

The Cross Placarded

*Readings: Isaiah chapter 52 verse 13- chapter 53 verse 3;
John chapter 12 verses 27 – 36*

When I was in theological college our Greek tutor said that the two essential sources for a sermon were the Bible and the Newspaper. Nine times out of 10 I use the newspaper to illustrate the Bible. I am reversing that in this sermon. I begin with the newspaper.

This last week one image has had an incredible impact. It was the picture of a little Syrian boy whose family fled as refugees to Europe. They were herded aboard a small boat which capsized at sea and the little boy drowned. His tiny body was washed up on the beach and the picture showed a man carrying him away. He looked like a little rag doll, completely lifeless. That image went viral and had an incredible impact. It even caused David Cameron to alter his immigration policy and it altered the perceptions of the whole nation.

The powerful impact of one image. And my mind immediately leapt to another image which has had an even greater impact. The Cross of Christ. Paul used it in his letter to Christians in Colossae. He spoke of Christ being placarded on the Cross and Jesus Himself used the same image. Faced with the imminent possibility of crucifixion Jesus said: "I, if I be lifted up on from the earth will draw all men to me." So it was that Jesus was crucified and that image has changed the world.

The story and the image a little boy drowned encapsulates for me my understanding of the Cross of Christ. In two ways. One is what caused it. The other is its impact.

What caused it? The answer is the heartlessness and sinfulness of human nature. That little boy was taken by his parents who fled the carnage of what is happening in Syria. A country enveloped in violence fuelled by a corrupt dictatorship, a barbaric Islamic League and a futile attempt by the outside world to bomb the people into submission. Caught up in this maelstrom his parents determined to flee the carnage. They had relatives in Canada but the Canadians refused to grant asylum. So, in desperation they paid people smugglers to get to Europe and paid the price of human greed. They were herded onto a small boat which capsized and sank. A hundred people drowned.

Human sinfulness caused their death. And human sinfulness caused the death of Christ. Jesus didn't die because it was all part of the plan and purpose of God. Never in a 1000 years will you get me singing the hymn line which says; *"And on the Cross where Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied."* That is an abominable understanding and unfortunately it is all too common amongst Christians. Jesus died because the religious leaders saw Him as a threat and determined to be rid of Him. He died because Pilate put his ambition before truth and sentenced an innocent man to death to save his career. Jesus died because human nature is fickle, shouting Hosanna one day and Crucify the next. He died because the false expectations of sincere people resulted in angry disillusionment. It was the sinfulness of human nature, embodied in the Pharisees and Pilate and the Mob, which nailed Him to the Cross. – The will of man and not the Will of God!

Now to its impact. The image of a little boy dead had the power to transform the way people think. The image of Christ upon His Cross has the power to transform human lives. For the Cross is a demonstration of just how much God loves us. It is sign and symbol of what it costs God to offer us a free forgiveness. It is not a mere demonstration because it has the power to generate within us an answering love which transforms life

There is a story told of three young men who went on a night out in Paris. On the way home they passed the Cathedral of Notre Dame and one suggested they go inside and take the mickey out of the priest by making a bogus confession. The priest heard them out and said: "For every confession there is a penance. Your penance is to walk up the aisle and kneel before the crucifix above the altar. And look into the eyes of the crucified Christ and say three times: "You have done all this for

me and I don't give a damn."

One lad did it. He swaggered up the aisle, knelt below the crucifix and said "You have done all this for me ..." He said it a second time. And then a third. "You have done all this for me and I — and I — and I" And broke down in tears. Years later that young lad became the Bishop of Notre Dame.

That is the regenerative power of the Cross. It impacts upon our lives with a transforming power and nobody expressed this better than Isaac Watts. He wrote a hymn which begins by urging us to look at the Christ upon His Cross.

When I survey the wondrous Cross
on which the prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
and pour contempt on all my pride.

See from His head, his hands, his feet
sorrow and love flow mingled down
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

And, when we see that, when we feel that only one response is possible;

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.