

BRIAN
ZAHND

A POETIC
THEOLOGY
OF THE
CROSS

THE
WOOD
BETWEEN
THE
WORLDS



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THE WOOD BETWEEN THE WORLDS

There's blood on the wood between the worlds.

BOB AYALA

WHEN WE LOOK AT A CRUCIFIX what do we see? A naked man nailed to a tree. A macabre image of bleeding flesh fastened to wood by cold iron. Viewed objectively it's abhorrent—like those ghastly photos of lynchings. Strangely, many find solace as they look upon a depiction of this naked man nailed to a tree. Finding comfort in such death is a mystery we will explore. But most modern people find it neither ghastly nor consoling—for them it's just a banal religious cliché barely noticed. On canvas and wood, in stone and metal, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ has been painted, carved, sculpted, and molded billions of times. *Billions!* Everyone has seen a crucifix. Its long history and sheer ubiquity have rendered it almost invisible. Yet if we give just a moment of serious consideration to a crucifix it is still capable of shocking us, if for no other reason than it is such an outrageous anthropological absurdity.

From our beginning, we Homo sapiens have created images as a way of representing and interpreting our world. We took up painting while living in caves. Those located in Cáceres, Spain, are sixty-four

thousand years old! We've been doing this for a long time. Clearly, we are a species given to symbolic artistic endeavor. It's not tangential to our being—it's central. Whether in primitive cave paintings or masterpieces housed in museums, we have sought to depict through art that which gives meaning to our lives. Art is a window into the human imagination.

Now reflect upon this strange fact: our single most depicted story-image is of a man nailed to a tree. Considered from an anthropological point of view, how bizarre it is that Jesus of Nazareth portrayed as crucified is the most replicated work of art in human history! This must indicate something deeply significant about the human experience. Of course religion is at work here. Christians bring meaning to the crucifixion by confessing that the crucified one is, in fact, God. Nevertheless, the religious element doesn't explain everything. Depictions of deities and their avatars have been common throughout history, be it Ra shining like the sun, Krishna riding triumphantly in his chariot, or Buddha sitting in the tranquil bliss of enlightenment. But the depiction of a tortured god nailed to a tree is not something we would expect. A crucified god is an absurd incongruity, yet it's the event we have depicted the most. *That* must mean something!

Ask yourself this question: What would alien visitors to our planet make of our billions of crucifixes? I once saw a cartoon that illustrates this point. Two space aliens who have just landed their flying saucer on Earth are standing in front of a life-sized crucifix, like the kind you can find along roadsides in Spain. One alien says to the other, "You know what we need to do? We need to get the f— out of here, that's what we need to do." The expletive accentuates the absurdist humor. The cartoon may be somewhat profane, but it also alerts us to how shocking and unsettling a crucifix is when considered objectively. The aliens have concluded that a planet whose inhabitants erect public depictions of crucifixions is probably not a safe place—and they are not wrong.

The space alien cartoon is not the first to use the crucifixion as its subject matter. Around AD 200 someone scratched a blasphemous

graffiti on a plaster wall in Rome, evidently intended to mock a Christian by the name of Alexamenos. It depicts a crucified man with the head of a donkey, while a young man worships the crucified victim. An inscription in misspelled Greek reads, “Alexamenos worships his god.” (Note that this image, as well as several other pieces of art that are referenced, can be viewed on the color insert near the center of this book.)

Clearly someone thought it comical that Alexamenos worshiped the god of the Christians—a Galilean Jew who had been crucified by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. What did Alexamenos think of this insult? We may know. In a room adjacent to where the blasphemous graffiti was found, another graffiti written in another hand reads, “Alexamenos is faithful.” This is a fascinating glimpse into the world of early Christianity—a time long before the worship of a crucified god could be dismissed as cliché.

A CAMINO OF CRUCIFIXES

My wife and I have walked the five-hundred-mile Francés route on the Camino de Santiago across northern Spain numerous times, but our first trek began (by happy accident) on Holy Cross Day, September 14. On this feast day dedicated to the cross itself, I sensed the Holy Spirit giving me some specific instructions for our forty-day pilgrimage:

Enter every church you can.

Pay attention to the crucifix.

Ask what does this mean?

Don't be too quick to give an answer.

For forty days and five hundred miles I paid attention to hundreds of crucifixes, always asking what it meant and resisting easy answers. It was a profound spiritual exercise.

In the Protestant world crucifixes are uncommon, and in many denominations, they are altogether absent. Instead of portraying Christ as crucified, many Protestant churches have opted for an abstract symbol of a cross. Ostensibly it represents the same thing, but absent a crucified Christ it is easy to sanitize the cross to a prosaic

theological formula. A geometric design of two interesting lines does not evoke the pathos of a crucifix. Geometry doesn't tell a story.

As a Protestant I had not been around the life-sized crucifixes found in Catholic churches on a regular basis, but now I was encountering them several times a day. Contemplating them was a powerful reminder that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was not an equation in a salvation formula; it was an *event*. It was something that happened within history. Because I was on pilgrimage, I wasn't seeing the same crucifix over and over. Instead, I saw hundreds of different crucifixes, but they were not mass-produced copies. Each crucifix, whether in a grand cathedral or in a small village chapel, was an original. In some Jesus was serene, in others he was in anguish. In some Jesus was still alive, in others he had already died. Some were strangely beautiful, while others accentuated the horror. One of my favorites stood in a tiny hilltop chapel near Zabaldika, surrounded by hundreds of green Post-it notes, giving it the appearance of Jesus crucified in a verdant forest. Upon closer inspection the notes were prayer requests written by pilgrims. The crucified Christ in a forest of prayer was an exceptionally peaceful place.

For six weeks I saw different crucifixes every day, and as I walked, I meditated on what it meant that when the Son of God came into the world he was nailed to a tree. I heeded the Spirit's admonition to resist a quick answer. This is the bane of tidy atonement theories. The idea that we can sum up the meaning of the crucifixion in a sentence or two borders on the blasphemous. Atonement theories have an unfortunate tendency to reduce the crucifixion to a single meaning. This is an enormous mistake. If you're going to dabble in atonement theories, at least keep it plural. Reducing the cross to a single meaning quarantines the cross so it doesn't touch too many areas of our lives.

The crucifixion means everything. Everything that can be known about God is in some way present at the cross.

It's the pinnacle of divine self-disclosure, the eternal moment of forgiveness, divine solidarity with human suffering, the enduring model

of discipleship, the supreme demonstration of divine love, the beauty that saves the world, the re-founding of the world around an axis of love, the overthrow of the satan, the shaming of the principalities and powers, the unmasking of mob violence, the condemnation of state violence, the exposé of political power, the abolition of war, the sacrifice to end sacrificing, the great divide of humankind, the healing center of the cosmos, the death by which death is conquered, the Lamb upon the throne, the tree of life recovered and revealed. And with this brief list of interpretations, I've come nowhere near exhausting the meaning of the cross, for indeed the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is an inexhaustible revelation of who God is.

This book is my humble attempt to communicate some of the mysteries I've glimpsed while meditating on Christ crucified. I've written all my books with a candle burning in front of a Byzantine cross icon sitting on my writing desk. I want Christ crucified to preside over every book I write, but especially this one. I won't try to "sum up" what the cross means, as doing so would be to treat the cross dismissively. Instead, I want to muse on the deep mystery of the cross. Rather than searching for a final word, I seek an eternal recurrence of holy awe.

I want to be drawn into a contemplative orbit around the cross. Because along with everything else the cross is, it is the epicenter of Christian faith. At the center of the gospel we don't find perennial wisdom spirituality, proverbial advice on how to achieve success, or "practical sermons" that you can "apply to your life." What we find is the disorienting story of the God-Man nailed to a tree. *Christ crucified is ever and always the true focus of the gospel proclamation.*

This is why the apostle Paul told the Corinthians that in proclaiming the mystery of God, he determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). As we look at the cross, we encounter the mystery of God, not an atonement theory. I don't want to reduce the cross to one of the Four Spiritual Laws or a waypoint

on the Roman Road or a single sentence in a statement of faith. We don't need a technical manual on the cross, we need something more like a theopoetics of the cross.

*The cross of Christ is the wood between the worlds.
There is the world that was and the world to come,
and in between those two worlds
is the wood upon which the Son of God was hung.*

A TALE OF TWO TREES

Trees abound at the beginning of the Bible. At the center of our paradisiacal innocence that was Eden, there were two mysterious trees—the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Both trees were blessed by God, but the fruit of the second tree eaten out of season was poisonous. And that's when the trouble began. Loss of innocence, shame and blame, banishment and exile followed. Adam and Eve were forced to venture into a world bereft of the tree of life. Outside the gates of Eden the specter of death awaited them. The first death did not come from Adam or Eve having grown old, but when their firstborn slew their second son. (Was it with a wooden club fashioned from a tree as Pietro Novelli depicts in a famous painting?)

After his crime Cain fled east of Eden to found the first city. And the blood of all the slain Abels throughout history cries against the violence that is the foundation of human civilization. We live in the world that war hath wrought. Cain inaugurated the pattern that all great empires would follow, what the Bible cryptically calls Babylon. Cain's fratricidal DNA is found in the genetics of every empire: Call your brother other and enemy. Tell yourself it must be done. Slay the indigenous Abels. Hide the bodies. Lie to yourself and God about it. Move further away from Eden. Repeat, repeat, repeat . . .

This is the world that was, and in many ways still is. But in the midst of history something has happened. The tree of life has been found again. This eternal tree was first planted by God in paradise and then lost to the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve when the

gates of Eden closed behind them. But this time, the tree of life was not planted in paradise; it was planted upon a skull-like hill called Golgotha. It's a forlorn tree having but two branches. It was, in fact, a killing tree. Its strange and bitter fruit was death for all who hung upon it. Golgotha's tree embraced living men and released them only once they were dead.

This was the tree upon which the living One was hung. Jesus of Nazareth. The Christ. The Son of Man. The Son of God. The Lamb of God. The Word of God. The Logos made flesh. The New Adam. The way, the truth, and the life. Crucifixion can extinguish the life of those who are already dead in their sins and trespasses, but this is no mere son of Adam; this is the Son of the living God. "The first man, Adam, became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:45). The Son of God entered the world of the dead and dying children of Adam as one possessing the spirit of life—and "the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev 17:11). When the blood of the Son of God stained the wood that stood upon Skull Hill, it became the tree of life. What once was lost behind the closed gates of Eden has now been found. The cross of Christ *is* the tree of life. Our long exile east of Eden is over and we can at last return home. The tree of life has forever opened the once-closed gates of paradise (Rev 2:7; 21:25; 22:14).

The cross of Christ is the wood between the worlds—the world that was and the world to come.

At the end of the Nicene Creed, Christians confess, "we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." According to our great confession there is a world to come—a world whose eschatological vision is set forth at the end of the Bible with these exceedingly hopeful words:

See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away. (Rev 21:3-4)

Christians confess that the world to come is somehow made possible by the cross of Christ. As in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, the wood between the worlds is a portal. In this world of sin and death we do not despair because we believe the cross will transport us to a world where, in the beloved words of Lady Julian, "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."¹

Space aliens looking at a crucifix may see nothing but a graphic testament to a violent world, but we who believe the gospel story see something else. We see the place where an old world died with the death of Christ, and we see the act of redemption that opened the door to a world made new. Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* had its flaws, but anachronistically placing "See, I am making all things new" (Rev 21:5) in the mouth of Jesus as he carries his cross to Golgotha was a sophisticated artistic and theological move. The cross really is the point from which the world is made new. And though we still await the full arrival of the new Jerusalem, those in Christ inhabit the liminal space of the now and not yet. Clearly, we are still part of the old world that is passing away, but we also belong, even now, to the new creation to come.

Saint Paul says it like this: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being" (2 Cor 5:17). From the vantage of the wood between the worlds we see both realities at the same time. We see the broken world that everyone else sees, but we also catch glimpses of the beautiful world to come. Inspired by what we see in the world to come, we advocate for its possibility here and now. This is part of the prophetic task of the church. In his book *Reality, Grief, Hope*, Walter Brueggemann says the three prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a

society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.² And the cross is always the primary source for the church's prophetic witness.

THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

If we encountered the aliens before they fled in their flying saucer and attempted some extraterrestrial evangelism by explaining that the crucifix is a retelling of what happened to God when he visited our planet, but that his crucifixion was, in fact, the act which saves the world . . . well, I can imagine some alien incredulity. But perhaps no more than what the apostles encountered in the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity. The apostle Paul readily admitted that for his Jewish audience the message of a crucified messiah was an outrageous scandal, while his Gentile audience found the very notion of a crucified god laughable and foolish (1 Cor 1:23).

The gospel is not sensible advice on how to have a better life. If what Paul and subsequent Christians claim about the cross is not true, it is either a scandalous blasphemy or a ludicrous joke. Put bluntly, the cross is an offence. Its meaning is not clear to either religious expectations or common sense. If in the time of the apostles you were trying to invent a religion with mass appeal, you wouldn't place a crucifixion at the center of it. A sacrificial or heroic death, perhaps, but not a *crucifixion*.

At the dawn of Christianity, crucifixion was so repulsive that the word itself was avoided in polite company. Fleming Rutledge observes, "The cross is by a very long way the most *irreligious* object ever to find its way into the heart of faith."³ Midway through the first century AD, who could have predicted that within a few hundred years there would be millions of people who believed that a *crucified* Jew from Galilee is indeed the Son of God and Savior of the world? Yet this is exactly what happened. Significantly, the apostles and first evangelists didn't try to *prove* the gospel of the cross; they *proclaimed* it. Their gospel message wasn't an analytic explanation; it was a

shocking announcement. They proclaimed a message that had at its center what contemporary society considered the vilest concept imaginable: crucifixion. And as improbable as it seems, this message eventually turned the Roman world upside down and altered the course of Western civilization.

How do we explain this? In a word, resurrection. The Romans crucified hundreds of thousands of people, most of them slaves and rebels. Crucifixion was horrific but not uncommon. From the point of view of those who passed by Golgotha on Good Friday, there was nothing unique in the crucifixion of the Galilean who hung in the center of three crosses. What is unique is Easter. Christ the crucified is also Christ the risen. When we speak of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ it is always in light of the resurrection. It is the light shining from the empty tomb that illuminates the cross so that we can understand it correctly. When we speak of the crucified Christ, we always mean the crucified-risen Christ. To properly interpret the crucifixion and the resurrection they must always be held together. What Saint Peter said to the Sanhedrin is the foundation for understanding the cross: "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree" (Acts 5:30). The tree of Calvary is the wood between the old world dominated by death and the new world animated by resurrection. And it's in this light that we can begin to explore what it all means.

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