

When I was ordained, many people kindly gave me gifts. I was amazed at how many crosses I was given. Crosses to go on the wall, crosses to go on the sideboard, crosses to hang around my neck, crosses to put in my ears. Now please don't get me wrong, these were beautiful crosses and lovely gifts. But it amazed me that the symbol which Paul describes as a scandal, foolishness and a stumbling block has become an ornament.

At the time of Jesus, crucifixion was not a distant reality. It was everywhere. The Romans used crucifixion as a way to enforce their power, leaving human bodies strung up on poles, rotting in the sun. If one of your family was crucified, you didn't talk about it. You kept it quiet. When Jesus was crucified, the disciples were devastated.

It was only after the resurrection that they began to see Jesus' death on the cross as a positive thing. As Paul says in today's reading, "we proclaim Christ crucified." Looking at the crucifixion through the lens of Jesus' resurrection it became something glorious not something ignominious. Yet it was not the central image of the new church.

A few years ago in a Hollister Class we read **Saving Paradise** by Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock. They studied Christian art and found that until the 11<sup>th</sup> century there were no images of the crucifixion. For the first thousand years of Christianity, we did not put dead Jesus in our sacred places, instead we decorated our churches with pictures of Paradise.

It wasn't until shortly before the time of the Crusades, when Christians raped and pillaged Jews and other non-Christians in the name of God, that images of the crucified Christ appeared. Now it may be that before that the dead Jesus was held in such high regard that it wasn't used in art, but it is more likely that the church saw the cross as the way that

Paradise – the reign of God – broke through into human lives. So the focus was not on Jesus’ death itself but upon the effect of the crucifixion in the light of the resurrection. The focus of Christian art was the hope of redemption and the restoration of creation into right relationship with its creator.

If Jesus had not been raised, his life and ministry would have probably disappeared without trace. At the most he would have been a footnote in Roman history, another itinerant preacher who tried to start an insurgency and failed. But looking back through the lens of the risen Christ we see that it was not just a human rebel who died that day, but Christ – the Messiah, the Son of God – Christ crucified.

In the sentence before the ones we heard today from 1 Corinthians, Paul says, “Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.” Paul believed that the cross spoke for itself, and did not need a great deal of interpretation, in fact he was concerned that eloquent wisdom would get in the way of the message of the Christ crucified. Which may be why he never developed a coherent theology of the cross. Paul was not a systematic theologian. He was highly educated and charismatic preacher, leader and church planter. Most of his letters were written to churches he had founded.

And in them, he used a variety of metaphors. Like most of us who talk or preach or write about the things of the Spirit, he used different images to try to express his intuitive or Spirit-led understanding and those images were not always consistent. Perhaps he wished he could revise some of his ideas later when he understood more, but there was no way for him to issue a revised edition. We can only use metaphors when we talk about the profound things of the Spirit and not every metaphor truly captures what we want to say.

I have heard that there was a very wise and learned Rabbi who was at the end of his life, and all his followers were gathered around his bed hoping to catch a final word of wisdom. One of them leant over and asked. “Rabbi, what is the meaning of life?” The Rabbi replied “Ah... life is like a doughnut.” Only the people closest to him heard him and the people behind asked wanted to know “What did he say?” “life is like a doughnut.” And they passed the word back through the crowd. “What did he say?” “life is like a doughnut.” “What did he say?” “life is like a doughnut.” Until the word reached the very back of the crowd. And there someone asked, “What does that mean? Life is like a doughnut.” So the message was passed forward, “What does that mean, life is like a doughnut, what does that mean?” It was passed from person to person until it reached the men standing closest to the Rabbi. One of them leaned over and said, “Rabbi, what does it mean, life is like a doughnut?” There was a pause as the Rabbi thought about his answer and then he said, “Ah... perhaps life is not like a doughnut.”

The doughnut metaphor doesn't work so well.

And likewise over time the different metaphors that we humans have come up with to explain the crucifixion have had problems.

Just about the same time that Christians in what is now Germany began to use images of the crucifixion, the Benedictine monk Anselm was writing about Christian thought with a rational and philosophical approach. He developed the first philosophical argument for the existence of God and he also developed a new understanding of the crucifixion. Of course, he was a man of his times and he didn't just pluck a new theory out of the air.

Prior to this time it was generally thought that on the cross, Jesus had outwitted the Devil or that in some way Jesus had paid the Devil a

ransom for humanity. In other words, the purpose of the cross was to overcome the Devil. But this was problematic in that it suggested that the Devil was so powerful that God couldn't just deal with him but had to die as a human in a very nasty way in order to overcome him.

Anselm's argument was taken from feudal society. He argued that God was like a lord whose honor and justice was offended by the sin of his subjects but since everything they had was already his, they could not repay the debt. Personal acts of atonement were pointless. So atonement could only come by a sinless person who owed the lord no debt atoning for everyone. By taking it upon himself to provide the atoning act, God has provided a surplus of grace which is available to us and allows us to approach and be reconciled with God despite our sinful nature.

Two hundred years later, Thomas Aquinas refined Anselm's theory somewhat with more emphasis on God's judgement of our sin. He argued that punishment is a morally good response to sin – that sin should be punished and that Jesus took that punishment for all of us. For Aquinas God is not so much angry but concerned to restore the harmony between God and human by dealing with the consequences of sin.

Whether you use Anselm's metaphor or that of Aquinas, this is a substitution theory, which argues that Jesus died instead of us. Which is what most of us were taught to believe, or if we didn't grow up going to church, we know it's what Christianity teaches.

But Jesus didn't teach it. Jesus didn't teach that God is angry and requires someone to die in order that he can stop being angry; or that our sin creates a block in our relationship with God which requires punishment.

Yes, Jesus talked about laying down his life for his friends. Yes, Jesus talked about his coming betrayal and crucifixion. In today's Gospel

where he gets into a major confrontation with the systems of religious and financial oppression, he seems to refer to his resurrection. But I have yet to find a scripture where he says that he must appease his angry Father. Instead he teaches that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

It is possible to interpret that, as Anselm, Aquinas and many others have done, by saying that the reason we might “perish” is because we have offended God and so need to be punished. But we might also ask, why would a loving God be so angry that he had to kill someone?

Is it possible that we perish when we are separate from God but the separation comes from our fear not from God’s demands?

If God is love then he didn’t need to kill someone to achieve reconciliation. So I am sure that Anselm and Aquinas were wrong – I don’t believe that God needed Jesus to die. But in his crucifixion and resurrection we get a whole different picture of God. As Paul said “Christ crucified... [is]the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” On the cross, God became weak and foolish yet that weakness and foolishness was shown by the resurrection to be wisdom and strength.

Not an angry God but one who was willing to become human for us. For “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”