

A Crossless Christianity is Not Good News

A sermon at Holy Eucharist on Holy Cross Day 2025

The Revd Andrew Rampton

The cross is a place of shame and death. It is not pleasant to look upon. It is the place where we see that which kills us, that which we would rather avoid. But it is also the place where God opens the gate to eternal life and begins our transformation from sin to glory.

The cross is good news. For anyone who is new to church, new to Christianity, new to the stories about Jesus Christ, this may sound like a strange thing to say. After all, the cross is a place of shame, humiliation, the victory of an oppressive empire, and the site of a painful death. None of that sounds like good news. And certainly not good enough news that the cross should become the most identifiable symbol of our faith. And yet, here we are.

I am not claiming any great insight with this statement. St Paul beat me to it by a couple of millennia, as we heard in today's reading from his first letter to the church in Corinth.¹ What St Paul would be surprised by, I think, is the number of people today who claim their identity in Christ and would prefer it without the cross. An uncrucified Christ—Christianity without the cross—is dangerous thinking and worth a few moments before we turn to the good news of the cross.

I suspect most of us have heard versions of crossless Christianity being presented, even if it wasn't described in exactly those terms. It is usually described as a faith where evidence

of one's salvation is measured by the material blessings one has in this life. One's closeness to God can be discerned by how successful one is in the here and now. Success, of course, being the accumulation of money, property, and other earthly status symbols. This comes with the related idea that if one's life does not seem to have many blessings or, indeed, many difficulties, then it is because one's faith somehow lacks. Maybe a few more prayers are needed or there is some terrible, secret sin that is causing the many misfortunes.

This kind of thinking is difficult to reconcile with the teaching of Jesus on earthly wealth and where our priorities ought to lie.² It flirts with the idea that we are capable of somehow earning our salvation or, at the very least, can prove our saved status using our status in this life as the measure. And this teaching works well for many people, who feel quite satisfied with their lives and all of the evidence of their holiness surrounding them. Until, of course, they are diagnosed with a terminal illness. Until a child develops leukemia. Everything was blessing yesterday and the behaviours and patterns haven't changed, but somehow the blessings have stopped and trials have arrived. And the whole fragile structure falls down.

To the best of my knowledge, God has never promised that this life will be easy. In fact, humanity is told rather near the beginning of things that this life is going to be hard work. Importantly, we are also told that our tendency to sin is going to make it even harder work than it ought to be.³ God does invite us into a relationship where it is promised that God will share the work, share our trials, and make the burden lighter, but not that God will remove all of this

¹1 Corinthians 1:18-24

²Matthew 6:19-21

³Genesis 3:16-19

from us.⁴ Not on this side of the Last Day, at least.⁵

Of course, even with God sharing the burden of this life, we are infinitely creative in finding ways to sin. We pull away from God and go about our lives under the tragic illusion that we really can sort it out ourselves. The Bible is full of stories of God's people doing this. Thankfully, the Bible is also full of stories of God's grace, mercy, and patience in waiting for those same people to recognize their sin, repent of it, and return to God to try again.

We heard one such story in the reading from the book of Numbers. The people of Israel are traversing the wilderness and unhappy with their circumstances. They are beset by venomous serpents who bite them and many people die. In the midst of this suffering, the people acknowledge that their plight is the result of their own sin. They admit this and beg Moses to intercede with God on their behalf, to save them from what they have wrought. Moses pleads with God and, following the instructions given him, he fashions a bronze serpent and raises it on a pole. When the people look upon the serpent and see the result of their own sin—when they say what it is that hurts them—they begin to be healed.⁶

This story is a short and powerful illustration of many circumstances in the human experience. When we suffer with illnesses and injuries, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, if we cannot acknowledge that we are injured, we cannot begin to heal. This is especially true when the source of our illness is our own action. There is an old joke about a physician who asks a patient if they are experiencing pain,

to which the patient replies, "Only when I do this." The physician then says, "Well then stop doing that!" The joke is funny, in part, because we all recognize that it holds truth. When we can recognize patterns of behaviour, thought, and action in our lives that cause us and others harm, we may not like the realization. But, that recognition is not where we are meant to stop, wallowing in shame. It is meant to be from there that we begin to change and to heal.

When we look upon the cross, we see that which kills us. The evil of empire; the lengths to which greed will go to protect its hoard; the oppression of dissenting voices; the violence done to those who lack power to defend themselves; scapegoating so that the innocent are made to suffer punishments which they have not earned; the depth of fear that holds the powerful in its grasp when they contemplate losing their power. What humanity does on the cross is heap blame, hatred, and violence born out of fear upon an innocent. What God does upon the cross is confront us with the worst parts of ourselves. In that confrontation, God proves, beyond any shadow of doubt, that those hateful parts of ourselves can be transformed by God into beauty and holiness. Just as the scene of humiliating death can become the open gate into eternal life, so can we, with all of our sin, become reflections of God's glory in the world.

Salvation comes to us not by thinking our way into the kingdom of God, but by looking upon the cross, and seeing that it is a mirror in which we see ourselves, sin and all. Salvation comes to us by allowing the truth revealed in the cross to be the beginning of our healing, our transformation. Salvation comes to us by trusting and following the path of the one we hung on upon the cross, whose arms were spread wide that all

⁴Matthew 11:28-30

⁵Revelation 21:4

⁶Numbers 21:4b-9

the world might have eternal life.⁷
The cross is good news.

⁷John 3:13-17