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TOM WRIGHT

SPCK

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For Leo

Look! The lion . . . has won the victory!
(Revelation 5.5)

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PART ONE



Introduction



I

A Vitally Important Scandal

Why the Cross?

YOUNG HERO WINS HEARTS.” Had there been newspapers in Jerusalem in the year we now call AD 33, this was the headline you would *not* have seen. When Jesus of Nazareth died the horrible death of crucifixion at the hands of the Roman army, nobody thought him a hero. Nobody was saying, as they hurriedly laid his body in a tomb, that his death had been a splendid victory, a heroic martyrdom. His movement, which had in any case been something of a ragtag group of followers, was over. Nothing had changed. Another young leader had been brutally liquidated. This was the sort of thing that Rome did best. Caesar was on his throne. Death, as usual, had the last word.

Except that in this case it didn't. As Jesus's followers looked back on that day in the light of what happened soon afterward, they came up with the shocking, scandalous, nonsensical claim that his death had launched a revolution. That something had happened that afternoon that had changed the world. That by six o'clock on that dark Friday evening the world was a different place.

Nonsensical or not, they were proven right. Whether we believe in Jesus, whether we approve of his teaching, let alone whether we like the look of the movement that still claims to follow him, we are bound to see his crucifixion as one of the pivotal moments in human history. Like the assassination of Julius Caesar around seventy years earlier, it marks the end of one era and the start of another.

And Jesus's first followers saw it as something more. They saw it as the vital moment not just in human history, but in the entire story of God and the world. Indeed, they believed it had opened a new and shocking window onto the meaning of the word "God" itself. They believed that with this event the one true God had suddenly and dramatically put into operation his plan for the rescue of the world.

They saw it as the day the revolution began.

It wasn't just that they believed Jesus had been raised from the dead. They did believe that, of course, and that too was scandalous nonsense in their day as it is in ours. But they quickly came to see his resurrection not simply as an astonishing new beginning in itself, but as *the result of what had happened three days earlier*. The resurrection was the first visible sign that the revolution was already under way. More signs would follow.

Most Christians today don't see it like this—and, in consequence, most people outside the church don't see it like that either. I understand why. Like most Christians today, I started my thinking about Jesus's death with the assumption, from what I had been taught, that the death of Jesus was all about God saving me from my "sin," so that I could "go to heaven." That, of course, can be quite a revolutionary idea for someone who's never thought of it before. But it's not quite the revolution the early Christians were talking about. In fact, that way of putting it, taken on its own, significantly distorts what Jesus's first followers were saying. They were talking about something bigger, something more dangerous, something altogether more explosive. The personal meaning

is not left behind. I want to make that clear from the start. But it is contained within the larger story. And it means more, not less, as a result.

Let me put this another way. The early Christian writers used some stunning expressions of delight and gratitude when they mentioned Jesus's death. Think of Paul saying, "He loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20), or "The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Bible" (1 Cor. 15:3). Think of John writing perhaps the most famous line in the New Testament, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (3:16, KJV). The focus in all these cases is upon Jesus's death on the cross, not the resurrection. These must remain central in any authentic description of what the first Christians believed had happened when Jesus died. But by themselves, without paying attention to the larger elements in the picture, they can lead us into a private or even selfish way of seeing things, in which our immediate needs may seem to have been met (our needs for forgiveness in the present and salvation in the future), but without making any difference in the wider world.

Some, indeed, make a virtue of that irrelevance. This world is not our home, they say. Jesus has rescued us, and he's taking us somewhere else. But the early Christians were clear: Jesus's death made all the difference in the world, all the difference *to* the world. The revolution had begun. In this book I want to show what that means and how a fuller vision of what happened when Jesus died, rooted in the New Testament itself, can enable us to be part of that revolution. According to the book of Revelation, Jesus died in order to make us not rescued nonentities, but restored human beings with a vocation to play a vital part in God's purposes for the world. Understanding what exactly happened on that horrible Friday afternoon is a big step toward making that vocation a reality.

But whether we understand it or not, there is no denying that the sheer fact of Jesus's crucifixion and the symbol of the cross

itself still carry enormous power in our world. We need to think about this for a moment before going any farther. It forces us to ask, again, the key question: Why?

Captivated by the Cross

Someone recently drew my attention to an energetic, youthful organization calling itself the “Jesus Army.” It has, of course, a website, and I confess that when I first looked at it, I was expecting trite clichés and tired slogans. Not at all. It had the feel of fresh discovery and embraced a wider variety of spiritual traditions and practical programs than I had anticipated. But at its heart it remained deeply traditional, as you can see in the posting that caught my eye. This short piece places the spotlight on the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the event that forms the subject of this book. It draws our attention to the strange, perhaps even revolutionary power that this event still appears to possess, despite all the skepticism and sneering of today’s world:

YOU can’t get away from it. It’s everywhere.

The cross.

In homes, in films, in paintings, in pop videos. Worn as an earring, on a necklace. Stitched or studded onto leather or denim. Tattooed onto skin . . .

What would Coca-Cola or McDonald’s give to own a symbol that millions wear around their necks every day?

The cross is the universal Christian symbol, acknowledged by millions of Christians everywhere as the single visual sign of their faith.

Which is weird, isn’t it? Because the cross was originally a symbol of suffering and defeat. The Roman Empire killed thousands of its enemies by nailing them to wooden crosses.

It's like wearing a gibbet around your neck. Or hanging a little golden lethal injection from your necklace.

Jesus Christ was executed 2,000 years ago by the Romans. But Christians believe Jesus didn't stay dead—that Jesus beat death and rose again, beyond death's reach.

That makes the cross not a sign of death, but a sign of the end of death.

A sign of hope, a sign of possibility—for every human being.

That's why Christians wear crosses.

The Jesus Army wear and give away bright red crosses. Jesus Army member Chris, 38, says, "We give away hundreds of crosses. People like them. They glow in UV light, which makes them popular with clubbers! But all sorts of people like them and use them to help them to think about God or to pray."

"They're designed to stand out" he adds. "The cross of Jesus means we can be forgiven and can have a new start. Even death's been clobbered."

"It's worth shouting about."¹

There's quite a lot to think about in that sharp little extract. Clearly it isn't designed as a sophisticated piece of theology, or for that matter biblical exegesis, but that's part of the point: the crucifixion of Jesus is a plain, stark fact, etched into real space and time and, even more important, into the real flesh and blood of a human being. People today, in a wide variety of ways, simply intuit that it has powerful and profound meaning for them. Others, of course, see nothing in it except an unpleasant tale from long ago.

1. <http://jesus.org.uk/blog/streetpaper/cross-my-heart-and-hope>.

Despite the predictions of people who imagined that religion in general and Christianity in particular were losing their appeal in today's world, the fact of Jesus's crucifixion and the gospel story in which we find it retain a remarkable power in late modern culture. This appeal persists even among people who don't hold any particular theory about its precise meaning or even any specific faith in Jesus or God. Why? Why does the cross of Jesus of Nazareth have this impact even today?

In 2000, the National Gallery in London put on a millennial exhibition entitled "Seeing Salvation." That was a case in point—especially remembering that European countries tend to be far more "secularized" than the United States. It consisted mostly of artists' depictions of Jesus's crucifixion. Many critics sneered. All those old paintings about someone being tortured to death! Why did we need to look at rooms full of such stuff? Fortunately, the general public ignored the critics and turned up in droves to see works of art, which, like the crucifixion itself, seem to carry a power beyond theory and beyond suspicion.

The Gallery's director, Neil McGregor, moved from that role to become director of the British Museum, a job he did with great distinction and effect for the next decade. The final piece he acquired in the latter capacity, before moving to a similar position in Berlin, was a simple but haunting cross made from fragments of a small boat. The boat, which been carrying refugees from Eritrea and Somalia, was wrecked off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa, south of Sicily, on October 3, 2013. Of the 500 people on board, 349 drowned. A local craftsman, Francesco Tuccio, was deeply distressed that nothing more could have been done to save people, and he made several crosses out of fragments of the wrecked vessel. One was carried by Pope Francis at the memorial service for the survivors. The British Museum contacted Mr. Tuccio, and he made a cross especially for the museum, thanking the authorities there for drawing attention to the suffering that this

small wooden object would symbolize. Why the cross rather than anything else?

Another example struck me forcibly during the 2014 season of Promenade Concerts in the Albert Hall in London. (The “Proms,” as they are known, make up a major annual festival, offering world-class music cheaply to a wide audience.) On September 6, 2014, Sir Simon Rattle conducted an extraordinary performance of J. S. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*. Not only was the music wonderfully performed, the whole thing was acted out, choreographed by the American director Peter Sellars, a professor at University of California in Los Angeles, who is noted especially for his unique contemporary stagings of classical operas and plays. In a broadcast talk during intermission, Sellars explained that this wasn’t theater; it was prayer. What he was doing, he said, related first to Bach’s musical portrayal of the story of Jesus’s death and then to our modern appropriation of both the story itself and Bach’s interpretation. At no point did Sellars make any specifically Christian confession of faith. But it was clear throughout that he saw the story of Jesus’s crucifixion as the story par excellence in which all human beings are confronted with the full darkness of human life and with the possibility, through inhabiting that story themselves, of finding a way through. Just as the world as a whole, whether Christian or not, dates itself by Jesus’s birth, so the reflective world, whether Christian or not, regularly finds that the story of his death, in art, music, or literature, provides a unique focal point for the dark dilemma of human existence and also a shining light to guide us through.

We could pile up plenty of other examples, each of which would increase the volume of the question: Why? Why does this death and the story in which we find it carry this power? It seems to go well beyond any one articulate explanation, and it certainly goes way beyond the boundaries of explicit Christian faith. I think of the Jewish novelist Chaim Potok, whose artistic hero Asher Lev

searches for imagery to express the pain of modern Judaism. The only thing he can find that will do—to the predictable horror of his community—is the crucifixion scene, which he paints in fresh and shocking ways. I think of the way in which the first *Harry Potter* novel ends with the disclosure that Harry had been rescued, as a young child, by the loving self-sacrifice of his mother. We could go on.

Skeptics may well continue to see the execution of Jesus as just one among thousands of crucifixions carried out by the Romans in the Middle East. But for reasons that seem to go beyond mere cultural traditions, this particular death still carries enormous evocative power. And just as in the Middle Ages many found that they could relate to that story by meditating on the “instruments of the Passion” (the scourge, the crown of thorns, the nails, and so forth), so today various human elements of the story—the cock-crow as Peter is denying that he knows Jesus, the kiss by which Judas betrays his master—have become proverbial. They seem to sum up the way in which we humans get things horribly wrong, but at the same time they do so within a larger and more powerful context of meaning.

When we come to more explicitly Christian presentations, the same point emerges all the more powerfully, especially when we notice how the cross, even though it's such a simple symbol, somehow resists being turned into a mere cliché. In Roland Joffé's award-winning 1986 movie *The Mission*, the cross in various forms haunts the whole narrative. The story begins with the death of one of the early Jesuit missionaries to the remote South American tribe of the Guarani. The tribesmen tie him to a wooden cross and send him over the vast Iguazu Falls, providing the movie with its poster image. The story ends with the massacre of the unresisting leaders, carrying the symbols of the crucifixion in procession, as the Portuguese colonial forces, bent on enslaving the natives rather than evangelizing them, close in and open fire. The meaning of the cross—especially its stark opposition to the

world's ways of power—is allowed to hang like a great question mark over the entire narrative.

More explicit again are the many ways in which the cross has been described in the classics of Christian literature. In John Bunyan's famous *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), the hero, Christian, is trudging along, weighed down with a huge burden. Eventually he comes to a place where, in Bunyan's matchless description:

There stood a Cross, and a little below in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my Dream, that just as Christian came up with the Cross, his Burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the Sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more. . . .

Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said with a merry heart, *He hath given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death.* Then he stood still awhile to look and wonder; for it was very surprizing to him, that the sight of the Cross should thus ease him of his Burden.²

Let me give one more example, out of thousands of possible ones, of the way in which the crucifixion of Jesus appears to carry a power that goes way beyond any attempt to rationalize it away. A Roman Catholic archbishop (I have tried to discover which one, but so far without success; the story is well known) described how three mischievous young lads decided to play a trick on the priest who was hearing confessions in their local church. They took turns going into the confessional and “confessing” all sorts of terrible sins and crimes to see how the priest would react. Two of them then made off in a hurry; but the priest stopped the third one and, as though taking him seriously, announced that he was going to impose a penance on him. The lad was to walk up to the far end of the church, toward the figure of Jesus hanging on

2. John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. J. M. Dent (London, 1898), 38.

