

Good Friday
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

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Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Why the Cross?
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

There was a big flap in the Anglican blogosphere this week. Of course, lately, we've gotten good at those. The *Sunday Telegraph* in England had a good go at stirring the pot just in time for Holy Week with a headline that read *Easter Message: Christ did not die for sin*. In the article, Jeffrey John, Dean of St. Alban's Cathedral, was referred to as a "controversial cleric," as he was the center of a debate a few years ago when he was almost made bishop in the Church of England, but was turned aside by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the midst of a media frenzy and a dreadful row. . . because Jeffrey John is gay.

So now he's a media favorite, and was paraphrased by the *Telegraph* as saying that "Clergy who preach this Easter that Christ was sent to earth to die in atonement for the sins of mankind are 'making God sound like a psychopath. . .In other words, Jesus took the rap and we got forgiven as long as we said we believed in him. . .This is repulsive as well as nonsensical.'"

Not leaving any stone unturned, the *Telegraph* then interviewed N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham, world-renowned evangelical and New Testament scholar, who was quoted as saying, "He is denying the way in which we understand Christ's sacrifice. It is right to stress that he is a God of love but he is ignoring that this means he must also be angry at everything that distorts human life." And unnamed "Church figures" we're quoted as saying that Jeffrey John's words were a "deliberate perversion of the Bible."

What a great way to sell a newspaper. Clerics shouting at each other. Accusations of perversion. Positing the counterpoint of a God of Love and a God of Anger. Stepping into the rifts of contemporary Christianity and tickling both sides to make a scene.

Turns out Jeffrey John was being quoted out of context in a very profound way. His full address didn't appear publicly until *after* the *Telegraph's* article. N. T. Wright might have been quoted out of context, too. But, hey, this is the stuff that gets the dander up of Christian theologians. And it's the stuff that gets the reading public to take a second look. Because we all love a good controversy. We all love great spectacle. Even if its an itinerate healer, preacher, teacher, and prophet strung up on a cross.

Even after 2,000 years, Christians are still duking it out over the cross, trying to make sense of the violent sequence of events that led to Jesus' execution at the hands of Empire and religious authorities. . .and *why* this had to happen. *Why* Jesus had to suffer a gruesome and excruciating death when he was, tradition holds, otherwise innocent. The question goes much deeper than

this, of course. There are questions of sacrifice and satisfaction, deeply tangled up in the cultures of ancient Judaism, first century Palestine, the late Roman Empire, the feudal society of Northern Europe, and the mystics of the Middle Ages. And more recently in our own society, nineteenth- and twentieth-century church phenomenon like the rise of contemporary evangelicals, fundamentalism, the Oxford Movement.

Look, the cross and theories about atonement are favorite subjects for church historians and theologians. Worthy of spilling a great deal of ink over and vast resource expenditures researching and compiling and ruminating.

But there is one thing we are apt to forget as we argue over the why's and wherefore's of Jesus' crucifixion. As much as we Episcopalians and Anglicans pride ourselves in pursuing faith without sacrificing our minds, we mustn't forget that when God in Christ dies on the cross, all intellect dies, too. On the cross, all of humanity – heart, soul, body, and mind – are lost to Jesus. Just as they are lost to all of us in death.

At the end of the day, the apostles were so frightened that most were scattered. The crowds were stirred to shout, almost blindly, "Crucify him!" rather than to sit and carefully weigh – in good Anglican fashion – the merits of Jesus' teaching. Pilate was only interested in preserving the peace of Jerusalem as best he could, a consummate politician and brutal Roman Governor who would take lives if he had to in order to keep the tributes to Rome flowing. The Sanhedrin, made up of wealthy family interests and classes beholden to the Roman authorities, had their own affairs to look after. Jesus had pushed the plight of the ordinary people in their faces and was fomenting what looked alarmingly like a revolution with his entry into Jerusalem and his pushing the money-changers and merchants out of the Temple a few days before. One man's life was weighed in the scales of social order. Guess which side won.

No one on the day of the crucifixion sat down to wonder long if God would be satisfied by Jesus' death, or if Satan would be, for that matter. Or if the sins of the whole world for all time could be supported by iron nails and wooden beams. Nor did anyone sit down that day to write a book about why indeed bad things happen to good people. Our intellects ask these questions, of course, but our intellects are ephemeral – gone like the wind as Jesus' mind was when he breathed his last and darkness covered the land.

The cross simply is. Like our suffering much of the time. Like the suffering of the world. It *is* in the moment. Hard as the cross, sharp as nails. Propped up in a sky with a harshness that wrecks all our best thought and deepest hopes.

I am reminded of a few years ago when two young and wonderful parents in the church I was serving lost their four-year-old son to an unknown illness. Little Issey was struck down in a matter of days by fever, and then coma. All the best 21st-century medicine and technology could not save him. He had been a joyous child, innocent in so many ways, effused with the energy of new life. He did not deserve death. Nor did his family.

Children in the West in this day and age aren't supposed to die so suddenly and tragically. Nor are first-century healers and teachers who bring hope to the poor and love to the loveless.

I can only reflect this Good Friday on the plaintive word of Issey's mother as she sobbed next to the body of her dead child. "Doushite?" she asked through the tears. . . Japanese for "Why?"

There was, of course, no good answer, except to grieve with her and her family.

The cross remains a hideous thing. Hideous even though we've tried turning it golden, by wearing it as jewelry and painting it onto Bibles and Prayer Books and raising it up as statue and sculpture. We have painted it, drawn it, reflected on it, named holy orders after it, raised it up as a sign of hope. Some have gone to war using it as a talisman. Others have waged peace holding the cross up high. We have made it a symbol of mercy, of redemption, of liberation. It has been the tool, weapon, and wonder for us and our spiritual ancestors across a hundred generations. Strange we are as a Christian people.

But the cross remains a hideous thing. And holy. Because it reminds us of the death in our own lives and stands on Golgotha like a beacon of terror. It is the doorway we must all pass sooner or later. It is the weight we must all carry with our own sufferings, each unique, but each common with the sufferings of all humanity. We hunger and thirst for answers to our own special crosses – those unique weights we haul around even if we pretend not to. We want to know why. Of course we do. What could be more human? And there are some who claim to have answers.

But answers to senseless things are never fully satisfactory, even if we give them titles like "Penal Substitutionary Atonement," "Christus Victor," or even the aptly named "Satisfaction Theory."

The reason the crucifixion speaks to us has little to do with theory, but everything to do with reality. It is C. S. Lewis who remarked in one of his books that pain and suffering are probably among the most real elements of our lives. All of us who at one time or another have experienced pain, death, and suffering know this to be true. Even when our minds are in denial, our hearts, our guts, and even our very bones and flesh know the truths of pain, death, and suffering.

It was real that Jesus died for the simple reason that good people who challenge the evils of their day often die. It was real that love is often crucified by our anxieties, lust for power, and hunger to be in control. It remains real that God in Christ Jesus speaks to us most often when we are out of intellectual answers, facing death of one kind or another, and bereft of the Spirit.

That is the Good News of Good Friday, no matter what we theorize about Jesus and the sins of the world. And who's right, be it the Bishop of Durham, the Dean of St. Alban's, or a young upstart like me? Perhaps those of us who wear the fancy clothes and write with fancy prose should listen more to the mothers of lost children. Perhaps we should dispense with the sometimes arrogant desire to explain everything and embrace the crosses of our lives and the lives of others as Jesus did: with humility, grace, and love. Perhaps it is time to stop pursuing our desire to be God, and let God pursue us, even into our darkest hours, where hope seems dead and love is crucified.

And only then, do we have a shot at true understanding. Understanding that will not require explanation. But understanding that will emerge from the very heart of life and death itself, from the foundations of being, from that which stands as alpha and omega, from the One who is our beginning and end and who holds our lives so lovingly, so tenderly, so absolutely, that our cross may not mark an end, but a new beginning.