
The Way of the Cross is the Way of Life and Peace

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
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The way of the cross is the way of life and peace? No way! Who came up with that title? (I know it's from the prayer book, but who wants to title a presentation that way?)

The way of the Cross is, quite simply, the way of way of suffering and pain -and even death. The way of the Cross is mystery. There is no getting around those realities.

Obviously, given a choice, we tend to avoid suffering. Who chooses suffering?

But there is another reality occurring at the cross. At the cross, things change. At the cross, people change. It is the aspect of change which I want to present today. The Way of the Cross means bearing change.

I don't know about you-- but change is hardest thing I do. I don't do it well at all. And life is forcing me to change all the time. Life is like a river that way, always moving, changing, and carrying me in that change.

I remember when I was really young, and I had a river. Well, it was really a creek, down from the long hill in front of my house. But when I was about ten years old, it was a river. It ran under Georgia highway 54; and on Saturdays, or in the afternoon after school, I would yell to my mother that I was going down to play in the river. I would then walk down through the pasture and the cows (I lived on a farm), down about a half a mile, to the creek.

There, I would engage in fantastic play. Surely you remember those days. I would build roads, bridges, dams, and wars - while the cars and trucks on Highway 54 whizzed by on the bridge overhead. It was a beautiful place, a place where I would take every friend who happened over to visit. We took sandwiches with us, so we wouldn't have to climb the long hill back up for lunch.

We would sit in a worn-out hollow or in one of the overhanging trees and have lunch. It was beautiful, despite the snakes with which we might have to share the smooth, sunny rocks. It was beautiful despite the trash that folks would pitch over the bridge into the creek - all manner of cups and cans and car parts. One day, an old engine manifold appeared in the middle of the creek, exactly in the right place to become a fort for my toy soldiers.

Understand, now, that the sand bar under the bridge, and the rock island nearby, were great places for my little army men and steel trucks and tanks. One day, I decided that I would save a lot of effort if I just kept my army troops and their heavy artillery down at the creek, instead of hauling them back and forth up the hill. So I buried them, carefully, on the sand bar, right alongside the cement pillar that supported Highway 54.

Unfortunately, it was three or four weeks -or some such time- before I could return. When I did, I dug into the sand looking for my fond playthings. They were not there. I dug alongside another pillar; they were not there either. I was

devastated, thinking that surely someone had stolen them. Then, I thought maybe they had just magically disappeared, since there was so much magic in that spot. I was genuinely confused for several years.

When I was older, however, I began to notice more about that river. I noticed that three or four feet above the banks was all manner of debris, flotsam and jetsam caught in branches and limbs. I realized that the water had been there occasionally. I began to notice that when I helped my father check the cows in the pasture, some would have magically escaped to another pasture across the road; my father said they had crossed the fence exactly where the creek had washed away part of the fence, under the bridge, when the water was high.

I grew older, and I paid even more attention. *Of course* the water rose and fell, with the rains, and I began to take advantage of those floods. Two or three days after a heavy rain, we would haul out the canoe and put it in the creek about two or three miles above the farm, and then ride the waters down, getting ourselves caught in tree limbs that were normally ten feet above the water level.

I knew, by then, that no one had stolen my favorite toy army men and trucks. And it wasn't by magic that they had disappeared. No, the shoal and island and sand bar had been made new. The entire landscape had changed. It had been made new by the steady rise and fall of the river. My little toys had taken their place somewhere downstream in someone else's flotsam and jetsam.

When I return today to that spot, it has changed even more. Cows have not been in that pasture for thirty years now, and the overgrowth of trees and bushes shows it. My paths are gone- at least I thought they were my paths- paths which were really cattle trails winding down to the water.

No, things have not stayed the same in that place. They have been made new. And the truth is, as much as newness excites me, it also saddens me. Some of my favorite things are gone. Oh, there were some things I would like to have changed; I would have loved to get rid of the snakes and that mushy spot next to the path. But *everything* changed. All things became new. I would have preferred to have changed only what I wanted made new.

It'd be fine if the Church stuck with replacing only those things which we want replaced. There's always something we want made new. We want new acolyte robes, or new paint in the parish hall. We want the preacher to preach about something new. Sometimes we just want a new priest entirely. But a new sanctuary? Of course not! A new Prayer Book? No way. The psalms say "Sing to the Lord a new song!" "Sing to the Lord a new Song? No, No, no thank you. The old ones suit us just fine.

The prophet Isaiah and John the Revelation both said the same thing, too: "Behold I am making all things new?"

But "*All things made new*" is one of the most unsettling and downright controversial themes in the Christian Church. Most of us, I daresay every single one of us, whether we are liberal or conservative, whether we are rural or urban, whether we are large church or small church, have some special image of what church and religion means to us. We definitely do not want that to change. That image is what we inwardly long for when we show up Sunday after Sunday for the liturgy. That image may be what we think we had some time long ago. And it's that image, more than anything, which prevents us from experiencing God.

Waters breaking forth in the wilderness is not good news to those who have grown accustomed to the wilderness. Streams in the desert tend to make a mess of how neat everything is. All things made new is every faithful person's hope, but it is also every faithful person's nightmare.

I learned the same way most children do that all things are made new. I learned it the hard way. I had to lose something. I had to lose something that would make me start paying attention to the world around me. Many of you who have lost far more important things than toy soldiers have learned this too. You have lost loved ones. Loss often serves the purpose of making us pay attention, making us observe and notice the truth for, sometimes, the first time. Yet, all things are being made new all the time, if we are watching.

The Christian Church, in fact, is a great River, a river whose streams make glad the people of God. But that river, and those streams which are our various local churches, --they are always changing the landscape. They ebb and flow and wash away sand bars, move unmovable rocks, carry away our childhood toys, bring new material from upstream. The Christian River will, at any one time, have all sorts of flotsam and jetsam floating along it. A river is always carrying some sort of trash and some sort of treasure. And often, what we thought was trash is transformed into a treasure.

I sometimes wish I were in charge of the River. I would make sure it brought down only the finest debris. I would detour its route around the sacred spots of my memory, avoiding my favorite sunbathing rocks; I'd make sure the River didn't undermine any of those overhanging trees. But I'm not in charge of the River. And sooner or later, every one of those special and sacred places is going to change; it's going to be made new.

If I pay attention, however, I will notice who is in charge of the River. It is our God. It is our God who is in charge of the Church. And it is God, not any special trend, or disenchanted party; it is God who declares that all things will be made new -- not any of us at all. Trying to stop all things being made new is trying to stop God --it's like trying to stop a River. We may succeed for a few years, but when it bursts our small dams and levees, great is that flood.

"All things are being made new" said the prophet Isaiah. We will repeat that line during the Good Friday liturgy. The Cross means that all things are becoming new.

The same God who causes rivers to flow in the wilderness took his son to the Cross. Our God knows about loss. Our God knows about change.

Again, the Cross is ultimately about change.

One of the classics of the spiritual life is a powerful book by Richard Foster, called Celebration of Discipline. He talks about change in a different sort of way. "Our world is hungry," he says "for genuinely changed people." (page 11). But we generally want someone else to be changed.

He reminds us of the words of Leo Tolsoy, "Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself." Yes, we generally want someone else to be changed. We want someone else to go to the cross. Certainly not us.

Consider what else happens on the cross. We think of torture, violence, suffering, change. But something more important occurred there. Forgiveness occurred there.

The Cross means forgiveness. And this is one of the biggest changes we ever go through in life.

Whenever things change, most of us immediately look for, what? We look for someone to blame. There has to be someone else responsible. Most of the time we accuse.

We start asking, "Who needs forgiveness here?" "Who should repent?"

And our answer comes all too easily to us. Who needs to repent? It's You! It's always "You." You, you, you. You are the one who done me wrong. Oh, it hurts so much it's like a poison set forth in me. Repent, stop! Turn around.

But from Calvary, from the cross, another cry comes. Jesus does not look down from the cross and shout out "Repent!" Those are not the words from his mouth, are they?

Jesus says something else. From the Cross, Jesus says "Father, forgive." They are the same words scribbled on a burned-out altar at Coventry Cathedral. They are the last words of dear St. Stephen, who died before we even knew what a martyr was. They are the last words of most of our Christian saints.

Forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Those did not have to be the last words of Jesus on the cross. His last words might well have been, "Repent, Repent!" I

accuse you! I accuse you! Those could have been the words of Jesus from the cross. The newspapers would have given them tremendous coverage. "Innocent Man Hauled Up On False Charges Finally Gets His Accusations Out!" would run the headlines.

No, from Calvary, the words are different. Forgive. Forgive them.

The strength of the Christian Church has never been in how we accuse. The strength of the church is in how we forgive.

Forgiveness does not wait for repentance. True forgiveness does not wait for repentance.

Ultimately, the Church is centered in forgiveness. No other institution we participate in can give us forgiveness. Sure, there are plenty of good and generous institutions in the world. But few of those institutions are really about forgiveness. And certainly the media, certainly the newspapers and television shows cannot give us forgiveness.

What happens when we forgive? Well, things really do change!

When we forgive, we come back to life! When we forgive, we are somehow born again! Death is overturned! Forgiveness is the antidote to the poison all around us.

Is the Episcopal Church on the brink of falling apart? No, the Church will never fall as long as one activity survives. Our services may look different from time to time. Our priests, deacons, and bishops may look different from time to time. Our prayers may look different. Our prayer books may look different from generation to generation. But the Church will never fail as long as one activity survives; forgiveness.

As long as the Church is in the business of forgiveness, the Church is in business. As long as a corporation forgives people, that corporation is the Church of Jesus Christ.

How do I know this? Because that was the full statement which Jesus delivered to St. Peter, when Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ. Jesus said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I build my church. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven." The word for "loose", of course, is "forgiveness," to be set free, released. We are meant to be forgiving people, as poor Peter would experience time and time again in his life. If anybody needed forgiveness, it was Peter. It was Peter, the very rock upon which Jesus built the Church.

Somebody told me of the joy that they had. Somebody told me that in sorrow, that they could be glad. Somebody told me they once were bound, but now set free. I didn't think it could be until it happened to me." (from the song by Andre Crouch).

Somebody told me that they were bound but now set free. I am being set free, but the great secret of forgiveness is that being forgiven doesn't set us free completely. It's great, to be sure.

But do you know what really sets us free? It's not the acceptance of being forgiven. It's doing the forgiving ourselves. What sets us free is the moment we forgive!

The moment we forgive. That's when Jesus displayed his most divine action. That's when Jesus truly was freed from bondage. It was when he looked down from Calvary and said, "Father forgive them." That was when Jesus was truly raised from the dead: at the moment of forgiveness.

Is the Episcopal Church in crisis? Crisis? Turning Point? Crossroads? The Cross? You bet it is. The Episcopal Church is always at the Cross. And whenever we are at the Cross, we are in crisis, at a crisis point, But that point is exactly where we are supposed to be. The point of the Cross is forgiveness. It is that point which is our center. It is that point which is our unity. Jesus spoke forgiveness on the Cross.

When we forgive, we bless. The most powerful thing we do as Christians is forgive and bless. We speak good and releasing words to each other.

To "forgive" in Greek means "to release, to let go." One of my most useful definitions of the Church is "a laboratory for forgiveness." The Church is meant to be a place where we learn to change gracefully. Obviously, it is around change where the Church argues the most. But it is also around change where we learn the most.

Consider the pastoral offices: baptism, healing of the sick, confirmation, marriage, death." They are all ways of practicing the art of "changing gracefully."

These words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," are not new to scripture. God does not become a forgiving God only in the time of the New Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures themselves, what we Christians have called the Old Testament, is replete with the forgiveness of God.

That forgiveness occurs in the opening chapters of Genesis itself. We know the creation story best as a story of goodness and sin, don't we? We remember God creating the world and pronouncing, day by day, the words, "It was good." Then we remember the original sin of Adam and Eve, first humanity, setting a pattern that will slide through history just like codes on DNA strands. That pattern is willful disobedience of God, manifested primarily as trying to be something that humanity is not. Adam and Eve eat the fruit that is forbidden them, fruit that properly belongs to God alone, and they are banished from the garden of innocence.

That might be the end of creation there. Why does human history continue after that? God created the world, created humanity, and things went wrong. Temptation and evil entered the good world of creation within a week of its development!

But that is not the end of human history. In fact, it is the beginning. For God forgives Adam and Eve. Scripture does not use those words exactly. But God does forgive. The entire work of dressing Adam and Eve with skins is an attempt to forgive them and to protect them from further evil. Adam and Eve do not die as they had been warned. They are banished from innocence, but they are, after all, saved. Such is God's first act of forgiveness.

God does the same thing for their son, Cain, who committed the most grievous crime of killing, his brother. Cain is not killed, but banished. Yet, the Lord has mercy on him and puts a mark on his forehead, a mark we know today as the "mark of Cain." But that mark was not meant as a scarlet letter identifying him for life. Rather, scripture is clear that it is meant to protect Cain, so that no one will kill him.

From the beginning of creation, then, and time and time again, this Hebrew God is in the business of forgiving humanity, not condemning humanity. Noah and humanity are saved, even though Noah is no saint. Jacob, the younger and mischievous son, is saved by God, indeed is chosen by God, despite his trickery. Joseph and his brothers are saved from famine, even though Joseph's daydreaming almost deserved his ill treatment and his brothers certainly deserved the same. At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph tells his brothers: "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." God meant it for good. This is the God who appears on Good Friday, too. Not the God of condemnation and judgment, but the God of salvation and forgiveness.

The Cross moves us, changes us, from young to old, from death to life, and from accusation to forgiveness

But the Cross also moves us from fear to peace.

I suggest that those places where we are most afraid and terrified might be the very places where we will find God. We need religion which is frightening. We need religion which puts fear and trembling into us. When was the last time your religion frightened you?

About eight years ago, I was quite frightened in church. It was Good Friday at my home church, Trinity Cathedral. Our cathedral is in downtown Columbia, which means that our mission is to the city, to the well-off and to the homeless, to the clean and immaculate and to the dirty and the disgusting, to those with fine homes and to those who merely wander the streets. The Cathedral is where those folks come together.

On Good Friday, at the evening service, we noticed a strange and dirty man sitting in the very first pew of the church. He was surrounded by several ragged paper bags and a battered violin case. Immediately, we were cautious about what was in

the case. All during the service, he would thumb through a crumbling little Bible, as if he were looking up random verses. He couldn't sit still. He would stand up, then sit down, then twitch this way and that, then pull out his Bible again and look something up.

He was clearly not stable, and I began to rehearse in my mind what I would do if something snapped. During the long litany, he lay prostrate on the floor, and none of us closed our eyes during the prayers. One of the other priests began to read the long Good Friday Gospel, the story of the Passion, and she walked into the aisle, not five feet away from the man, in order to read it. I was scared. I knew I would have to jump over the chancel rail and stop any disturbance.

The tension mounted. All during the sermon, the man's nervous activity made all of us nervous. Another priest was preaching, and I do not know how he maintained his concentration. Finally, the sermon was over, and, on Good Friday, we sing a hymn after the sermon.

The hymn we sang was "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Suddenly the man jumped to attention and gazed off into the distance, as if he were remembering something. Then he leaned over and began fumbling with the violin case. Our eyes got wider and wider. From the violin case, he pulled out ...a violin! We were relieved it was not a gun, but we were horrified at the same time. He was going to play the violin.

He did begin to play along with the pipe organ and the choir; and, to our utter amazement, the notes were clean and perfect. A violin, as you know, can sound chicken scratches, but this sound was not dirty. These notes were accurate, precise, and beautiful. "Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble," we sang -- and, indeed, we were standing in fear and trembling. The notes were the beautiful sounds of the presence of God with us that day, but it wasn't a sickly sweet presence; it was a presence of fear and trembling.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? If you have trembled, perhaps you have been in the presence of the Lord.

If you find a prayer, or find a song this Good Friday, which makes you tremble, then perhaps you will be, not away from God, but close to God. It will have to be a prayer which admits mystery, which admits pains, and which, perhaps, evokes fear. If you find it, then you will be close to the Cross.

For the Cross presents a Christ who is mystery and pain and fear, a Jesus who has holes in his hands and a tear in his side! In fact, it is only because our Lord and Savior is wounded that he can give such things as peace and comfort and forgiveness. Peace cannot come from someone who has never known violence. Forgiveness cannot come from someone who has never been betrayed. Comfort cannot come from someone who has never been forsaken. Our Lord is a wounded Savior. Our Lord is a pierced Healer.

In our time of raging ignorance and emotional fakery, let us beware of getting our salvation from someone who has all the answers but none of the pain. Jesus is our Savior because he has known our questions, and our pain, in very real ways.

The Cross is about change. The Cross is about movement. It is a moving experience. Old things are passed away, and those changes puzzle us. Accusation is turned into forgiveness. Fear is turned into peace. But, through it all, our conclusion is changed, too: the Way of the Cross is none other than the way of life and peace.

AMEN.

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