
The Image of Christ on the Cross

**A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Good Friday**

Just last week, CBS announced that Stephen Colbert is to replace David Letterman as host of The Late Show. I am a fan of both David Letterman and Stephen Colbert and was excited to here this news!

I have watched The Colbert Report for a number of years and enjoy Colbert's sense of humor. I particularly love watching the show when Colbert interviews prominent religious leaders.

If you haven't seen the show, Stephen Colbert is quite vocal about his faith, and if you watch him interview religious leaders, it is apparent that Colbert understands scripture and theology.

If you know anything about Colbert's story, you know that his faith is more than just a part of his unique comical persona. Not long ago, I was reading *The New York Times Magazine* and stumbled upon an article that addressed the formation of Colbert's faith.

In 1974, when Stephen Colbert was 10 years old, his father and two of his older brothers died in a plane crash. When asked how he dealt with that grief and loss, Colbert said, "My mother was instrumental in keeping me from becoming bitter ... she directed me toward the image of Christ on the Cross."

Colbert's mother was in the difficult position of grieving the loss of her husband and two sons, while also helping her 10-year-old son deal with his overwhelming grief.

The cross became a place for them to take that unbearable pain. The cross became a place of them to take that unanswerable question—Why? Why did God allow this to happen? Why did God allow my father and brothers to die?

How is the image of Christ on the cross is a response to our human suffering? Just how is Christ on the cross the answer to that unanswerable question—Why? Exactly how does a man like Stephen Colbert look back on his life and say the image of Christ on the cross is what got him through one of the darkest and difficult moments of his life?

We all believe the cross saves us from our sins, but what is it about Christ on the cross that saves us from the things that we have no control over? How does the cross save in the midst of our pain and suffering?

The cross is where we encounter a God who understands the human condition. The cross is where we meet a God who understands our pain and suffering; it is where we meet a God who puts voice to our question—Why? Jesus says, "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?"

On the cross Jesus does not hear the resounding voice that spoke at His baptism and transfiguration. There are no words and there is no miracle. Silence seems to be God's response to Jesus' lament—"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus experiences a silence that we know all too well.

Silence. The silence we experience in our lives is troubling only if we believe that silence is the absence of God's presence. The silence we experience in our lives is troubling only if we believe that silence is the absence of God's Word.

God forbid that we believe God is absent or silent in the silence we experience in our lives! The joyous Alleluias on Easter morning are preceded by a day of silence. All too often, we want our Good Friday's to be immediately followed by Easter morning, and we fail to remember there is a lot of silence in these holy days!

St. John of the Cross, the great sixteenth century Spanish theologian believed that God speaks but silence is where we hear God's Word. Here is what St. John of the Cross writes: "The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul" (*The Sayings of Light and Love*, #100).

God is present and speaks in the silence. The answers that we seek, the revelation that we desire, the words we long to hear are found in the "Word made flesh."

St. John of the Cross believes that silence draws us toward the image of Christ on the cross—fasten "your eyes on him alone ... you will discover even more than you ask for and desire" (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.22, 5-6)

Perhaps this is what St. Paul means when he tells the Colossians, "In the Son of God are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God" (Col. 2:3). And to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "I want to know nothing more than Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

When the cross becomes the focus of our faith, when we "want to know nothing more than Christ crucified," then we come to understand the depth of God's faithfulness and love.

When the cross becomes the focus of our faith we believe that God will be with us when we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps 23:4), that God is present with us when it feels as though God is silent and we walk alone.

When the cross becomes the focus of our faith we realize that the darkness of Calvary is perhaps the only thing that we can see in the darkest and difficult moments of our lives. It is very similar to what happens in Exodus.

You remember the story, as the Israelites were leaving Egypt, God gave them a dark cloud to follow (Ex. 14: 19-20). Its darkness was seen in both the day and the night. The dark cloud was able to guide the Israelites through the Red Sea.

The synoptic gospels say that darkness came over the whole land (Lk 23:44, Mk 15:33, Mt 27:45). The cross is our dark cloud. It meets us in both the day and in the dark moments of our lives. It is a reminder that God is with us; it is a reminder that God is guiding and leading us into a new day.

St. Paul writes that we are "to preach Christ crucified," (1 Cor. 1:23) and that "even if we, or an angel from heaven, were to preach another gospel, let us be accursed" (Gal. 1:8).

Christ on the cross is at the center of our faith. It is the heart of the gospel (the good news) because it shows us "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8: 38-39).

Today, we remember what happened "on a hill far away" (*Old Rugged Cross*). Today, we "go to dark Gethsemane" (*Go to Dark Gethsemane*). Today, we hear Jesus say the words, "it is finished," as he bows his head and gives up his spirit (Jn 19:30).

Today, we kneel and fasten our eyes on the cross. We give thanks for what was accomplished on it. We give thanks that it continues to speak in the silence of our lives. And we pray, "that among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed [on your cross] where true joys [comfort and peace] are to be found" (BCP, 219).

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*