

Meditation on the Cross

By Sarah Colyn

In *Restoring the Christian Soul* Leanne wrote about her practice of regularly kneeling in the quiet of a small chapel. “It had a wonderful crucifix over its altar, and above that an exquisite old stained-glass window depicting the risen Christ.” Her prayers in this special place taught her much about how the deepest needs of our souls are met by looking to Christ and His Cross. As she wrote, “Our hearts need to picture these great and grave actions of Christ aright, for they image the great story of our salvation. The head may well know Christian doctrine while at the same time the heart is starved for the story and the experience of love and forgiveness that comes with it. It’s as if God has been waiting for us to once again be able to see with our hearts the great truths of our faith and receive the healing word and vision He is always sending” (*Restoring the Christian Soul*, p. 63).

The Cross of Christ is *the* sign for all who call Him Lord. In the Cross I see my full redemption, in the Cross you see your full redemption, and in the Cross we see the full redemption of the whole of creation. And yet our grasp of the Cross so quickly shrivels to abstract head-knowledge about a historic fact. This potent and priceless sign of our faith is diminished by unappreciative familiarity, leaving us insensitive to its earthquake of eternity-changing meaning. In the season of Lent we make a special journey seeking an intuition of the Real, that we might apprehend the whole and living sign of the Cross. We fast and pray, we join together for special liturgies, and we call on the Holy Spirit to wake up our hearts that we might look and see Christ and Him crucified. Believers today do not so much need the Cross *explained* as *illuminated*. We do not so much need to *understand* what the Cross represents as we need to *stand under* the Cross, yielding all that we are to all that Christ accomplished there.

One of the great costs of our abstract notions of the Cross is that it is reduced in our minds to the meaning that can be held in a single sentence. As though I could answer the question, “What happened on the Cross?” with one fill-in-the-blank description of this center point of all reality. Truly one needs the tongue of a poet to express the multicolored splendor of the Cross, as Traherne offers here:

The cross is the abyss of wonders, the centre of desires, the school of virtues, the house of wisdom, the throne of love, the theatre of joys, and the place of sorrows; it is the root of happiness, and the gate of heaven.

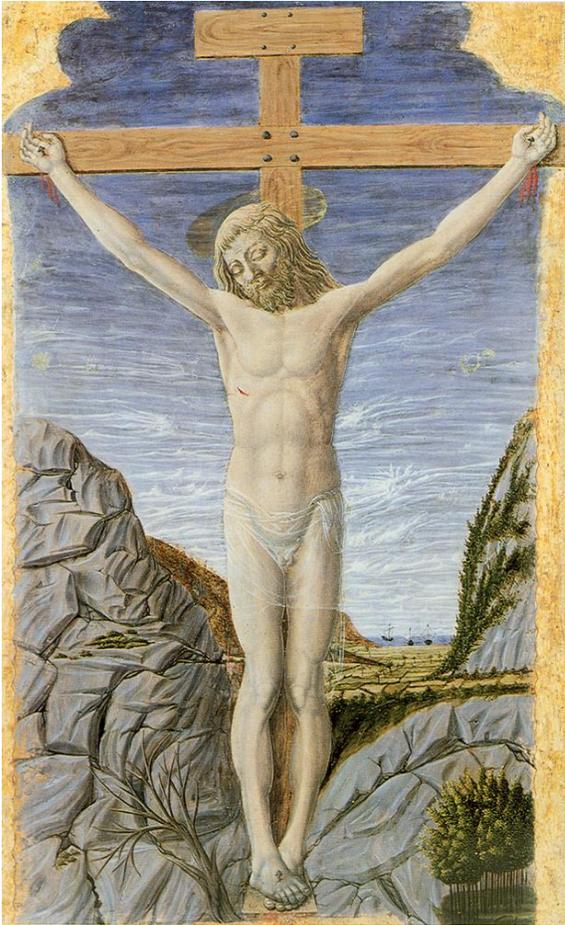
Of all things in heaven and earth it is the most peculiar. It is the most exalted of all objects. It is an ensign lifted up for all nations, to it shall the gentiles seek. His rest shall be glorious: the dispersed of Judah shall be gathered together to it, from the four corners of the earth. If love be the weight of the soul, and its object the centre, all eyes and hearts may convert and turn unto this object, cleave unto this centre, and by it enter into rest. There we may see God’s goodness, wisdom and power: yea his mercy and anger displayed. There we may see man’s sin and infinite value, his hope and fear, his misery and happiness. There we might see the Rock of Ages, and the joys of heaven. There we may see a man loving all the world, and a God dying for mankind.

(Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*)

Indeed, the Cross is the sign of our one true God reaching us with many facets of His grace. If we desire to see the Cross truly, we will want to enrich our souls with the wealth of Christian tradition. In this meditation I am sharing words from P. T. Forsyth’s *Cruciality of the Cross* and Alexander Schmemmann’s *Of Water and the Spirit*. These two men were graced with a particularly deep love for the truth of Christ’s Cross. I encourage you to take these writings not just into your head but into your belly. Partake of their richness as you would a morsel of filet mignon (or a grilled portabella for those who are fasting from meat). You may want to write out these passages in your prayer journal and let the images and phrases take you further into the mystery of the Cross. Meditate, make the sign on your forehead or body, dream, sing, write, imagine, kneel or lie prostrate, and ask that the manifold power and beauty of the Cross might draw the whole of you deeper into Christian reality. Along with the passages from Schmemmann and Forsyth are prayers, Scriptures and songs in the hopes that these words will lead to your own spontaneous words of response to all that God is giving you at the Cross. *Come, Holy Spirit, bridge the chasm that separates head from heart, and draw us into the wholeness and union given only and ever at the foot of the Cross of Christ.*

The sign of the One we can trust

“ . . . who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17b NIV)

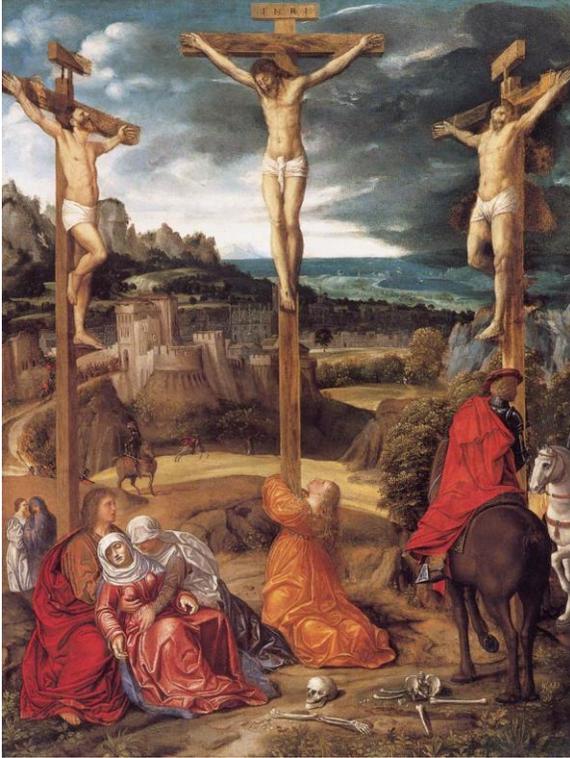


“Is not the Holy God the heart of things and the head of things—the eternal good, central, self-poised, unmoved amid the millions of souls that lift to Him their eye, their need, their cry, their trust, or their hate, as His holiness goes out in love? Would entire faith be possible without that eternal and holy goodness, changeless behind all the love we trust? A love that could change we might love, but we could not trust it, however intense. It is the holiness within love that is the ground of such trust in it as makes religion. It is this holiness that enables us to meet the love of God with faith, and not merely with gladness; to trust it for ever, and not only welcome it at a time. And the Christian plea is that eternal holiness is nowhere secured and satisfied but in the sinless cross, which is therefore at the centre of life and things.” (Forsyth, pp. 143-145)

Yes, Lord, as I lift my eyes to Your Cross, it is Your holiness that I see. Your Presence is ineffable—I fall silent in awe before Your Cross, the deepest regions of my heart stirred without words or even thought. All I know is that I am drawn to You with all that I am. My rebellion and self-will meet their end in the power of Your crucifixion. All that is hungry and needy within me knows that You are the One—that on Your Cross You are pouring out the love I have been searching for always. I lift my eyes to you as does every soul You have ever created, and even in this place of dreadful awe, praise for Your holiness wells up from my very foundations. You have made a way for me to meet Your love with faith, and I bow here as the undeserving recipient of the miracle of sight. I see You, Lord. I see Your eternal goodness. Here on Your sinless Cross, the center and foundation of the universe, You bring me into the truth of all things—body, soul and spirit—and I know that You are holy.

The sign of what sin really is

“We have turned every one to his own way.” (Isaiah 53:6b KJV)

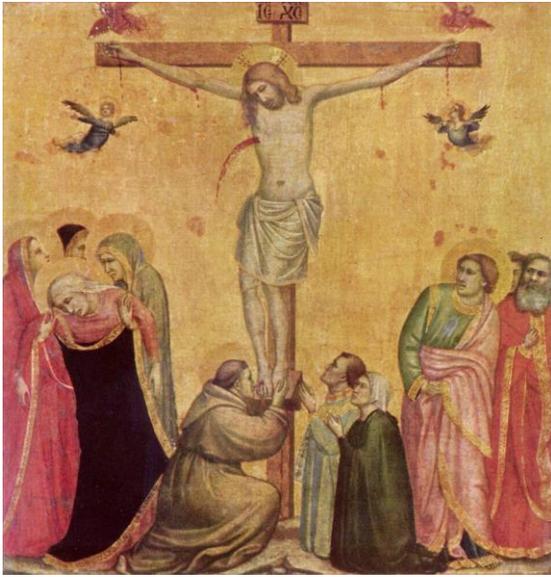


“The Cross reveals each and every sin—committed from the beginning and until the end of the world, in all times, in all places, by all men regardless of whether they lived before or after Christ, of whether they believed in Him or not—to be the *rejection of God*, the acceptance of and the surrender to the very *reality of Evil*, whose ultimate expression is the rejection and crucifixion of Christ.”
(Schmemmann, p. 88)

Lord, I thank You for bringing me into the truth. I thank You for Your Cross as the stark and horrifying picture of what sin does to goodness, beauty, and truth. In the hate-filled execution of Love Incarnate, I see what sin really is. Come, Holy Spirit, and help me fully receive this truth. Father, I confess that I am fallen, and have lived my whole life in this fallen world. I confess that every sin that has tragically misshaped my life was at its heart a rejection of You and a surrender to Evil. I thank You for lifting up this picture, this reality, that sin hates You and tries to destroy everything You have made, including me. I kneel before Your Cross now and praise You for planting Yourself between me and sin, between me and Evil. I say yes, Lord, reveal sin for what it is. Be lifted up and draw all men to Yourself. Be lifted up and draw everything in me, all that I am, to You. I confess my fundamental sin of rejecting You and of accepting and surrendering to Evil. Forgive me, Lord. And I confess that every sin committed against me was a rejection of You, and I choose to forgive, Lord, and ask You now to draw that rejection out of my body and into Yours. I ask You to plant Your Cross between me and the consequences of those sins. I receive forgiveness and cleansing from You now—body, soul and spirit—and rest in the shadow of Your wondrous Cross.

The sign of love

“I have loved you with an everlasting love.” (Jeremiah 31:3b NIV)



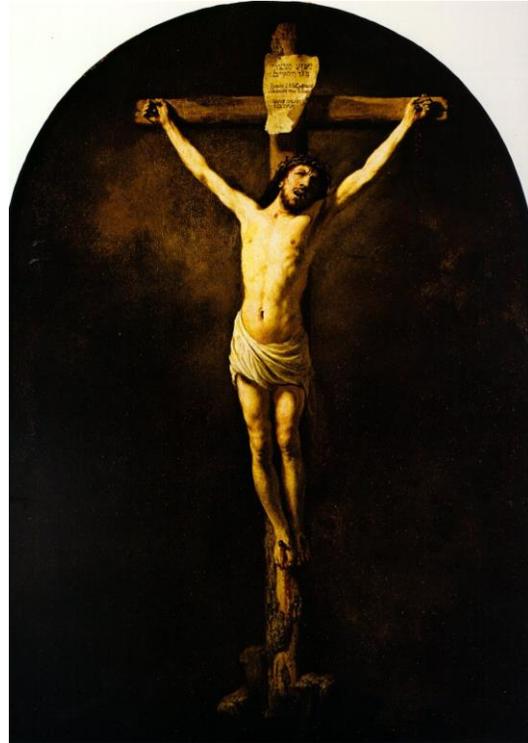
Bless the Lord, oh my soul. Bless You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yes, Holy One, yes: shed Your love into my heart. With every breath I draw, every tear I cry, shed Your love into my heart. Reach me with Your insatiable holy love, embrace me with Your insatiable holy love, submerge me in Your insatiable holy love, lift me into Your insatiable holy love. Take my whole personality into union with You. Let Your death and Your life be my true center. Another lives in me; insatiable holy Love lives in me. Bless the Lord, oh my soul.

“We make sacrifices, and costly ones, which yet do not draw blood from us. They do not come home. They do not go to the very centre of our life. They do not touch the nerve or strain the heart. A man may devote the toil of a self-denying life to a book of stupendous research on the gravest of subjects, which yet makes no call on his inmost self, and is not written with his blood but only with a sweating brow. We get the toiler in calm research, the genius of scholarly combination perhaps, but not the man. But when we speak of the blood of Christ we mean that what He did drew upon the very citadel of His personality and involved His total self. The foundations of His great deep were broken up. His whole personality was put into His work and identified with it; not merely His whole interest or ambition. The saving work of God drew blood from Christ as it drew Christ from God—and not from God’s side only but from His heart. Christ’s work touched the quick of God; as it touched the quick also of His own divinest life, and stirred up all that was within Him to bless and magnify God’s holy name. He poured out His soul unto death. God, in His insatiable holy love, was exigent even on Him, and spared not His own Son. Man’s sin drew upon all God’s Son, and taxed the Holiest to the height. It made call upon what is most deep in Christ and dear to God—Himself, His person, His vital soul, His blood. The love of God is only shed into our hearts in the shedding of that most precious blood.” (Forsyth, pp. 194-196)

The sign of a jealous God

“ . . . for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.” (Exodus 20:5b NIV)

“In being ‘made sin,’ treated as sin (though not as a sinner), Christ experienced sin as God does, while He experienced its effects as man does. He felt sin with God, and sin’s judgment with men. He realized, as God, how real sin was, how radical, how malignant, how deadly to the Holy One’s very being. When Christ died at sin’s hands it meant that sin was death to the holiness of God, and both could not live in the same world. When He rose it meant that what was to live and rule in the world was the holy God.” (Forsyth, pp. 212-213)

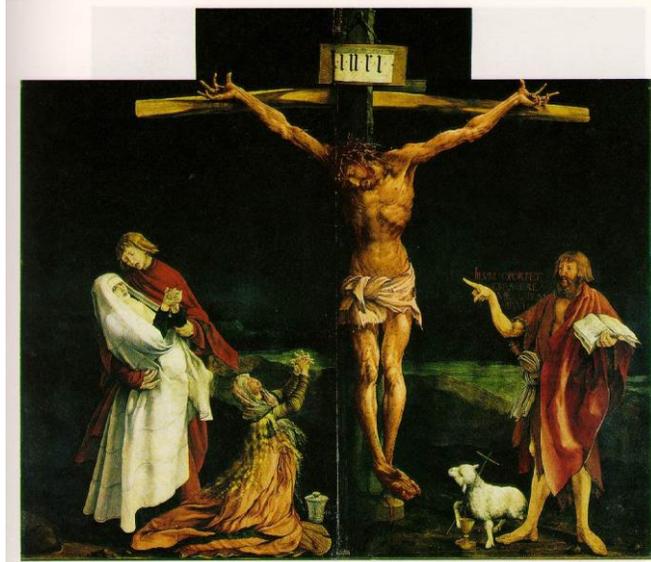


Praise the name of the Lord! Praise Your jealousy, praise Your might, praise You, consuming fire! You are my God, the One who will not share Your world with sin, the One who will never compromise, the One who will never relinquish any territory or give up anything that belongs to You! You will be God, You will be I Am, now and forever, amen! You are the truth and You know the truth. There is no shadow of turning in You. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! You live and rule. All honor and glory and praise, now and forever, be Yours!

The sign of the King

“King of Kings and Lord of Lords.” (Revelation 19:16b NIV)

“As Christ stands before His judges, is condemned, mocked, insulted, nailed to the Cross, suffers and dies, it is He and He alone who triumphs; for it is His obedience, His love, His forgiveness that are revealed as overcoming ‘this world,’ and it is from the very depth of His apparent defeat that we hear the first confession of Him as King: in Pilate’s inscription on the Cross, in the cry of the dying thief, in the ‘creed’ of the centurion—‘truly this Man is the Son of God.’” (Schmemmann, p. 90)



Praise You, King of creation! Praise you, Jesus, for in Your obedience You have set us free! You have overcome this world and all its darkness. No longer must I serve the rulers of the powers of the air. Jesus, You are King of Kings and Lord of Lords. You are my King. As I kneel here before Your Cross, I ask you again to ascend and reign on the throne of my heart. What could win my whole-hearted allegiance but Your perfect obedience and love. Praise You, Lord, for You have saved this mocker and made me Your servant forever. All hail, King Jesus!

For further meditation, here are some hymns of the Cross:

“O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” (author Bernard of Clairvaux, 1091-1153, translated by James W. Alexander, 1830; tune Passion Chorale, Hassler).

“Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted” (Author: Thomas Kelly, 1804; Tune: O Mein Jesu, Ich Muss Sterben)

“Were You There?” (African-American spiritual)

“In Christ Alone” (Getty & Townend, 2001)

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (Author: Isaac Watts, 1707)