

THE MAGNETIC CROSS

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday in Lent, March 20, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ps. 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Freda described herself as a campus flower child back in the early 1970s. Her long, curly hair, crowned with flowers, fell down to her waist. She preferred muslin, Indian-print dresses and became fascinated with Hinduism. This was back when Eastern religions were being popularized by the Beatles. Then, something odd happened. Freda's boyfriend, Gary, had to read one of the Gospels for a philosophy of religion class. He chose the Gospel of Mark because it was the shortest. Gary wasn't at all religious. In fact he claimed to be an atheist at the time. Nevertheless, he was intrigued by Mark's portrait of Christ. He'd look up from the Gospel he was reading over and over and he'd say to Freda, "There's something about Jesus."

In May, 1974, Freda and Gary married in a Hindu ceremony. They hitch-hiked through Europe on their honeymoon. In Dublin, Ireland, Freda stood before a statue of Jesus - one of many she'd seen in the many cathedrals they visited. A plaque at the base of the statue said, "Behold the heart that so loved mankind." She found herself strangely drawn to this figure of Christ. She had an overwhelming compulsion to kneel on the cold, stone floor before Jesus. She began to weep unexplainedly. She prayed, "I think my life is in my personality, my intellect, in the very breath I breathe, but these are not my life. You are my life." ^{from that time} She began to read the Bible. "There were parts of it I didn't like", she says. "But I was now submitted to an authority greater than myself." As she was drawn to Christ, she

began to rethink her position on a number of social and political issues. She found that Christ was interested in every area of her life. She became drawn, through her faith in Christ, into the life of the church. Her new found faith was not just a passing phase. Twenty years later, she's an active, practicing worshipping Christian very much involved in the life of her church and in the life of her community. Her husband, Gary, is now a Greek Orthodox priest (Christianity Today, 1994).

I thought of them when I read the story in the Gospels of how some Greeks were drawn to Jesus. Andrew and Philip came to Jesus and said, "There are some Greeks who'd like to see you. They've come all the way across the Mediterranean Sea to celebrate the Passover. They've heard about you. They've heard how you heal the sick, open the eyes of the blind, and raise the dead. They've heard about your teaching and preaching. They want to see you." These Greeks represent the great multitude of men and women from every nation and ethnic group who have been, like Freda and Gary, drawn to Jesus over the last two thousand years. And Jesus said to Andrew and Philip, "when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

When Jesus said that, he knew he was going to be lifted up onto a cross and executed as a common criminal. He knew, as well that, that God would lift him up from the grave. God the Father would lift him up to sit as God's right hand. He knew that only after his death and resurrection would his ministry bear fruit and draw men and women of all nations to himself. For the last two thousand years

ordinary men and women (and not just professional ministers and missionaries) have served Christ and followed him by lifting up Christ so that friends and neighbors would be drawn to him.

Christians believe the world's salvation depends upon all people everywhere being drawn to Christ. We believe that the world's peace depends upon all people everywhere being drawn to Christ crucified. God is an inclusive God. This One lifted up on the cross is not just the God who loves Americans, but the God who loves Russians, Serbians, Bosnians, Chinese, South Africans, Palestinians, Jews, Muslims as well as Christians. Our God is not a narrow, tribal God nor is God a nationalistic God - but a God for all peoples. "And I, if I be lifted up will draw all peoples to myself," Jesus said.

Two months ago Nancy Address, Kay and I attended the worship service at St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem where we heard Canon Ateek preach. We returned that evening to the Parish house to talk with him again. In his book, *Justice and only Justice*, he spoke of the great mission of the Christian church to proclaim the reality of God who has come to us as a crucified Palestinian Jew. He said that the Church should proclaim God, as we have come to know God through Christ, to all people in society, including Muslims and Jews. This should be done, he said, "unashamedly and uncompromisingly." "The Church should insist on what God is really like - not in a spirit of superiority or condescension, but in humility and love." The mission of the church is to proclaim and insist that there is no other God than the Crucified God.

The Crucified Incl.

The mission of the church is to lift up Christ, It's mission is not to lift up the church as an institution. We don't preach the church. We don't preach Presbyterianism. We don't try to draw people to us by putting down other churches, other denominations, or other religions. Now, I believe the church has immense importance as an institution. I believe it's minimized too often by people who feel that they can be drawn to Christ without also being drawn into the institutional church. But our aim is to lift up Christ, not the church.

Nor is our mission to lift up Presbyterian doctrine. Doctrines don't save us. Only God can save us. Doctrines, in and of themselves, do not raise the dead, heal the sick, or forgive sins. Christ raises the dead, heals the sick, frees the captive and forgives sin. Now, there are probably few ministers in our presbytery or ministerium who are more doctrinally oriented than I am. Doctrines help me to relate what I believe to every area of life, but my aim is to lift up Christ not doctrine. We're not saved by believing that Christ is the Savior of the world. We're saved by Christ who is the **S**avior of the world whether or not we believe the doctrine.

Nor do we draw men and women to Christ by lifting up morality. Do this! Don't do that! None of us will be saved by our own goodness or our own morality. None of us will be saved by the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount. The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount condemn us. The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount show us God's ^{perfect} will. They are a blueprint for living. But as we build our lives following those blue prints we soon

discover that we don't have the material or the resources in ourselves to so construct our lives. We're saved only by Christ lifted up upon the cross and crucified in our place for our sins.

When we look at Christ lifted up on the cross, what do we see? We see, of course, a human being, a Palestinian Jew. We see human suffering. Samuel Escobar, a South American Christian who now teaches at Eastern College, said, "the crucified Christ typifies the life experience of so many people in Latin America. Today, as through the centuries, people who endure pain and suffering, who feel ruthless oppression and live daily with fear and uncertainty, are overcome with wonder when they hear that God has come and joined Himself with them in their misery." Throughout the ages this good news has drawn many disadvantaged people to Christ. The sick, the suffering, the poor, those who have come to the end of their rope look in their despair into the face of God, and they discover a Savior who went into the depths of suffering with them and for them (Nederhood).

But when we look at Christ, lifted up on the cross, we see not only human suffering, we also see the suffering of God. We see the pain of God who loves the world enough to go to hell to save us. God comes to us in Christ crucified. In Christ crucified we see God suffering for and with Muslim, Jews and Christians. We see God suffering with and for agnostic and atheists. Alistair McGrath writes, "At Calvary, God entered into the darkness of human pain and suffering. God faced the threat of extinction - and having met it, having recognized, exposed and named

it as it really is, he conquered it.”

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” Greeks said. As we leave the church this morning I’d like us all to see Jesus, see him lifted up on the cross! See his arms stretched out in invitation to you and the whole world! “There’s something about Jesus,” Gary would tell Freda. Yes, there is something about God suffering and dieing in the person of Christ that draws us out of ourselves to God. “Behold the heart that so loved mankind,” the plaque on the statue of Christ said. Freda felt drawn to Christ. She began to pray to Christ, “You are my life.” May each one of us feel that strange attraction of the crucified Christ and be drawn to him, serve him, follow him so that where he is there we will be also.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for all that you did to pay for our sins. We marvel that you were willing to be like a kernel of wheat that is sown in the ground and dies and then bears rich fruit. We think of how cruelly you were crucified at Calvary, and we bless your holy name for giving your all so that we could be saved. Draw people to yourself. Draw all people to yourself so that our world might be saved and experience forgiveness and peace. Amen.