

Good Friday 2011

A reflection on the cross from a Pentecostal perspective.

In Churches together, when we do stuff --joining in worship and learning--we add value to our experience.

That added value comes from not just telling the old, old story but retelling it through the lenses of our different traditions. By taking a slightly different angle, we get to appreciate the small differences between us and also the great chunks of doctrine and practice which we share. I want to build on that practice by reflecting on the message of the cross from a distinctively Pentecostal angle.

Out of the tradition in which I was raised I'm going to look at

- The power of the cross
- The pain of the cross
- The foolishness of the cross

Pentecostal Tradition

- With 100 years of the modern Pentecostal movement behind us there is a clear historical tradition emerging.
- My grandparents found faith (they would have said 'were born again') in the fires of the early twentieth century Pentecostal revival. My mother grew up in it's heat. As a teenage tearaway my father was forged in it and my children and grandchildren still feel the effects of its warmth to a greater or lesser extent. That's five generations which seems more than enough for a tradition. So if this morning you squeeze out a Hallelujah or an Amen or even stand on the pews and wave your arms about, I wont be shocked—a little surprised maybe but we'll cope.
- Then it's not a bad idea to speak from within the Pentecostal tradition if we wish to be global Christians. Worldwide Christianity is not shrinking. Every day the number of Christians is growing. By the end of today there will be 80000 more people will be following Christ Isn't that fantastic. Nearly half of those will follow Christ within the broad Pentecostal tradition. When 45% of new Christians pursue their faith within a tradition it has to be worth considering even if most of them are younger than us, less educated than us, poorer than us and a different colour to us.
- That tradition has been recognized in a variety of ways including university centres for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies even here in the UK at Birmingham and at Bangor.

Pentecostal or charismatic

I've probably already irritated some of you by talking about the Pentecostal tradition rather than the Charismatic movement. I do this because in most parts of the world Pentecostal includes charismatic rather than the other way round. I also do it because arguably the charismatic movement is drawing more from mainstream Pentecostalism (you only have to listen to speakers at new wine to catch that and also because by and large it is Pentecostal rather than charismatic theologians that are doing the good stuff.

So here we are on Good Friday talking about the cross. We'll take three areas. We'll quote a verse or two because Pentecostals love to quote bible verses, we'll tell a story or two because without testimony no meeting can be called truly Pentecostal and we'll try to identify some takeaways because the way I was brought up, its all very well to talk about stuff but you have to roll up your sleeves and do it.

The power of the cross.

Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Colossians 2:15)

- When we use the term 'the cross', it's short for Christ's death on the cross, that's where the power lies, not in the symbol.
- Pentecostals make much of spiritual warfare.
- Paul talks in cosmic terms—of powers and authorities.
- Pentecostals see this worked out in dirt level practicalities. In favelas and slums the world over they see the cross as symbolizing their empowerment.
- In more spiritual terms they embrace the power of the cross too. As well as having been saved in the past from the penalty of sin and in the future from the presence of sin. We are saved in the here and now from the power of sin—from negative habits, fixations and addictions. I was brought up on stories of how the cross changes lives.

I have been videoing many parents' testimonies—their family stories of faith. You can follow links to them from the CCT Facebook page.

Around 1922 there was a revivalist tent campaign (they weren't called crusades then). My granddad worked at Dagenham Dock on the Thames and as a non-churchgoer was invited to go and see what was happening. The stories of dramatic healings caught his attention. That very first encounter, he walked back from the tent, along what is now the A13 to the home fit for heroes where my nan and he lived all their married life. Like most first world war soldiers he was a heavy smoker. Apparently after one drag he threw it away and never smoked again. Not the most amazing miracle you might say but for him, it was an evidence of the power of the cross which intervened at a very early stage on his journey to faith. Apparently he dumped the whole packet in somebody's garden. But there again, the Pentecostals at that stage weren't hot on their theology of environmental responsibility.

Rather more telling is my father's story. Not to put too fine a point on it my dad was a teenage thug. He was a knife-wielding black marketeer. His leg was crippled by childhood disease. A gang of boys with serious disabilities like his ran rackets up and down Dagenham's Broad Street out of the shops in which they worked. He had a wallet full of money and pockets full of clothing coupons. They were the go-to guys who could lay their hands on anything.

His career was cut short by hearing the good news of Jesus preached in a Pentecostal church and within a few months his life radically changed. The tipping point came when he went to a stall run by Sid, one of his mates, to buy some apples. He offered a shilling and was given

change of a pound, which was the way it was done. Giving back the money, he said. I don't do that anymore Sid I have become a Christian. Sid never spoke to him again and the lad with one leg six inches shorter than the other

Sure enough more people meet Jesus on the Emmaus Road than the Damascus Road. But these stories of everyday miracles are evidence of the power of the cross. It is that power which makes a bad Friday Good Friday.

The pain of the cross.

Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.

(1 Peter 2:24a)

The cross was a gruesome *physical* experience. The death of Christ on the cross was not just a spiritual experience or a mental process but a physical experience of unimaginable pain. How does it feel that the Lord Jesus Christ bore our sins in his *body* on the cross. This is a sort of side point but one worth making, nonetheless. Under Christianity from the renaissance onwards, human beings were things that think (I think therefore I am). The body was dodgy and at best to be ignored.

When Pentecostals raise their hands—not just when singing 'Thine be the glory' on Easter Day, when they clap their hands or jump around or in other ways get on down in celebration, there is a direct line back to the fact that—even if they are easily led and get us in trouble and that when it comes to watching and praying they are willing but weak, a human body paid a significant part in suffering for us on the cross.

But of course, for Pentecostals, there is a more critical understanding of the physicality of the cross. That quote from Peter carries on with the sound bite, "by his wounds you have been healed."

Within the tradition and for many Pentecostals today, the reference back to Isaiah 53 means just what it says. In the suffering of the cross, not only was our spiritual wellbeing assured but our physical health was engaged as well. Most card carrying Pentecostals would accept that healings don't happen all the time or even most of the time. But they would also want you to know that there is just too much evidence that sometimes—seemingly quite randomly—the power of the cross to brings physical healing. I was told as a child of how my grandmother was healed of asthma as she joined in with prayer for a small child. As a child too, I saw hands laid on people by local pastors and itinerant evangelists and was aware of God's palpable presence. Some of those prayed for went away cured. If you were to ask global Pentecostals does the work of the cross include physical healing they would have no doubt and would point you to examples that would be tough to challenge, particularly in countries where medical services are such that faith in God is the only option.

I am just not good at healing. But my daughter too, as a teenager experienced a significant physical cure, which was convincing enough for me to write up when I edited the first edition of the youth Bible back in 92. The story is on page 1102. I don't come out of it looking good. Talking of the power of the cross, the pain of the cross, draws us in quite naturally or perhaps supernaturally to something that the Pentecostal tradition holds dear.

The foolishness of the cross

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ... God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

(1 Corinthians 1:18,21b)

I know that some of you would like to feel that Pentecostals have got a monopoly on foolishness and that other Christians, in other churches, are a little more sane and safe. I shouldn't be so sure.

A few years ago I heard Brian McLaren tell how he had arrived early to speak at a church.

While his hosts sorted themselves out he joined a girl in her early teens.

'Hello', she said. 'Are you new here.' 'Yes', he said. 'It's my first time.'

'I've been coming for a little while', said the young woman. 'It's really nice. They're very friendly. I like it'.

She paused for a bit and then wanting to support her new friends but not frighten Brian as a newcomer to the church world, she went on. 'They do some strange things though. They have this cup and pass it round and drink it. It's got blood in it. I haven't done it yet'.

When you think about it drinking blood makes the Pentecostal habit of swinging from the lamp brackets look almost tame. And it's no good saying that we only pretend to drink blood.

Drinking blood and pretending to drink blood rank just about equal on the weirdness scale.

One of the great things about my grandparents when they were around and my parents too, is that they accepted that the gospel of the cross was pretty nuts by any standard.

How did Paul put it? 'To the natural mind [the cross is] foolishness but to us who are saved [it is] the power of God.

Am I exaggerating to suggest that we Christians seem pretty weird to our neighbours?—nice but weird.

In a few minutes we will parade through the town carrying crosses. A few years back, I took time out and watched the march from just inside Emery Gate and got close enough to some embarrassed shoppers who had stopped to watch you all walk by. What are they doing?

What's it about? Why are they doing it? They sounded really perplexed. They were really embarrassed for you.

The stuff we believe and the stuff we do is just plain weird. Suck it up guys.

As we form up in a tidy rabble outside, some of us will be praying a heartfelt prayer. Please God, don't let anybody I know see me when I walk up the High Street. Help me find a place in the middle of the crowd where I can be inconspicuous.

How did Martin Smith say it.?

Oh I feel like dancing Its just foolishness I know

Yes its foolish to believe that in some way one man dying in an utterly barbaric way can change to the world but it is true and its worth being foolish to do the little bit you can to see that he gets the recognition.

It may seem like foolishness, but the power of the cross and the pain of the cross, its glory and its shame begins to make sense but never as a theory, only when it's a fire that burns inside you even on those days when its more like a glimmer than a furnace.

Here's a new song.

"You are worthy because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God members of every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth. Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

(Revelation 5: 9-10,12)

Dave Halls

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(Bible quotations are from Today's New International Version)