

The most clear and simple image or symbol for Christianity and the church has been the cross. You will find one at the front of almost every Christian space of worship. In Catholic churches it is often an ornate and detailed sculpture or carving of Jesus crucified; in many protestant churches, such as our own, it is a cross of stark simplicity, two intersecting beams of wood and not much else.

It is appropriate that such a symbol has become the main identifying mark of Christianity. The New Testament makes it a central and crucial theme. The Apostle Paul famously wrote in the first letter to the Corinthians that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). If it is indeed the power of God who Christians worship, then we have a lot at stake in this image at the front of our sanctuary. It is at the very heart of our tradition.

Through the centuries, though, this image, so central to Christian language and action, has had a tendency to be romanticized. Jesus Christ and his painful death on the cross is the power of God, reconciling the world to God. In Jesus, we read in Colossians, “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to God’s self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19-20). Such passages seem to indicate that the reconciliation between God and creation has been *definitively* completed through the cross. Nothing more is required for our reconciled relationship with God, as individuals, as the human community, and as all of creation.

We then make the cross the centre of our worship out of thankfulness, gratitude, and awe of God’s completed work, restoring peace and shalom through Christ. (The emphasis is on *God’s* work of restoration, and much of our Christian ethic is based on such an idea: we love the world and attempt to bring God’s healing increasingly into the world because God has already completed the healing through the cross and resurrection.)

Such an emphasis is no doubt important. But it may run the risk of *over-romanticising* the cross at the expense of another crucially important and central theme in our scriptures. We ought not to *only* worship in awe and thanksgiving for God’s saving power: in an exciting and simultaneously frightening way, *we also become what we worship*. Worship ought to lead to imitation.

Consider the following:

Jesus said “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:23-24).

Paul says that “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:19-20). “Do you no know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Rom. 6:3).

And Jesus, on the cross, in the moment of what we proclaim as God’s saving and reconciling power, cries out in the psalmists lament: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1).

This throws an important light and insight onto the cross and what it means to follow Jesus. It is not an easy cross: it is often dark, lonely, and isolating. And we do not simply watch and benefit from it: we are,

Paul writes, baptized into it, invited into a co-crucifixion. We die *to* ourselves, we die *with* Christ. But suffering is never an end in itself; it is always in order for Christ's Holy Spirit to make a home within us.

Today we are continuing our summer sermon series, looking at the widely diverse and creative ways Christians across the tradition have interpreted scripture. The scripture reader I am looking at today, St. John of the Cross, was a 16th century catholic priest in Spain. He was an important part of the *counter-reformation*, and so is not an obvious part of the Mennonite tradition we attend to at TUMC. But Christians from *any* tradition can find hope in his spirituality of suffering. With his help we can penetrate into the meaning of our own suffering and the meaning of being co-crucified with Christ.

St. John chose to call himself "John of the Cross", and for good reason. He is normally associated with an incredibly negative and painful understanding of the Christian life; he constantly relates us back to suffering. And it is true that he describes the cost of Christian life with more ruthless honesty than almost any other writer; but "One of John's greatest qualities is to be able to show clearly the light and *positive* value that are present in aspects of experience which most regard as negative or even potentially destructive" (Follent 83).

John's most famous phrase comes from the title of one of his poems: "the dark night of the soul". His main spiritual writings are commentaries on his poetry, and he expands extensively on this poem. What he is trying to describe is the experience of a human being moving toward union with God.

This movement begins with a positive desire for God, a desire to serve and love God and God's world. This beginning of the spiritual journey has energy and enthusiasm; we are lead into prayer and service with joy and God is experienced as a source of strength and comfort.

However, John says that any spirituality that proceeds with only sweetness, ease, and comfort, flees from the imitations of Christ. Such a spiritual journey, John says, is of no value.

He quotes in full the Lamentations passage that we read this morning as a description of what this "dark night" feels and tastes and appears like to the person who experiences it. What is so striking and terrifying about this passage is that the speaker is not simply suffering the pain of the world; the speaker feels as though *God himself is absent, distant, or has even turned against* him or her. "God had led me and brought me into darkness.... He has turned and turned again his hand against me all the day.... He has shut out my prayer.... I have forgotten good things".

These are harsh, difficult words. But "Any account of spiritual life which does not attempt to come to terms with such suffering, and somehow show its place in the overall process of spiritual life and growth, is worthless" (Follent 84). What John wants to ultimately show is how this spiritual suffering is a necessary step towards a full life with God and in God.

But isn't John a little extreme? And isn't he taking these scriptural passages way out of context? Lamentations was written as a series of laments for the destruction of Jerusalem, not for John to use to talk about his own small, little story of spiritual suffering. And, in any case, what does it have to say about our own struggles? I'm not exiled from my homeland like the writer of lamentations. And I'm also not a Catholic monk like John who spent hours and days and weeks in silent prayer, as some kind of elitist mystic who is pursuing powerful experiences of the divine.

But there may be more to St. John than we first realize. We may yet find some insight in his use of scripture.

Let me give a little more background to John's life. John was part of a group of monks and nuns called the Carmelites. During his lifetime there was a lot of tension and turmoil within the leadership structure of the Carmelites; John was one of the leaders involved in these problems, and throughout his life he was caught in complex conflict; he was disrespected, mistreated, arrested and imprisoned, and at the end of his life he was exiled to a small, isolated monastery.

So John's writings are in the context of a complex life, one in which conflict and mistreatment were often present. He is not an elite mystic with extraordinary visions or experiences of God. He was just a regular person, trying to follow Jesus, and involved in the complicated and difficult issues of living life with himself and with others.

We too all live amidst the complicated and difficult issues of living life in this world. We experience tension with people around us. We're faced with the feeling of inadequacy to the tasks set before us, whether at work, school, or church, or with friends or family. We might be scared by the possibility or even the *reality* of relationships falling apart. Or maybe we're embarrassed and ashamed by our own actions, the way we see ourselves acting in pride, selfishness, or sometimes even cruelty.

And it hurts! It burns and it freezes, it can threaten to consume us. And we can't even cry out with Jesus "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" because we think that Jesus' suffering eventually brought life and resurrection and healing to the world! While *this* pain of inadequacy, self-loathing, and internal frustration is completely *unredeeming*. Sometimes my own problems can seem so boring, pointless, and worthless; this isn't redemptive suffering, it is just me distressing from my own ungodliness and my own ungodly situation.

It's so useless! What on earth is the point of all these little psychological or relational issues? At such times we might feel prevented from loving people, from investing ourselves positively in relationships.

And where is God in all this? Well, we might say, we can't say for sure where God *is* but God is certainly not *here*, at work in this life or in this situation or in this emotional experience of inadequacy, insecurity, or self-hatred.

Wherever God is, God's not here. And it's my own stupid, little fault for pushing God away.

Ah, says St. John of the Cross, but that is *precisely* when God is at work in the soul. And it is painful, oh yes, it *hurts*. But it is preparation, a preparation for union with God.

Suffering comes in all different forms. And I am bold enough to hope that *all* experiences, either good or bad, can be an opportunity for growth towards God. I *don't* want to claim that God *causes* or *wants* suffering. But every and any experience of suffering, every cross we bear, even those crosses that seem so far removed from the truth of Jesus's own redeeming cross, *can be seen* in the light of Christ's resurrection and the empty tomb.

In these utterly ordinary experiences of negativity, St. John says that God is "assailing" the soul. In other words, God is moving towards us, purging us, stripping us of our stability, certainty, and self-worth. But this is ultimately a hopeful sign, for "The discovery that one can no longer find one's guarantees in oneself may indeed be a sign that progress in the life with God is finally being achieved" (Follent 97).

This is because abandoning control over ourselves and our own lives and becoming more and more dependent on God will almost necessarily be accompanied by a sense of being undone, ungrounded, or even annihilated. St. John uses the image of a log burning. When a log is first put into a fire, it is dried out, it may even make a screeching sound as the moisture is sucked out of it and it is prepared for contributing fuel to the fire. God is the fire and we are the log. The preparation may be painful, but the end of the process is union with God; the log becomes part of the fire. And we become united with God as what is false, transitory, and insubstantial within us, all that we construct around us to keep ourselves comforted and in control, is consumed, leaving only the pure self in an unconditionally trusting relationship with the creator.

And *all* experiences can serve as continual preparation for a deeper and closer relationship with the divine, culminating in our imitation of Christ who shared completely in the divine nature. For the writer of Lamentations it was the exile of the nation of Israel from Jerusalem. For John it was imprisonment. For you and me it may be countless different things.

And the suffering may not end in this life, for we can *always* find something more to give up, something else that needs to be stripped away so our dependence is more and more completely on God. And God, too, is infinite; whatever intimacy we truly experience is always accompanied by a sense of the endless and limitless expanses of God's love, the depths of which can always be explored further. So the process does not end.

But we still can move in the right direction, endless though the journey may be.

And that ought to give us hope. For nothing is permanent; every emotional, relational, or physical situation, good or bad, will pass away. And yet it *all* contributes to our journey with God. Even those moments where we sense it is impossible to please God, or that we don't even believe in God enough to want to please him! It is *all* a preparation, a stripping away, a purging as God moves towards us, seeking to make a home for the Trinity of love within each and every person.

And as we are stripped of our certitudes, our personal comforts, we may feel as though we are becoming emptier and emptier; what can fill the space within us of our sadness, grief, guilt, and general negativity? But the emptier we are, the more room there is for God to make a home in us. And then we will find that we receive our whole lives back – all of our longings, desires, and comforts are returned to us not as our own possessions, but as good gifts from God. As we read today in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we will "have nothing, and yet possess everything".

For when we are joined in union with the creator, we also participate in the true fullness of creation. And then we find that *all things* have been made new; our participation in Christ's death leads to resurrection, and is made real in every part of our journey.

The cross is no longer simply an object of worship; it is a model for our spiritual journey. As we bear more and more fully our own cross of suffering, *whatever that may be*, we also share more and more fully in the life and joy of the risen Christ.

Amen.