Five Readings: Five Motifs: Five ways of looking at the cross

Hebrews 9: 24-28

Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

The First Motif. The Cross as a Symbol of Sacrifice

The best Christmas Film ever made is ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ directed by Frank Capra and starring James Stewart and Donna Read.

It isn’t a film about a baby being born in a stable. There are no shepherds or wise men. There is an angel, but it’s an odd sort of angel. So why is it a Christmas film? The main part of the plot and the turning point of the film take place at Christmas. This is what makes it a Christmas film. Even though the film isn’t about Christmas, the Christmas setting lends the film a specific emotional backdrop and leads us to make parallels between the Christmas story and the story told in the film.

The Easter story is the best Passover story ever told. All the events happen in Jerusalem as the city celebrates Passover. Jesus and the disciples themselves celebrate Passover. If Passover was your main annual festival, this would lend the Easter story a specific emotional backdrop and lead you to see parallels all over the place between the Easter story and the Passover story.

Passover is the celebration of God bringing the people of Israel out of captivity in Egypt. It is a story of liberation. It is a story of a one-off powerful act of liberation. It is a story of God’s mighty and terrible power.

Through Moses, God told the people of Israel to kill a lamb and smear the blood of the lamb on their doorpost. When the wrath of God came upon Egypt, all the houses where the doors were smeared with lamb’s blood were passed over. But in those other houses where there was no lamb’s blood, the first born sons died.

Today we find this story unbearably grim. Protected by the blood of a lamb, the people of Israel who were held as captives and exploited as slaves were set free. That is the Passover backdrop to the Easter story. And this is the Easter story: Jesus is the Lamb of God. Through his one-off sacrifice, he takes away the sin of the world. By his blood we are captives of sin no more. By the mighty power of God, we are set free. God has taken the grimness upon himself.

The Book of Hebrews is a beautiful part of the Holy Scripture. It is a closely argued essay, no word is surplus to requirements. It sets out the Christian faith to a people who essentially believed two things;

Firstly, that their ancestors were liberated from slavery by the strong arm of God who told them to sacrifice a lamb. Secondly, that God would continue to bless them as long as they worshipped him and continued to make sacrifices to him in the temple. Sacrifices were what everything turned on.

Nearly all the people, who witnessed the Easter story, witnessed it with Jewish eyes. Our understanding of Easter is incomplete unless we too try to see the story through these same eyes.

What this passage from the letter to the Hebrews is saying is that this continual sacrifice is no longer necessary. Christ’s death on the cross is the final sacrifice. What does Jesus say on the cross? ‘It is finished’. The sacrifice is made. It is the perfect sacrifice. Jesus has entered into the real heaven. It is the once and for all redeeming act of God. We are set free.

Jesus is the Lamb of God. He takes away the sin of the world. Through him, we know that God has mercy upon us. The sins have been taken away. They have been paid for in advance.

The door to eternal life has now been opened. Life will never be the same again.

Philippians 2: 5-8

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

The Second Motif – The Cross as a Symbol of Solidarity

The second most famous crucifixion in history must surely be the crucifixion of Spartacus. You must have seen the film. It is the best slave revolt film ever made.

The Roman army defeats the army of rebellious slaves. And they come looking for Spartacus. They want to crucify Spartacus and send the rest of the slaves to the galleys. First one man stands up and says he is Spartacus. Then another. Then they all do. If that’s how you want it, said the Romans, fine. We’ll crucify the lot of you. And all the slaves were crucified along the Appian Way, the main road of the Roman Empire. And slaves who were still in captivity would have travelled that road and seen for themselves the terrible fate that awaited them if they thought they could fight for their freedom.

The Romans used crucifixion as the most publicly painful, humiliating and shameful death they could inflict on rebellious slaves. The death inflicted on Jesus followed a standard procedure. First he was scourged, removing the skin and some skeletal muscles from his back and buttocks. During this time he was also vilified. He carried the means of his execution to the place of execution outside the city. His shame in front of the city was intended to be complete. The method of fixing him to the cross was meant to be as gratuitously painful as possible. Once on the cross, it was the weight of his own naked body that finally killed him, many victims would spend days gasping for breath until they finally gave up and died. Most depictions of the crucifixon shy away from showing its full horror. And above all they shy away from its shame and its godlessness. How often have you seen a naked Jesus on the cross?

Slaves are meant to look at crucifixion victims and think to themselves, even my life of cruelty, brutality and unending toil is better than a death like that. It was not any death that Jesus suffered. It was the death of a slave. It was the death reserved for people who do not really count as people.

Rowan Williams, in his book Tokens of Trust, retells a story from the Nazi concentration camps. A group of prisoners were to be executed by hanging. They were made to stand on chairs so that the nooses could be placed round their necks. Then the chairs were kicked away. They struggled for breath. One of the victims was a teenage boy. He was not as heavy as the other prisoners. So his weight was not enough to make the noose tighten as tightly as the others. His death took longer. The other prisoners were made to watch. One of the watching prisoners cried out watching that scene. Where is God? Another prisoner replied. ‘He is on the end of that rope.’

God himself was crucified. Many human beings suffer or have suffered as God suffered. But nobody has suffered worse. The crucified God is a God who is in solidarity with all who suffer and all who have suffered.

And we also have suffered and will suffer. We suffer the helplessness of watching loved ones die. We will suffer the pain and shame of death ourselves.

God emptied himself. He took the form of a slave. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross. We gather round the cross, knowing that God knows our suffering. We gather round the cross in solidarity with others who have suffered. Our suffering is understood. We are not forsaken.

2 Corinthians 5: 17-21

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The Third Motif – The Cross as a Symbol of Reconciliation

At some point in this vigil you will find yourself standing before the cross alone. You will find yourself focusing on the fact that Jesus died on the cross for you. That the nails that held him to the tree represent your individual sin.

We have just been singing ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’, one of the many Good Friday hymns written in the first person. The crucifixion is personal. It is personal for me and for you. It is personal for all of us.

And because it is personal for all of us, after a while, standing at the foot of the cross, we look around us and see all the other people. People we know and then the many many more people we do not know. People like us and the many many people who are not like us. The cross is personal for me and for you and for billions of others.

Sometimes I imagine the pile of sins that have been brought to the foot of the cross. The staggering amount of sin. The impossible to contemplate burden of them all. The weight of sin that has broken so many people.

Standing at the foot of the cross we see the world gathered round the cross with us. Paul writes, ‘In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.’ When we look around us as we stand at the foot of the cross, we become aware of so many other people.

But even as we try to imagine all these other people, we become aware that our imagination cannot actually encompass what we understand must be true. There are so many more different kinds of people gathered at the cross than our imaginations can cope with.

The prophet Isaiah wrote,

Let the wicked forsake their way,  
    and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,  
    and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.  
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
    nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
    so are my ways higher than your ways  
    and my thoughts than your thoughts.

It is God’s intention to reconcile far more people to himself than we can imagine. His thoughts are not our thoughts.

What is reconciliation?

When apartheid ended in South Africa, the newly elected Mandela government established the Truth and Reconciliation Committee under the chairmanship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The committee heard testimonies of the injustices that had occurred under the apartheid regime – and there were terrible injustices and there was terrible suffering. Those who had suffered were given an opportunity to forgive or not to forgive as they felt able. The perpetrators of violence and abuse were not punished. The purpose of the committee hearings was to establish the truth. And on the basis of truth, it was hoped that reconciliation would be possible. In some cases it has been possible.

But the South African case is unusual. Most injustice in the world is never recognised. The truth is not acknowledged. And true reconciliation cannot therefore happen.

God’s reconciliation is not the false reconciliation that we are used to seeing in the world. The kind of false reconciliation where those who have suffered never get to see the truth of their suffering recognised. God’s reconciliation is true reconciliation rooted in justice and in truth. It is a reconciliation which recognises suffering and absorbs it, overcoming it.

I would like to offer you two quotes from the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf.

“The cross of Christ should teach us that the only alternative to violence is a willingness to absorb violence in order to embrace the other in the knowledge that truth and justice have been, and will be, upheld by God.”

“The cross is not forgiveness pure and simple, but God’s setting aright the world of injustice and deception”.

Sometimes we stand before the cross alone. And as we force ourselves to look, we are forced to look at the truth about the sin of the world and our part in it. And we become aware of all the others who stand there with us. And our confidence grows that we can participate in the reconciliation that God brings to the world. It is reconciliation based on truth, justice, infinite mercy and infinite love.

Psalm 139: 7-12

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night’, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

The Fourth Motif – The Cross as a Symbol of Victory

When we recite the apostle’s creed, we say that Jesus descended into hell. We say that Jesus;

Suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
Was crucified, dead, and buried:  
He descended into hell;  
The third day he rose again from the dead;

The church has generally understood hell to be a place of unending torment.

What do we actually mean by hell? And what does it mean to say that Jesus went there after he was buried and then came back?

The idea of a place of unending torment does not sit comfortably with us. We read in the Old Testament that God forgave his people over and over again. Why then, would his creation include a place of unending torment? And Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Why then would the place of unending torment still be in business after his saving work was done? And what of the people who experience this world as a place of unending torment, for whom death is a release? What does the idea of hell as a place people go to after death have to say to them?

The Old Testament uses the Hebrew word Sheol to describe a place of nothingness and meaninglessness away from God. This is where the Old Testament imagination understand we go when we die.

Many of the psalms talk about being with God. The happy psalms give thanks that God is with us. The angry psalms ask where God is. The stoical psalms insist that God is still with us despite appearances to the contrary. Don’t worry, these psalms say, God is with us, he’ll be along any minute now.

For me, Psalm 139 is the most profound expression of the idea that God is always with us. Where can I flee from your presence? If I make my bed in Sheol you are there.

On the cross Jesus names that fear of the psalmists that God has abandoned us. My God, my God why have you forsaken me he cries. We look at the cross and we see humanity abandoned by God; actually worse than that, we see God betraying his Son; God is separated from God. The crucifixion is what being abandoned by God looks like.

But God does not abandon us. Psalm 139 says there is nowhere we can go to flee the presence of God. God desires to be with us wherever we are; even in the places of desolation we find ourselves in. God does not abandon people in hell. He comes to be with them. He comes to fetch them.

This is an ancient belief of the church. Thomas Aquinas wrote, ‘therefore to triumph completely, Christ wanted also to capture the heart of the devil’s kingdom, and to bind him in his own house, which was hell.’

And here is Cyril of Alexandria, ‘When he shed his blood for us, Jesus Christ destroyed death and corruptibility. For had he not died for us, we should not have been saved, and if he had not gone down among the dead, death’s cruel empire would never have been shattered.’

Matthew’s Gospel records that at the moment of Christ’s death on the cross, the tombs of the dead were opened and many bodies of saints were raised, appearing in the city of Jerusalem after the resurrection.

This extraordinary image seems to us now like a scene from a zombie film. It is not the scene we routinely see on Easter cards. The artists of the renaissance stayed well away from it. But it is an image we need to keep in our minds.

Because it reminds us that at the moment of his death, the victorious Messiah entered Sheol, the place of meaninglessness, he entered Hades, the place of punishment, and he overcame the gates of these terrible places on behalf of the many who were imprisoned there, beyond the bounds of Christian fellowship as it is ordinarily understood.

In his letter to the Romans Paul wrote, ‘God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.’ There is nowhere we can go to flee his loving presence. He will come after us to the end of the earth and beyond, in order to save us.

Mark 8: 31-36

Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

The Fifth Motif – The Cross as a Symbol of Discipleship

According to tradition, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria was founded by St. Mark. In the first centuries of the church, the church of Egypt made great contributions to the spiritual and theological life of the worldwide church.

But in AD 639, Muslim armies invaded Egypt. Christians were allowed to continue to worship as Christians but were subjected to higher taxes than Muslims. As a result, by the twelfth century, Egypt was no longer a majority Christian country. And the Christian minority in Egypt tended to live among the poorer sections of society. It now makes up 15% of the total population of that country. In recent years there have been terror attacks on churches and many have died.

In this country the church has developed a strong position in state and society. And yet we hear expressions of anxiety about falling numbers in our congregations, about the long-term impact of covid, about doctrinal divisions over same sex marriage and so on.

We really need to keep this in perspective and not get carried away by anxiety. One way to do that is to look around the world and imagine what it must be like for our brothers and sisters in parts of the world where the church lost its position of strength hundreds of years ago and today remains vulnerable to attacks from which it cannot protect itself.

Being in a permanent state of weakness in the conventional sense, that is the experience of the church in Egypt for over a thousand years.

But then, Jesus did tell them that is what would happen. ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it’.

At a conference a few years ago, I heard a member of the Anglican clergy say that he doesn’t wear his clerical collar when he walks around the streets anymore because the clergy is no longer respected and he prefers not to face the disrespectful comments directed at him when he is identifiable as a member of the clergy.

The image of Simon of Cyrene is helpful here. The man who was being executed was meant to carry the means of his own execution through the jeering crowds that thronged the streets. But when this became impractical, the Roman soldiers went for the pragmatic next best alternative. A random man in the crowd. Or was it random? Did they pick him because they saw a look of horror or anguish on Simon’s face? However he was chosen, Simon was chosen to walk the walk of shame with Christ.

That is the way of the cross. It is a walk of shame. It is the path of those who are ridiculed and worse. Those who come to church thinking they will earn respect in their community; they have come to the wrong place. The church is at its best when it is vulnerable and powerless and knows what it is like for other people who are vulnerable and powerless, whatever collar they have on their shirt.

Across the world we have brothers and sisters in Christ who gaze at the cross in a position of real vulnerability. Our brothers and sisters in Egypt are gazing at the cross as we are today. They may well be fearful and yet they are there. And that is their great strength.