

THE SIGN AND THE SACRIFICE

*The Meaning of the Cross
and Resurrection*

Rowan Williams

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Part 1

THE MEANING OF
THE CROSS

1

The sign

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (Peter 2.21–24, NRSV)

When we go into a Christian place of worship, we expect to see a cross. And when crosses are removed from public places, such as crematoria or hospital chapels, we quite reasonably get rather indignant about it. But in the world in which Christianity began, a place of worship was the last place you would expect to see a cross. We can only begin to get some sense of what it might have felt like to encounter the symbol of a cross in the first couple of Christian centuries if we imagine coming into a church and being faced with a large picture of an electric chair, or perhaps a guillotine. The cross was a sign of suffering, humiliation, disgrace. It was a sign of an all-powerful

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empire that held life very cheap indeed: a forceful and immediate reminder to everybody that their lives were in the hands of the state. You might well be used to seeing crosses on the outskirts of towns or by the side of the road, but most definitely not in any place of worship.

When Jesus was a small boy there was a revolt in Galilee that was brutally suppressed by the Romans. We're told that there were thousands of crosses by the roads of Galilee. When in the Gospels Jesus speaks of picking up your cross and following him, he is not using a religious metaphor for things becoming a bit difficult.

So a group of people who proclaimed that the sign of their allegiance was a cross had a lot of explaining to do; and so we will be looking at some of the ways in which the first Christians tried to explain themselves. Because once we get past the surface level of being used today to seeing crosses around as a religious symbol, once we let ourselves recognize what it is that we are looking at, we are bound to be faced with some of the same questions. What is this about? How does it work? Why do we have an instrument of torture at the centre of our imagination?

The early Christians must have felt that they had no option but to talk about the cross. They knew that because of the death of Jesus on the cross their universe had changed. They no longer lived in the same world. They expressed this with enormous force, talking about a new

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creation, about liberation from slavery. They talked about the transformation of their whole lives and they pinned it down to the events that we remember each Good Friday. They couldn't get away from the cross – or so at least the New Testament seems to imply. There are in fact some New Testament scholars who try to argue that reflection on the cross of Jesus came in a little bit later. First came Jesus the charismatic teacher, the wandering prophet; first came an interest in his words rather than his deeds or his sufferings. And yet, when you read the earliest texts of Christian Scripture, not only the Gospels, it's difficult to excavate any stratum of thinking that is, as you might say, 'pre-cross'. Pretty well everything we read in the New Testament is shadowed by the cross. It is, first and foremost, the *sign* of how much has changed and how it has changed.

Even non-Christians in the world around recognized the central importance of the cross to Jesus' early followers. The earliest picture we have of the crucifixion is scratched on a wall in Rome; it may be as old as the second century. It is a rather shocking image: a man with a donkey's head strapped and nailed to a cross, and next to the cross a very badly drawn little figure wearing the short tunic of a slave, and scribbled above it, 'Alexamenos worshipping his god'. Presumably one of Alexamenos's fellow slaves had scrawled this little cartoon on the wall to make fun of him. But he

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knew, as Alexamenos knew, that Alexamenos' god was a crucified God.

The first Christians had some explaining to do; and so do we. In one of the great Christian poems of the twentieth century (the second of the *Four Quartets*), T. S. Eliot writes, 'Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.' That's the agenda for our reflections in this chapter: why is this instrument of suffering and death a sign of what is good?

The early Christians were at a huge disadvantage. They claimed that the world had changed because somebody had been executed by a death normally reserved for slaves and rebels. They were saying that their new life depended on somebody who had been so much at odds with the Roman world that the full force of the empire had crushed him. That might not in itself have been fatal if it had been possible to say that he died because he was defending his nation and his faith. In the couple of centuries just before the birth of Jesus, the Jewish people had begun to develop theories about martyrdom. They had come to believe that when somebody died for the law and for the nation, that person's death was pleasing to God: there's a phrase from a text of that time, affirming that 'God considers the soul of a man to be a worthy sacrifice.' But Jesus did not die defending the nation or the law against foreign oppression. He died because those who ruled his nation had collaborated with the oppressor. The early

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Christians were thus caught in a sort of pincer movement: here was somebody condemned by the state and rejected by the religious authorities of his own people. So, imagine you're an early Christian and this is your sign. What is it a sign of?

Sign of God's love and freedom

Several times in the New Testament we encounter a phrase like 'God demonstrates' or 'proves' his love for the world by or through the cross. It's there, for example, in Romans 5.8: 'Christ died for us . . . and that is God's own proof of his love towards us.' We find similar language in 1 Timothy 2 and several times in the first letter of John. God has 'proved' his love for us through Jesus, and particularly through the death of Jesus. The Gospel of John goes even further, speaking of the death of Jesus as his 'glorification': when Jesus dies God's glory becomes fully manifest. So the execution of Jesus is a proof that God loves us, and so is also a demonstration of the *kind* of God that we are talking about. In John 12 Jesus says: 'When I am lifted up, I will draw everyone to me' – and the context makes it clear that his hearers are puzzled and shocked by the allusion to crucifixion. This is how the early Christians begin to push back at the expectations, you might almost say the clichés, of the world around. Yes, the cross is our sign and it is a sign of the kind of God we believe in.

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How then does the execution of Jesus show the love of God? How does it become that sort of sign? We have a hint in Luke 23.34 and in the first letter of Peter 2.23. In Luke, as Jesus is crucified he says, ‘Father, forgive.’ And in Peter’s letter we are reminded that when Jesus is abused he doesn’t retaliate: ‘When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate.’ Here is a divine love that cannot be defeated by violence: we do our worst, and we still fail to put God off. We reject, exclude and murder the one who bears the love of God in his words and work, and that love continues to do exactly what it always did. The Jesus who is dying on the cross is completely consistent with the Jesus we have followed through his ministry, and this consistency shows that we can’t deflect the love that comes through in life and death. So when Pilate and the High Priest – acting on behalf of all of us, it seems – push God in Jesus to the edge, God in Jesus gently but firmly pushes back, doing exactly what he always did: loving, forgiving, healing.

So the cross is a sign of the transcendent freedom of the love of God. This is a God whose actions, and whose

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reactions to us, cannot be dictated by what we do. You can’t trap, trick or force God into behaving against his character. You can do what you like: but God is God. And if he wants

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to love and forgive then he's going to love and forgive whether you like it or not, because he is free. Our lives, in contrast, are regularly dominated by a kind of emotional economics: 'I give you that; you give me this.' 'I give you friendship; you give me friendship.' 'You treat me badly, and I'll treat you badly.' We're caught up in cycles of tit-for-tat behaviour. But God is not caught up in any cycle: God is free to be who he decides to be, and we can't do anything about it.

And that's the good news: the good news of our powerlessness to change God's mind. Which is just as well, because God's mind is focused upon us for mercy and for life. God will always survive our sin, our failure. God is never exhausted by what we do. God is always there, capable of remaking the relationships we break again and again. That's the sign of the cross, the sign of freedom.

It's out of that aspect of the New Testament – one strand among several – that the tradition arises in Christian history that has sometimes been called 'exemplarism': the cross of Christ is an example. 'Christ . . . suffered for you, leaving you an example,' says 1 Peter 2.21. Jesus was free from the vicious circle of retaliation, and so can we be and so should we be. Christ did not retaliate, return abuse for abuse; so neither should we. In the Acts of the Apostles we see that the free forgiveness of Jesus on the cross is already shaping the response of the disciples, because when

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Stephen – the first martyr – faces his execution, he says something very similar to what Jesus says. What Jesus said to the Father, Stephen says to Jesus: ‘Do not hold this sin against them’ (Acts 7.60). Already, it seems, the way in which Jesus died on the cross has become a model that Christian believers must follow. And so, if we imitate the non-violent, non-retaliatory response of Jesus, we ourselves become a sign of the same divine love. We in our lives, in our willingness to be reconciled, show the world what kind of God we believe in: a God who is free from the vicious circle of violence and retaliation.

But it’s not only that. The cross is an example *to* us but also an example *for* us. It is, in the old sense of example, a ‘sample’ of the love of God. This is what the love of God is like: it is free and therefore it is both all-powerful and completely vulnerable. All-powerful because it is always free to overcome, but vulnerable because it has no way of

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guaranteeing worldly success. The love of God belongs to a different order, not the order of power, manipulation and getting on top, which is the kind of power that pre-occupies us. This takes us a bit beyond what the New Testament says in so many words, but only a bit. It’s a very natural way for the idea to develop, and it’s been very powerful in much Christian

thinking. It allows us to say that the love of God is the kind of love that identifies with the powerless; the kind of love that appeals to nothing but its own integrity, that doesn't seek to force or batter its way through. It lives, it survives, it 'wins' simply by being itself. On the cross, God's love just is what it is and it's valid and world-changing and earth-shattering, even though at that moment what it means in the world's terms is failure, terror and death.

This has always been for Christians a hugely powerful idea: the defencelessness of the love of God, a love which has nothing but itself to rely on and yet somehow is all powerful. The weakness of God, said Paul, is stronger than human strength (1 Corinthians 1.25). And such a love – so many Christians have said – draws us towards Jesus. It has a magnetic force because it is a love that can't threaten us. How could we say no?

One of the people who most fully developed and reflected on this aspect of the cross was the twelfth-century philosopher and theologian Peter Abelard. He taught for many years in the schools of Paris, met with terrible personal tragedy and disaster, and ended his life as a monk. And it was he who first dwelt at length on the idea that the death of Jesus on the cross exemplifies a love that, when we have seen how it works, we simply can't refuse. One of the great novels of the twentieth century dealing with the Christian

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faith is Helen Waddell's *Peter Abelard*, a book in which Helen Waddell, a formidable scholar of the Middle Ages, seems to get right into the mind and the heart of Peter Abelard and of his lover and wife Eloise, and of the people around them – so much so that you really feel you are in Paris in the twelfth century and, yes, this must have been what they said to each other.

I'd like to dwell on two moments from that book. One is when Peter, in disgrace and deep despair, is trying to rebuild his life out in the country, having built a little hermitage. One of his former students is living alongside him, helping him with practical work and joining him at the altar. One day they're coming back from fishing and they hear a terrible cry, like a child's cry, coming from the woods behind them. They rush in the direction of the cry and find that it's not a child, it's a rabbit caught in a trap, squealing its life away in terrible anguish. They prise open the trap, the rabbit nestles its head for a moment in the crook of Peter's arm, and dies. And Peter feels for that moment overwhelmed by the sheer horror of the suffering that runs right through the world: his own suffering, the suffering he's inflicted on his wife, the suffering of this innocent animal. And to his amazement it's the student, Thibault, who has something to say to him.

'I think,' says Thibault nervously, 'God is in it too.'

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Abelard looked up sharply.

‘In it? Do you mean that it makes Him suffer, the way it does us?’

Again Thibault nodded.

‘Then why doesn’t He stop it?’

Thibault points to a tree near them:

That dark ring there, it goes up and down the whole length of the tree. But you only see it where it is cut across. That is what Christ’s life was; the bit of God that we saw . . . We think God is like that for ever, because it happened once, with Christ. But not the pain. Not the agony at the last. We think that stopped.

(Helen Waddell, *Peter Abelard*,
London, Constable 1933, p. 270)

Abelard asks whether he means that ‘all the pain of the world was Christ’s cross’ and Thibault says yes. The cross is the one moment when we see God and suffering brought together: but in fact it goes all the way through. Abelard is for a moment baffled and then intensely excited: ‘O God, if it were true . . . it would bring back the whole world.’

Like a good academic he goes off to write a book about it, and unsurprisingly the book gets him into trouble. At the very end of the novel, we catch a glimpse of his continuing struggles with ideas, with prayer and with God. But this time we see him from a distance. We’re back in

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Paris in the room of the old Canon of Notre Dame, Gilles, who has been a great friend to him in the past: an old and cynical and pleasure-loving man who still has a deeply kind heart. And with him is Eloise, mistress and then wife of Peter, and now the deeply respected and beloved abbess of her own monastery. She and Peter have exchanged some correspondence but it hasn't really got anywhere. She still cannot quite see why he has gone the way he has and why they had to part, why all the pain. And Gilles tells her that he's had a letter from Peter.

'Does he speak of me?' asks Eloise. 'Not yet,' Gilles replies. Eloise turns away to the window and when she turns round she sees a sight she had never expected to see, the old canon in tears. She goes to Gilles: 'Don't, Gilles. Beloved, you must not . . . It is over now. It doesn't hurt now.' She catches herself and says, 'Did you hear what I just said? . . . I can bear it now, because – because of you . . . Though why it should be – why you must break your heart to comfort mine . . .' Gilles looks at her, 'the old speculative gleam kindling in his eyes', and says, 'I wonder. Is that what men have asked of God?' (p. 282)

This takes us, I think, very close to the heart of why for many Christians the cross is a compelling sign not only of an inexhaustible love but of a *vulnerable* love. 'If it were true . . . it would bring back the whole world.' And it's strange and rather surprising to find the most orthodox

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and conventional thinker of the Middle Ages, the great St Thomas Aquinas, over a hundred years after Abelard, saying something very similar at one point. ‘The cross,’ says Aquinas, ‘prompts us to love, and it is by this that we are forgiven.’ The cross is what creates in us friendship with God. Here then is a very powerful and moving and resourceful tool for thinking about the cross. The sign of disgrace and exclusion, the sign of failure, is turned inside out to be a sign of that unique freedom which is God’s freedom to be God whatever we do. But it is also a sign of the riskiness, the vulnerability, which such freedom must mean.

Sign of God’s forgiveness

And yet, it has never been the whole of Christian thinking about the cross. Why not? If the cross were only an example of wonderful human behaviour, if the cross only said to us we should be ready to suffer nobly for our convictions or we should be non-violent and non-retaliatory, that would be and is inspiring, challenging (and alarming). But it doesn’t yet tell us quite why the cross has anything to do with the forgiveness of sins. So that alone can’t quite be all there is to it, in terms of the New Testament’s assumptions. Even with the cross as an example or ‘sample’ of God’s love drawing humankind towards Jesus, if this is just saying that the cross makes

or might make us change our minds – does this quite do justice to the idea of a new creation, a new horizon for all our lives, new possibilities created within us, without our knowing or thinking about it?

The New Testament seems to want to say more. Perhaps more to the point, Jesus himself seems to want to say more. ‘The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve,’ says Jesus in Mark 10.45, ‘and to give his life

The cross effects a change that happens independently of our efforts or ideas

as a ransom,’ a payment, something that releases prisoners and hostages from their bonds. He came to give his life as a transaction, not just as an example but an act that somehow springs the trap prior to any action or recognition of ours. The cross effects a change that happens independently of our efforts or ideas: the possibility of a deeply radically altered relationship with God, that doesn’t depend on us.

So to speak of the cross as ‘sign’ is one of the most immediately and emotionally powerful ways in. Yet it isn’t the only or the most comprehensive way of speaking. Every time we try to speak about how the cross works, we’re saying something lying on a spectrum between two extremes. At one extreme is a very stark, objective idea: God does something and that’s it. At the other extreme is subjectivity: we feel differently because of this event. In

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the Bible and in all Christian language and practice, these belong together. But the way in which people reflect on it all swings towards one end or the other of the spectrum. And what I've been speaking about in this chapter belongs at the more subjective end: what the cross causes us to feel, the difference made to how we think about God and ourselves and our world.

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

The writer of that hymn is looking at the cross, the sign of a 'love so amazing, so divine [that it] demands my soul, my life, my all'. But does everything depend on my ability to give 'my life, my soul, my all'? And is it really true that what the cross signifies is irresistible to human beings, automatically bringing back the whole world? It doesn't look like it, given the history of the world. Not so simple, surely. Yet so often it is this 'sign' element that most speaks to people, that addresses our fears and breaks down our defences, that *proves* to us (to go back to that aspect of New Testament language) that we needn't be afraid of God and that we needn't suffer alone in despair. A sign is something that communicates, that changes the world of meaning that we live in. It's a tangible word, a word that

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is expressed in an event, a symbol, a picture. And like other symbols and pictures it very often speaks to us at a level we can't fully make sense of. There have been many cases of people who, faced with the crucifix, can't ignore it or pass by.

There's a famous story from nineteenth-century France of a young military officer who made a bet with some of his colleagues. He was to go to confession in one of the big Paris churches and just pour out all the sins he could possibly think of to the priest in the most vivid and detailed terms. He did just that, thinking he'd been very clever. And on the other side of the grille there was a long silence and eventually the priest said, 'Now, my son, I want you to go back into the middle of the church in front of the big crucifix over the screen. I want you to look up at the crucifix and say, "You did that for me and I don't give a damn." And I want you to go on saying it as long as you can.' The young man went back and tried to do what he'd been instructed. He couldn't. He went off and joined a monastery. These are the levels at which the sign can work. So we mustn't imagine that because of the intellectual reservations there may be around this and the problems that they raise, we can easily let go of it.

A great twentieth-century French theologian said that in Holy Week, Jesus 'placed himself in the order of signs'. He made himself a symbol, a communication of God's

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love. And that's what we've been reflecting on in this chapter. Behind it and beyond it remains a mystery, a mystery that is in fact deeply connected with some of the themes we've already touched upon. If we're looking towards the freedom of the all-powerful God expressed in this failure and desolation, all kinds of images and ideas begin to unfold. And yet to think of the cross as the sign of freedom – God's freedom and therefore our freedom also – at least begins to clear the ground for thinking about some of the other images, the wealth of metaphor, that the rest of the New Testament brings to bear on the mystery.

For reflection or discussion

- 1 Try to imagine yourself as an early Christian believer. What might come into your mind when you think of the cross?
- 2 Do you find the idea that the cross is a sign of God's freedom helpful for your own life?
- 3 Have there been moments in your life when the cross has broken down your defences?