

## **THE EXALTATION OF THE CROSS FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT**

Have you ever seen a state's electric chair? Or one's gas chamber? I have not. But I imagine the sight of one or the other would disturb me at such a deep level that I would be unable to make much sense of what was going on inside me or at what I was looking. The sight of such an instrument of death would likely leave me speechless and strangely confused. The electric chair and the gas chamber are products of technology, and as someone once said, "Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral" (Melvin Kranzberg, "Technology and History: 'Kranzberg's Laws'," *Technology and Culture* 27, no. 3 [1986], 544-560). The cross was itself once a technological innovation. To say that electric chairs and gas chambers and crosses are not bad, not good, and not neutral is to say they are humanly disorienting. They are simultaneously seductive and repulsive. They demand our cooperation and affirmation while ignoring our qualms. The cross should always unsettle us a little. When it loses its power to bother us, it loses its power to save us.

How would we each have reacted if we had been present at the crucifixion of Jesus? Might we have been among those jeering? Among the sneering? Among the mocking? Might we have been among the lamenting? Among the mourning? Might we have hidden ourselves away in fear for our lives with other disciples and nearly all the Apostles? Honestly, none of us has any way of knowing. And the not knowing whether we'd have accepted Jesus or rejected him had we lived then, is disconcerting. When we start to imagine ourselves there: actually seeing Jesus nailed to the cross and hearing his screams of pain, that imagining is one way the cross could evoke discomfort and irritation in us. Yet that's the least of it.

Reflect on how Jesus might have looked on the cross. He wouldn't have been a pretty sight. It might not be unreasonable to think that after the night and morning he had just been through

Jesus looked grotesque, hideous, and inhuman. Sin did that to him. All sin. Every sin. My sin. Your sin. Sin is disfiguring, and the weight of every sin physically deformed Jesus. Hanging on that cross, Jesus probably had “a face only his mother could love.” The rest of us might not have been able to stand looking at him. It would have been too disturbing. The sight could have made it hard to sleep that Friday night.

The worst part for us, to this day, is accepting the fact that we have all participated in abusing Jesus; we have all and each participated in making his cross, have each and all pushed that cross upright with the Son of God impaled thereon. The far more troubling truth of the cross is: it’s our fault! It’s our doing! We may occasionally be moved to great sorrowing, moved to be ashamed of ourselves. That’s the cross bothering us to a profound depth and for a most beneficial purpose. The bad news is, “We belong to the activity” (Mark Blitz, “Understanding Heidegger on Technology,” *The New Atlantis*, no. 41 [Winter 2014], 63-80). We belong to the crucifixion.

The good news is, “We belong to the activity.” We belong to the saving action of Jesus Christ on that cross. Jesus told Nicodemus that the Son of Man “must” be crucified or people will have no chance of eternal life (Jn 3:14-15). Just like the Israelites had no chance of escaping or surviving the poisonous snake infestation unless Moses lifted up on a pole an ugly bronze snake at which the people had to look in order to be saved (Nm 21:8-9). If our participation in helping crucify the Lord has to be personally accepted, unflinchingly gazed upon, then it must be pointed out that likewise our salvation by Christ on the cross has to be personally accepted, unreservedly gloried.

In the second reading we heard “one of the earliest New Testament texts to reveal the divinity of Christ. The *Epistle to the Philippians* was written sometime between the years 55 and 62A.D.

and [the magnificent hymn St. Paul quotes] may well have been in use prior to 55A.D. The passage clearly bears witness to the fact that Christians were proclaiming, even in those early years, that Jesus ... was truly both God and man” (Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre, *The Navarre Bible: The Letters of St. Paul*, 436). Those earliest Christians sang out, “Christ Jesus was obedient to death on a cross and because of this God *exalted* him” (Phil 2:8-9).

“In the thought of St. John [the Evangelist], the cross ... is ... an anticipation of the glory of God. [...] In the eyes of John it is in the cross itself that Jesus is triumphant. [...] In the Johannine passion narrative, Jesus moves toward the cross with majesty. He ascends it triumphantly because it is on the cross that He founds his Church by ‘handing over the spirit’ (Jn 19:30b), and by permitting blood and water to flow from his side (Jn 19:34). Henceforth, one must ‘look upon Him who was pierced’ (Jn 19:37), since faith is directed to the crucified one, and the cross is the living sign of salvation” (Xavier Léon-Dufour, “Cross,” *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, updated 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 102-104). John the Evangelist *exalts the Cross*.

And we *exalt* in the cross, too. It is the means of our salvation. This instrument of death opened the gates to eternal life. That is a confusing, disorienting, and unsettling reality. It was the death of Jesus that redeemed us. And upon reflection, that can seem pretty weird; we might not be able to make much sense of it. Rejoice if that’s the case. *Exalt* if you fail to fully understand the single greatest sacrifice in history; (it’s impossible to anyway).

The cross should always unsettle us a little. The disturbance within us leads us to repentance, which leads us to redemption and glory. And that’s just what the Lord wants to happen.

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Readings:

Numbers 21:4b-9  
Psalm 78:1b-2, 34-38  
Philippians 2:6-11  
John 3:13-17

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