

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

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Rio Rancho, NM

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WHO KNEW?

I Corinthians 2: 1-12

This morning I am wearing a cross given to me by the good folks at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, where I served for almost 15 years. The cross consists of two nails joined together. It is a poignant reminder of what went through the hands and feet of Jesus. He was nailed to a cross and left to die like “a tramp on the street”. Second Isaiah prophetically proclaimed, “By his wounds we are healed.” And these nails remind us of the wounds on his hands, his feet, his head, his back and his side. The costly price of our redemption-that’s what these two nails bear witness to. We were indeed “bought with a price.”

This cross, despite its painful reminder of an unjust execution, has become a universal symbol of the Christian faith. You will see it on the walls of churches, communion tables, steeples, Bibles, clothing, jewelry of all kinds-not to mention tattoos! We “placard” the cross before others and ourselves to remind us of God’s passionate love for us, a love that went to such extremes to convict us and woo us. “God so loved the world....” It is truly a counter-intuitive symbol, one that on the

surface should only repel us. Who, after all, wants to focus upon a crucified victim?

And yet there it is. Always before our eyes, always holding up that “sacred head now wounded.” We cannot ignore it. We cannot wish it away. The cross looms before us in our imagination and in our collective memory. It will not let us go, this profound symbol of human sinfulness and divine mercy. I cannot shake the cross from my heart and my mind. I was captured by it long ago and still it “demands my soul, my life, my all.”

And that’s why Paul came to Corinth with a singular message: “Christ and him crucified.” Nothing else touches our heart. Nothing else makes us wrestle with our conscience. Nothing else will finally convert us. Only Christ and him crucified. Only the cross will move us to repentance. Nothing else will ultimately transform us into the image and likeness of Christ.

To be crucified with Christ is the beginning of life, life in Christ Jesus. To take up our cross daily is the path to discipleship, fruitful life in Christ. Only then can I think of others as sisters and brothers for whom Christ died. I die with Christ, and I am raised to an utterly different kind of life—a life for others. And then my whole life has one goal and one alone—to be like Christ in life and in death.

Paul himself admits that once he was utterly ignorant of what the cross really meant. He had thought of the cross as proof that Jesus was a false teacher, so he got what he deserved. That's before Paul encountered Christ risen from the grave. Paul acknowledges that those who crucified Jesus were, like himself, utterly ignorant as well. "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." They did not know. They did not understand. So "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

So, who knew what the cross really meant? Not Paul, not before Damascus. Not the rulers of this age-neither the principalities and powers of evil nor the political and religious leaders of that era. Those in the know, or so they thought, were utterly blind to who this Galilean prophet really was. As Paul so eloquently said, they did not know he was in fact the Lord of glory.

Who knew? Few if any and they knew only "in a glass darkly". A Peter who thinks Jesus is the Messiah but then again, this fisherman hardly knows him. Peter cannot comprehend that a Messiah could be headed for suffering and rejection and death. Peter hardly knew him. So when Peter denies him three times, he speaks the painful truth, "I do not know this man." Who knew? Peter hardly knew if he knew at all.

Only the risen Christ would reveal to Peter that he was in fact the Lord of glory.

Paul insists to the Corinthians that we cannot know this Lord of glory on our own. Only the Spirit of God can open our hearts and minds to see in this suffering One our Savior. Who can understand this paschal mystery, a mystery in the depths of God before the ages? Only the Spirit of God sent into our spirits can help us see, see who he truly is. A suffering servant. A rejected Messiah. A Christ who loved us and gave himself for us. The Lord of glory. The Spirit touches us and changes us and brings us to our knees in adoration and praise. The Spirit alone and nothing else can convert us, heart and soul.

One Christian who came to understand what the cross really means is Malcolm Muggeridge, a British television journalist who died in 1990. He was a Larry King or Anderson Cooper type, well known to the British public as a hard-nosed cynic. But in his late 60's he had a conversion experience and wrote a book entitled **Jesus Rediscovered**. In it Muggeridge tells of his father, a member of Parliament who had socialist utopian convictions. His father thought of Jesus as a card-carrying member of the Labor Party who despised the capitalists and the aristocracy. However, his dad hated the cross because it reminded him of unjust executions all over the world. And young Malcolm adored

his father and all that he stood for. Meanwhile, there was tension within the family, since his mother clung to a kind of orthodox Christianity.

So, from an early age Muggeridge had a fascination with the cross, which his father disdained and his mother embraced. I quote from his autobiographical sketch: "I knew there was something more to Jesus than just good causes. I would catch a glimpse of the cross-not necessarily a crucifix, maybe just two pieces of wood nailed together on a telegraph pole, and suddenly my heart would stand still. In an instinctive, intuitive way I understood that there was something more important than our good causes, however important they might be. I had this sense that Jesus' life was ultimately tragic in the sense that Lear's was or Macbeth's". So early on young Muggeridge felt that the cross held much more mystery than his father could have imagined.

He goes on to say: "I developed an obsessive interest in the cross, even fastening two sticks together with string." But that interest did not lead him to Christ. This is what he wrote: "I have no excuse. I can't say I didn't know. I knew from the beginning and turned away. Christ called me and I didn't go-instead I followed a path of empty years, empty words, and empty passion."

That's why he entitled his longer autobiography **Chronicles of Wasted Time**. In that wonderful book Muggeridge admits that he knew early on the power of the cross, yet he resisted its pull. Who knew? Malcolm Muggeridge knew deep in his heart that this cross was life, a life he could not accept. He once told his father, "I want God to play tunes through me; God plays, but I, the reed, am out of tune."

However, the cross would finally shatter his resistance and his pride after many long years. How did that conversion happen? Partly as a result of doing a television documentary on Mother Teresa in India. Her life and witness showed him the power of sacrificial love, the love Christ demonstrated on the cross. She showed Malcolm that sacrificial love is willing to serve "the least of these" on the streets of Calcutta.

And that is why there is such joy late in life when he finally bows before the cross. There he found that peace that passes all understanding, that joy that comes from beyond the walls of this world. Before the cross Malcolm Muggeridge laid his burdens down and embraced what he had always known to be true. That this crucified one is in fact the Lord of glory. That in adoration and praise we find life that is life indeed. That is what beckons all of us, whether early or late, at the foot of the cross-where forgiveness is spoken and life, abundant life is offered.

So this day I invite you to embrace once again the cross that looms up before us. That “sacred head now wounded” calls you afresh to “follow me.” With our whole being, let us bow before our Crucified Lord and Savior and confess, “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” May it be so. Amen.