How Mad the Cross

Mar 15:6-32

To The Village Church, April 02, 2006

Main Idea: The preaching of the crucifixion was a necessary scandal, to relieve us of all shame, so don't seek status and be free from shame.

Meditation:
With its paradoxical contrast between the divine nature of the pre-existent Son of God and his shameful death on the cross, the first Christian proclamation shattered all analogies and parallels to Christology which could be produced in the world of the time, whether from polytheism or from monotheistic philosophy.

–Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*.

Every criminal condemned to death bears his cross on his back…

--Plutarch, *Moralia*

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

--Jesus, Mark 8:34

Post-Sermon Song Theme: Sorrow at what Christ went through

Benediction:
May the blood of Christ cleanse you from all sin and restore to you all that has been lost.

Charge:
Go forth into your city with the proclamation of the only thing ugly enough to meet the ancient curse and reverse it: the cross of Jesus Christ.

How Mad the Cross

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Replace IA., Horace's rule, with a status-seeking example, and then gear the sermon to that application. "The right kind of people."
Emphasize Greenwich Village's problem of holding onto its ideal of tearing down status symbols.

I. The Meaning of the Cry, "Crucify Him!"

A. Horace's Rule of Dramatic Arts

1. Horace (d. 8 BC), was an outstanding Latin lyric poet and satirist under the emperor Augustus.

2. Horace's Rule of Dramatic Art[1]: It concerns when to introduce a god.
   - It really was an ancient formulation of the problem of the convention called "deus ex machina" [dĀ'əs ĕks mä'kə-nə]
   - "a God must not be introduced into the action unless the plot has gotten into such a tangle that only a God could unravel it."

3. Only when it got so bad, need a God to intervene.

B. When they cried, "Crucify him," what were they saying?

1. Not unrelated to the question of the meaning of v13 (and v14)? When they cried, "Crucify him," what were they saying? What does that mean? It is hard to imagine what they were really saying because of what the cross has come to mean to us.

2. Imagine a girl in a pink sweater, around her neck is a delicate necklace chain and at the end of the chain is a small gold cross. We look at that and say, Ah, a symbol of Christ, how pretty.

3. But for us to feel what they were crying for, I feel the need to go back behind the gold encrusting and talk about crucifixion in that time period. To give you a feeling for what it was and what went on. My ambition is modest this morning.

C. Two points about crucifixion: Widespread and For Scum

1. It was Widespread
   - Crucifixion was widespread and frequent, above all, in Roman times. Crosses were set up all over the Empire.
   - After the final defeat of Spartacus, the victor Crassus had 6,000 prisoners nailed to the cross along the road between Capua and Rome (Hengel, 55).
   - Even in Judea. There was a crucifixion of 800 Pharisees by Alexander Jannaeus. Varus had 2,000 prisoners crucified around Jerusalem.[2]
   - So, in **V22**, when Jesus was brought to this cursed place outside of the city, it was worse than a garbage dump: "The place of the Skull." Not because the hill looked like a skull, but probably because there had accumulated so many skulls around. As in just about all Roman cities, there was the place of

[1] Martin Luther somewhere in dealing with this matter refers to Horace's rule.
[2] Josephus talks about the crucifixions in Judaea, under Antiochus IV (167bc).

crucifixion outside of the city walls. Outside of Rome, it was called the *Campus Esquilinus*, the Roman counterpart to Jerusalem's Golgotha.

- So that Horace, that poet, calls, the vulture the "Esquiline bird," because of the grisly way the birds of prey would hang out there.
- Little jewelry around your neck: a little golden electric chair.

2. Second point about crucifixion concerns who this form of execution was for: it was for criminals and slaves
   - **v27**-JC crucified with two criminals.
   - As a rule, a crucified man was regarded as a criminal who was receiving just and necessary punishment.
   - Hardened criminals, rebels against the state. But the cross was practiced, above all, as a punishment for slaves. Cross distinguished between Roman citizen and slave.
   - Rulers had slaves crucified, Alexander Serverus: "on the street which slaves used most frequently on the way to the imperial palace." (Hengel, 60). As a punishment, it was chiefly used as a supreme deterrent.
   - When Paul spoke of Christ crucified, that is what everyone who heard him would think: dangerous criminals and members of the lowest classes.
   - Phi 2:6-11 hymn: "the form of a slave…even death on a cross." It meant extreme humiliation and shame.
   - **Vv16-20** describe Jesus in the company[3] of the soldiers. You think, how could they be so cruel? That accurately reflects the perception of crucifixion. They were assuming that this guy was scum.
   - Cicero[4]: "Even the mere word, "cross," must remain far not only from the lips of the citizens of Rome, but also from their thoughts, their eyes, their ears."
   - So it was a way of life. But the cultured world, enjoying the Pax Romana of the first century,[5] wanted to have nothing to do with it.

The "infamous stake," the "criminal wood," the "sign of shame," the "terrible cross"

3. Jewelry: an electric chair. Or maybe a tiny sculture of the landfill in Staten Island, with a guys getting knocked off by the mob there. Maybe we need a charm bracelet to capture Christianity.

4. That is what they were shouting for.

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[3] A cohort (`spei/ra`) was the tenth part of a Roman legion having about 600 men, though Louw-Nida says "only a part of such a cohort was often referred to as a cohort."
[4] Pro Rabirio V.16.
[5] Up until the time of Constantine's edict of toleration in A.D. 311, the cross meant scandal.

II. The "Word of the Cross" was Madness

So we are in a better position to hear, now, how did this message of Jesus sounded to the ancient world, when they heard "cross."

A. It was Madness

1. The Hellenistic world was familiar with the death and apotheosis of some demigods and heroes (like a Heracles on Mt. Oeta), but they were understood allegorically.

2. Hengel (89): "To assert that God himself accepted death in the form of a crucified Jewish manual worker from Galilee in order to break the power of death and bring salvation to all men could only seem like madness to people of ancient times…."

3. First of all, Jews were obscure. Second, Galilee was so out of the way that often the term "Galilean" was used as a derogatory term.

4. But to preach that the Son of God came and lived, not passing on "old and full of years", like the blessed Patriarchs of the OT, nor even the gentle death like Socrates, with his cup of hemlock, was to preach a ridiculous message.

5. Paul called what he preached, the 'word of the cross' (1Co 1:18), he said, it was "foolishness to the Gentiles. It was a very specific and highly offensive matter. He knew it from his decades of experience as a Christian missionary.

6. Justin Martyr, an apologist in the next century, says the same thing: "They say that our madness consists in the fact that we put a crucified man in the second place after the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of the world".[6]

7. And madness it was. There is a well-known cartoon inscription found on the Palatine [păl□ə-tīn] of Rome, of a crucified figure with the head of an ass, and the inscription: "Alexamenos worships his god"

8. **Celsus**, one of the greatest Roman medical writers, in the first or second century AD, ("The True Word"): mocks Christian talk of 'tree of life' and the 'resurrection of the flesh through the wood (of the cross)':
   - "What drunken old woman telling stories to lull a small child to sleep, would not be ashamed of muttering such preposterous things?"

B. So the response of Docetism

1. So it is not surprising that some early Christian apologists, such as Minucius Felix, who tended to want to prove that the God of the Christians was identical with the God of the philosophers, tried to avoid the point.

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[6] Apology I, 13:4.

2. In fact, this scandal all too easily led educated Christians into Docetism: the theory that the Son of God only seemed to be crucified. In reality He did not suffer at all.

3. Gnosticism was really an attempt at the Hellenization of the Christian creed.

4. And it is still true today: What is behind all the affection for Gnostic texts that you hear about, like "The gospel of Thomas," and all these attempts to date them back into the first century, except an aversion to this madness, that the cross was <u>on purpose</u>?

C. A Real Story: Re Rufus

1. But first century Christians insisted that it really happened.

2. **V21**—This is an important verse, because it is another one of these places that indicate the author's intent in writing this gospel.

3. There are two names that are brought up, that have absolutely nothing to do with the story of Jesus Christ: Simon of Cyrene, "Father of Alexander and Rufus." Now think about that please. The only reason Mark would mention these names is if they were known to his audience.

4. You are going along in a story and these never-before mentioned names appear. "Joe" and "Harry." You know, "Joe and Harry." No, we don't know. But Mark is writing as if his audience does. What the author must be saying is, "You, my original readers, have access to these two men, whose father was a witness to everything that I'm telling you happened at the crucifixion."

5. Mark's target audience was the Roman church, so it means that there seems to be a family of Jews, turned Christian, that spent time in Rome and Palestine.

6. A striking point comes, then, near the end of the letter to the *Romans*. The apostle Paul, completely separately, near the end of his letter to the Romans, says, "By the way, say 'Hello' to Rufus. And his mother." Indication of a family of Christians there, a son being Rufus.

7. But that is not all. In 1941, Israeli archeologists digging in Kidron valley, outside of Jerusalem, discovered a burial cave dating back to first century and belonging to a family of Cyrenian Jews. And one of the ossuaries is twice inscribed in Greek, with the words: "Alexander, son of Simon." Who knows?

8. This is important because it is details like this that demonstrate to us that the author of this work intended to report to you historical events. So any formulation of what you think the gospels are needs to pay attention to details like this. Otherwise, you are not reading it. Mark intends us to know that what he is saying actually took place. Go check it out with Rufus or Alexander. This isn't "a patchwork of traditions, reflected through the eyes of faith of the early church."

III. Why the Madness?

Why the Madness if it was so offensive? Why did folks like Mark and Paul cling to this scandal, insist on its emphasis, wear it around their necks like jewelry?

A. Things are that bad

1. Because the human plot really is in such a tangle. We reached Horace's rule. We need a god to intervene. And it is only God's intervention that can help us.

2. But what an intervention. This is full intervention. He had to plumb the depths of human shame to take away our shame.

3. You say, why need a God? Because we needed a substitute that could bear the weight of all of us. And the problem is too great for a single person. Needed to be a man. But couldn't only be a man.

4. **Vv6-15** There needed to be one to take the place of Barrabbas, There needed to be a substitute: The God becomes scum. So the scum can go free.

5. The cornerstone must be rejected to become the foundation stone.

6. So Jesus, as He walked though this life, and saw the shame of our hearts, how blackened our souls, began to realize, it is going to be the cross. That is what I am going to have to bear for them.

7. In other words, the human condition is *that bad*, bad enough for Horace's Rule.

B. Take up the criminal wood as a follower

1. The Christian life becomes about embracing the degradation of your situation.

2. Earlier in this gospel, Jesus…
   - **Mar 8:34** …called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me…"

3. The pop scholar-critics of the NT are skeptical of this saying and they vote with their little beads to say that Jesus couldn't have really said that. It shows too much foreknowledge by Jesus of what He would go through. It must have been read back into the story by "the early Church."
   - But to reason that way is to fail to understand what it was like to live in that world.
   - They are either ignorant or ignoring of how Crucifixion was ever-present in the Roman Empire. The cross was an ever-present horror.
   - But it is also to fail to understand what following Jesus is about.

4. Jesus was commanding us to take up the criminal wood as a follower. What does that mean?

C. Proclaiming the offence in Greenwich Village

1. It means a lot in New York City, where various measures of status is primary in peoples' minds.

2. It means the Village was made for this scandalous Gospel. When Greenwich Village defies status symbols, it is the closest to Jesus. When it rebels against the god of affluence, it does well.

3. Steven Gaines[7] tells, quoting Dominique Mason Richard, of a woman who carried with her to her interview with a Park Avenue coop board, a knockoff of a designer pocketbook, that she bought from a street vendor. The coop board rejected her and weeks later, she realized the scrawl written across the pocketbook wasn't the designer's name or initials but actually spelled out an obscenity.

4. Imagine going to a Coop board interview wearing our Christian charm bracelet: What's that you're wearing.

5. It means looking at those who are better dressed or worse-dressed than you and being able to say, we are equalized because God died on a cross.

6. It means becoming like Simon of Cyrene. His family is mentioned in this gospel because, it seems, they came to embrace the cross he was at first forced to carry. So that Rufus could say, "My father was proud to be associated with that cross." "And I am proud of my father." Simon stands as a call to us to follow.

7. And if anything fulfills the Village ideal, the scandal of this God does. He obliterates status.

8. As Martin Hengel: "Any genuine theology will have to be measured against the test of this scandal."

D. The Way to not grow weary or fainthearted is to embrace your degradation

1. The way to become that entering the scandal, and embracing the scandal is the answer for you.

2. **Heb 12:2 "**looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. [3] Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow <u>weary or fainthearted</u>."

[7] The Sky's The Limit, 57.

3. To not grow weary or fainthearted was so needed by Paul, by Mark, certainly by these Romans under Nero, to whom he wrote.

4. The infamous stake, the criminal wood, is what banishes weariness or faintheartedness.

5. But Jesus was commanding us to embrace, whatever your circumstances, however degrading, to embrace that degradation.

6. And you must enter this madness to enjoy Christ.
   - Plutarch said: "every criminal condemned to death bears his cross on his back"[8]
   - Jesus said: "every Christian, whatever the condemnation of this life, bears his cross on his back"

[8] Moralia 554A/B, as cited in Hengel, 77, and 69n1 on 499D.