

Lent 1  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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## **The Standing Cross**

Symbols of religious traditions often pick up on a central idea of the faith. For the Christian that symbol is the Cross. The Cross has two parts, the vertical stem that represents our relationship with God through the death and resurrection of Christ, and the horizontal arm that represents our relationship with others in the light of that vertical stem. Today, by way of initiating a Lenten series of sermons on the Cross, I would like to talk about the vertical stem.

Its central truth is that Christ died for us to forgive us our sins, but of all the theological questions I am asked, this one comes up with startling frequency. Just how, the question goes, does Jesus' death on the cross forgive our sins? "I just don't get it," they say. Throughout 2000+ years of Christian history this question has been answered in any number of ways. There are three major ones that encompass the great majority of the Church's thinking and teaching on the subject. Each of these is incomplete, each answers some questions and raises others. In the end the symbol of the Cross gathers together multiple meanings on many levels, and in doing so points to a mystery that is beyond the symbol itself.

The most commonly held understanding of the death of Jesus is called "Substitutionary Atonement." It became popular in the high medieval period, and was picked up by Reformers enthusiastically. It is by far the most common position of protestant churches throughout the United States. It's essentially a legal and economic model, and it goes like this:

When Adam sinned and we all fell into sin we incurred a debt. The debt is only payable by death. That leaves us in an impossible situation, for if we offer our lives for our own redemption we do not survive the process to enjoy the redemption we seek to obtain, and besides, a perfect death is required, and we are not perfect, so we wouldn't qualify anyway! Jesus came along as a perfect human being. Being perfect, he did not have to die for his sins, since he had none. He offered himself then, in our place, to pay our debt.

This model of the atonement emphasizes something that is very real. In terms of our salvation, we are caught in a catch 22. We cannot offer what must be offered. We need outside help. This model fits nicely with other doctrines popular among Protestants like the total depravity of humanity, that we are totally lost in sin and unable even to choose the right without external divine intervention. This generally stems from Augustine's

thought that says that we are guilty of sin before we were even born, and that God alone redeems us.

The problem comes when we stop to think about who we owe. In the Medieval period it was commonly held that we owed the devil for our souls. By sinning we sold our souls to the devil and cannot get them back on our own accord. But that implies that the devil somehow got something over on God and forced God to do something horrific and awful—the sacrifice of his own son; or just as crazy, that we forced God's hand by our dumb choices. Either way, God ends up being less than infinite, playing chess on the stage of existence with the devil and ourselves, an idea that is totally unacceptable to orthodox Christian theology.

An idea popular today is that we owe the debt to God. God's justice requires a holiness we cannot achieve. Jesus comes along and does it for us, satisfying the "justice" side of God, trumping it, so to speak with his death. But this paints a picture of God that is rather neurotic, with conflicting needs and desires within the Godhead, a divine internal struggle between justice and love. It sounds amazingly like ourselves, and the model cannot defend itself from the challenge of having painted God in our own image.

A final idea is that we owe the debt to ourselves. We are the ones who have been untrue to our own selves, we are the ones who have walked willingly into the trap of damnation. We have compromised our souls and cannot redeem them. In dying on the Cross Jesus saves us from ourselves. But this model never quite explains why the death of the Son of God was necessary. It doesn't hardly go beyond good psychology.

The Substitutionary Atonement model is also weak when it comes to spiritual growth. Jesus has done it all on the Cross. He has given us forgiveness for when we mess up now, and eternal fire insurance for later. It focuses on what God did to take care of what is wrong, and leaves us with no idea how to "grow in the faith" outside memorizing Scripture and going to Church.

Another model much more popular in the Eastern Church is called "Moral Example." The name is unfortunate, because it is much more than Jesus merely being a good guy we ought to emulate. It's more like, "Jesus blazes the trail through from death to resurrection for us so that we can follow the path." In dying Jesus shows us what we must do to our sins, in rising again Jesus promises us that it won't end in the grave.

The strength of this model is that it avoids some of the pitfalls of Substitutionary Atonement, it allows for a softer view of the human condition. The image of God is not totally lost in us. It is marred and wounded, to be sure, but that core goodness is not

gone. Furthermore, we participate in redemption. It's not merely something God does for and to us, it's something we must share in. The weakness in this model is that it does not clearly see what is unique about Jesus' self-sacrifice. Certainly he dared to what few dare to do, but others have actually dared to do so. What is so special about this Cross event that it would be something only God can do?

The last model is the Hebrew idea of sacrifice for reconciliation as a way of telling the truth. The offering reflects the nature of rupture of the relationship. When Eve took the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and ate of it she thought her own thought. She imagined that she could create her own reality out of her own head. But that makes about as much sense as the Gila River saying to the Gila Mountains, "I don't need you." Each of us eats of the same fruit the moment we think the same kind of thoughts. It happens to us all at a very early age. We cut ourselves free from our moorings in reality, and the result is death—naturally, just as the Gila would die if the mountains did not give it birth.

To reestablish that relationship God enters our false reality. In the Incarnation (Christmas) Jesus joins our human condition, on the Cross Jesus enters the full consequences of that condition. Jesus' death is at once the great revealing of our truth—that the false world of our own creation is not life-giving, and the death of that lie. The vertical stem of the Cross re-grounds the relationship in truth.

The Cross, then, is all about reestablishing a relationship. Think of today's Gospel lesson, the temptation of Christ. The devil tempts Jesus to create his own truth once more, just like with Eve, but Jesus gives him no quarter, answering with God's truth. The vertical stem of the Cross re-grounds us in truth.

The strength of this model is that it avoids the downfalls of the previous two: Christ is truly and fully unique, yet we also have something to do. And it is deeply grounded in the Scriptural tradition, with clear roots in the Old Testament.

The weakness is that it is native to another cultural mind, that of the ancient Jew. We don't think of sacrifice in this way today. It's easy to think that the death of Christ is somehow a peace offering from God's part, and that it is not at all what it is. It is God joining the radical truth of our own being, in order to reach across the alienation, and a call to us to do the same. It is a bit weak on one other point as well. It tells us that we have a huge amount of power in this relationship with God. The temptation is to make God into just Someone with whom we might want to consider reconciliation—or not, when the real goal and end of reconciliation is not merely to have a celestial buddy, but to be united to God.

Each of these models is helpful, but in the end it is incomplete. To understand the vertical stem of the Cross, our relationship with God in Christ, we must hold them all together, and in doing so somehow reach beyond them all. Together they call us to embrace the mystery that the love at the heart of all existence wants to be in relationship with us, and that the Cross is central to our Christian way of knowing it.

Perhaps during Lent the most poignant way we put feet on this is in the simple liturgical action of crossing ourselves. Jesus said in Luke 9:23, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Crossing yourself is a symbolic way of taking for our own the Cross of Christ. If we claim the Cross of Christ as our own we enter into the relationship God has offered. We nail ourselves in all our falseness to the Cross, and in hope of the resurrection, we take upon ourselves the truth of God in Christ.