

“Names of Wondrous Love: Christ Crucified”

What does the cross mean? I suppose that in some respects, it all depends on who’s looking at it. To many, a cross is merely an ornament to be worn around the neck. To an architect, it’s a symbol to be used when designing a house of worship. To a skeptic, it’s a superstition that clouds human minds. To a communist, it represents a narcotic, an opiate for the people to numb their needs. To the Romans, the cross was an instrument of torture, devilishly simple, but horribly painful. To the Sanhedrin, the cross of Jesus was a token of victory that was, at best, short lived. To the motley crew on Calvary, it was a holiday, carnal and cursed. To one thief the cross was his door to hell, horrible and eternal. To the other thief, it was the gate to heaven and more than he even dared pray for. What does the cross mean? It all depends on who’s looking at the cross.

The more important question is what does the cross mean to us? Hopefully we would answer that it’s the blessed symbol of what our Savior came to do for us. It’s the altar where the God-man sacrificed himself in payment for the sins of the world. It’s the crown of our salvation, gleaming brightly with the news of how Christ loves us and washed us from our sins with his own blood. For us too, as for the apostle Paul, there is no greater message than that of the cross, the message of Christ crucified (1 Co 2:2).

Today in our series of sermons, Names of Wondrous Love, we look at that word *crucified*. Perhaps, it’s more of a term than a name, yet we so often link it with this name, Christ. It’s his name of wondrous love: Christ Crucified. As we read John 19:16-18, we’ll remind ourselves that he was crucified because of our sins and that he was crucified for our salvation.

**<sup>16</sup> Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. <sup>17</sup> Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). <sup>18</sup> Here they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.**

“They crucified him,” it says, just three simple words in our translation. But there was nothing simple or brief about it. We shudder as we picture Jesus laid on that cross, his lacerated back pushed against the rough wood. His hands stretched out and held on the cross bar. His feet roughly positioned one on top of the other. We shrink back as we hear the dull strokes of the hammer pounding spikes through his flesh and the dull thud as the cross with its hapless victim is raised in the air and then dropped into the supporting hole in the ground. The crucifying work is done rather quickly, and then the dying begins, but oh, so slowly! Normally hours would go by, even days, with the victim hanging on that cross, his hands torn deeper and deeper by the relentless nails, his body wracked by burning thirst, constant pain, throbbing torture. No Roman citizen or respected person was ever to be subjected to this shameful, slow death by crucifixion. That was a torture reserved for the worst of criminals AND for God’s Son.

We can discuss and even try to imagine the physical pain of the cross, but far worse were the tortures of hell that God’s Son endured that day. All the bitter dregs in the cup of the world’s sins, all the terrible curses that are due to the world’s sins, all the pangs of death and the pains of hell that are the wages of the world’s sins, all this fell with staggering, crushing force on God’s Son as he hung on that accursed cross. We can’t even begin to plumb the depths of hell’s suffering that Jesus endured on that cross. Only the devils and the damned in hell can understand God’s Son’s anguished cry, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Mk 15:34). “They crucified him,” it says so simply. But how can we imagine the ocean of suffering this involved, crashing wave after wave over him on the cross that day?

We can only guess at the suffering involved in that word *crucified*. We do not have to guess, however, at the “they” who crucified him. Certainly the soldiers were involved, the ones who handled the hammer and manhandled his flesh. Afterwards, they sat beneath his cross, casting lots for his clothing and throwing bits of sarcasm at him. But look deeper. Behind those soldiers, back in his palace, stands a cowardly and

selfish Pontius Pilate, trying vainly to wash innocent blood off his hands with water. Look deeper still and behind him find the chief priests and Jewish people who in their blind hatred chose Barabbas and crucified their only Savior.

And deeper still, there are even more involved in the “they” who crucified him. In the distance lies Judas, himself now a corpse. Weeping in the darkness is Peter, repentant and forgiven, indeed, but guilty of denial and cowardice. And there farther back, back where we look only reluctantly stand even more. Do you see them? There they stand—men and women of all classes and conditions, but having one thing in common. They all bear the stamp and stain of sin. And among them, if we look closely enough, we’ll recognize our spouses, our children, our neighbors, our friends, and yes, even ourselves, sinners one and all, and all included in the “they” who crucified Jesus.

Like much of our Lenten season, today is another opportunity to come face to face with this truth. Today each of us can look into his own heart and at his own life and see the need to confess with the hymn writer, “Ah! I also and my sin wrought your deep affliction; this indeed the cause has been of your crucifixion” (CW 98:3). I have sinned; I have caused Christ’s suffering. **I crucified him.**

But I don’t think we want to stop today with just the thought of our guilt. What comfort can “Jesus crucified by me” bring for sinners like us? We surely want to look again at his cross, this time not to see who put him there but to see why he stayed there. Not the nails, not the soldiers, not the crowd, but his wondrous love held him there. That cross brings the blessed truth, the saving truth that we need so desperately, the truth that he is “**Christ crucified for me.**”

The Bible spells out this glorious truth again and again, in passage after passage, clearly and plainly. Yes, **“he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;”** but the prophet also reminds us, **“By his wounds we are healed”** (Isa 53:5). Paul sums up for us, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Co 5:21). John assures us, **“The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin”** (1 Jn 1:7). And these are just a few of the passages. Today, in summary of this saving truth, we look at the cross. It has quite a story to tell. It speaks of full payment for the world’s sins. It speaks, it shouts, of full payment for my sins. It’s a throne of wondrous love for my Savior, Christ crucified.

Down through the ages since Calvary that cross has stood in invitation to sinners. Countless thousands have heard the through Word and sacrament crucified Christ invite, **“Whoever comes to me I will never drive away”** (Jn 6:37). You and I have received this glorious invitation so many times in our lives that it perhaps doesn’t seem so grand anymore. We’ve heard about that wondrous Savior from sin so often that we might be tempted to respond, “So what else is new?” So many voices are competing for our ears today. We have to make a living, hold a job, keep the business going. We have to pay the bills, keep up with the mortgage, balance the checkbook. We have to raise the kids, keep them out of trouble, get them educated and then married. We have to relax a little, have some fun, get rid of some tension. Life is so complex, no doubt about it, and in the static of this complex world, the sound of Jesus’ voice offering his simple, sweet invitation to sinners can so quickly be drowned out.

That’s why once again this Lenten season is back-to-the-cross time. It’s time to kneel beneath that cross, confessing our sins and then rejoicing in his forgiveness. It’s time to marvel again at the wondrous love behind those words, “Christ crucified for me.” God help us to do so. Amen.

*Christ, the Life of all the living, Christ the death of death, our foe, Who thyself for me once giving To the darkest depths of woe – Through thy suff’ring, death, and merit, I eternal life inherit. Thousand, thousand thanks shall be, Dearest Jesus, unto thee. Thou, ah, thou hast taken on thee Bonds and stripes, a cruel rod; Pain and scorn were heaped upon thee, O thou sinless Son of God! Thus didst thou my soul deliver From the bonds of sin forever. Thousand, thousand thanks shall be, Dearest Jesus, unto thee. (CW 114:1-2)*