasis of the New Testament is Jesus Christ, and we would do well to stay with that focus.

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The Church Calendar provokes the Christian to see their lives as a part of God's Story. In Advent, the Christian once more celebrates the Hero's arrival in fulfillment of promise and picture. In Pentecost, the Christian recognizes and affirms the Hero's Legacy in and through His Church. And in Lent, the Christian embraces once more the Hero's Person and Work as culminating in His death, burial, and resurrection. How does Lent do this? What is its meaning?

Lent is the forty-day-long season of fasting and prayer before Easter. The forty days represent the time Jesus spent in the desert; where according to the Bible he endured temptation by Satan. The purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer for the annual commemoration during Holy Week of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, which recalls the events linked to the Passion of Christ and culminates in Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.³

Though not biblical, Lent has long been a tradition in the Christian Church.⁴

Thus, Lent calls us back. It beckons us to remember what the shadow means. It invites us to look past the shadow and see the person and work of Jesus Christ. How does Lent do this? One author in their reflections of Lent's purpose provides the following thought. It is insightful and penetrating. Though it is lengthy, we do well to read it with reflection.

The desert experience is about deprivation. Most of the world experiences it involuntarily. For many people, however, deprivation is a great evil, and to be avoided at all costs. In deprivation, we discover that we are not all-powerful. We are slaves to our bellies, to the opinions of others, to pleasure. We cannot bear pain, so we take a pill. We cannot bear growing old, so we dye our hair. Like Darth Vader in Star Wars, we replace our humanity with technology until there is little of our self-left. Doing without can strip away some of the illusions and give us a glimpse of truth.

During Lent, we have the opportunity to hear voices that are usually lost in the din of pleasure and meaningless talk. During Lent, we use abstinence . . . as metaphors. In a very small way, they model the rejection of illusions about what we need, who we are, and who God is. In this life, we try to make some progress in discarding our "disordered attachments." At death, we will no longer have a choice. We cannot enter Heaven burdened with a thousand foolish attachments. As our bodies lie rotting, there will be no more illusions about the worth of attractiveness. As others claim our possessions, they will finally have their proper value to us. When we stand in judgment before God, we will have no illusions about our sanctity or goodness. All will be laid bare, and there will be no more hypocrisy, lies, or illusions. It is far better to begin discarding our foolish attachments in this life, and Lent is a good time to begin this work.⁵

As followers of Christ, let us not forget the cross. Let us use this time to reflect deeply on who God is and what He has done in this powerful display of divine grace. Our journey to the cross will follow six fundamental ideas. **First**, let us reflect on the wisdom of the cross. Why is the cross considered foolish by those who reject it? Why did God use the cross as the means of delivering His people from their sin? **Second**, let us reflect on the work of the cross. What did Jesus accomplish when He offered Himself up as a sacrificial lamb in behalf of His people? **Third**, let us reflect on the way of the cross. The way of the cross looks a certain way. Those who follow Jesus travel a worn path. There is only one way to God, and it is by way of the cross. **Fourth**, let us reflect on the word of the cross. Living the way of the cross is what marks all who follow Him. It is the content of what they speak and the compass as to how they live. It both drives and directs all who follow to Him. **Fifth**, let us reflect on the weight of the cross. Those who take up His cross are marked by His cross. The cross is an instrument of death and as such there is a stigmata present in those who bear it. Yet the very thing once loathed becomes the object of love. **Finally**, let us reflect on the wonder of the cross. The cross is a symbol of the Father's pleasure and the Son's joy. The wonderment is found in life coming from death. The cross is fundamentally a symbol of something or someone greater. The cross is about God and His only begotten Son who gave Himself voluntarily in incarnation and vicariously in salvation. It is the cross that most shadows the power of God. Thus as we start Lent, may the Holy Spirit drive us to remove the rubble that impedes us from aggressively and singularly living for Him. And may our focus be on *who He is and what He has done and not in what we do.*



¹ http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2006-04-24

² <http://www.christianity.co.nz/cross-4.htm#emphasis>

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lent>

⁴ <http://archive.elca.org/communication/whatislent.html>

⁵ <http://www.whitstonejournal.com/lent1.html>