

The Cross As Unconditional Love

By Ronald Rolheiser

The cross of Christ is like a well-cut diamond. Turn it in the sun and you get a variety of colors and sparkles. Among other things, it brings out the price of true love, the power of vulnerability to bring about community, the presence of God within human suffering, how death washes things clean, how death can be triumph, how one is tempted to cry out in despair just before triumph, and especially how God loves us unconditionally. The unconditional love of God is what Good Friday is, in the end, all about. That is why it is called Good Friday, not black Friday. This was brought home to me, powerfully, several years ago.

A man in his mid-30s came to see me. He didn't ask for confession, but he made one. He sat himself down and said simply: "Father, I want to tell you a story. The worst thing that could possibly happen to anyone has happened to me – and the best thing that could ever happen to anyone has also happened to me. I have been to hell and back... and being in hell led me to believe in heaven." Tears flowed freely as he told me the story:

He was a married man with three children. His marriage was basically a good one, though he had been unfaithful. Unthinking, without prayer in his life, seduced by his own selfishness and the pressures of our culture, he had drifted into a sexual affair with one of the secretaries in his office. Initially, he experienced very little guilt about the affair and continued on with his family, the church, and his work as before.

"It was incredible", he confessed, "but I was able to continue this with basically no guilt feelings whatever. In fact, I even believed that this was helping the girl involved and was making me a better husband and father."

Eventually, the girl became pregnant. Even then his irresponsibility did not sink in. He continued as before. She didn't. Returning from a vacation with his family, he found a letter waiting for him. The girl had written to tell him that she had had an abortion, had quit her job, and had moved to another city. It was over. It was then that the reality of his sin sunk in, deeply and painfully. Before that moment, he had felt little guilt. Now, in an instant, he was overwhelmed by it. His world shattered. Guilt overcame him and, unable to see how he would ever again face God, his family, and himself, he decided, though in a vague sort of way, to kill himself. With no particular plan in mind, he sat in his car, on the very night on which he had received the letter, and began to drive. Eventually, after some hours, he found himself on dirt roads and finally, not knowing where he was, he ran out of gas.

Leaving his car, he saw an old dilapidated church. Its doors were torn off their hinges and he walked, blindly, into the church. He fell asleep and awoke just as the sun was rising. When he looked around, he saw that the only thing left in the church was a crucifix on the front wall. He said: "You know, Father, I'm a cradle Catholic. I've seen crucifixes all my life. But, before that moment, I had never really seen one. "I looked at

that cross and I understood. I had been to hell and God has never stopped loving me, even for one second!" Then he added: "I'm not proud of what I did. That sin will always be part of my past, nothing will ever erase that. But because of what I experienced in seeing that cross and knowing what it means, I can live beyond that. "I know now that God loves me even when I am twisted and sinful. From that, I draw strength to live new, beyond my sin."

Reflecting upon that story, I was reminded of a comment that theologian Jurgen Moltmann once made about the cross of Christ:

"The cross is the utterly incommensurable factor in the revelation of God. We have become far too used to it. We have surrounded the scandal of the cross with roses.

We have made a theory of salvation out of it. But that is not the cross...On the cross, God is non-God. Here is the triumph of death, the enemy, the non-church, the lawless state, the blasphemer, the soldiers. Here Satan triumphs over God.

Our faith begins at the point where atheists suppose that it must be at an end. Our faith begins with the bleakness and power which is the night of the cross, abandonment, temptation and doubt about everything that exists!

Our faith must be born where it is abandoned by all tangible reality; it must be born of nothingness, it must taste this nothingness and be given it to taste in a way that no philosophy of nihilism can imagine." (The Crucified God, Page 36)

Our faith does begin where we would think it ends. The darkness of hell, the blackness of Good Friday, perhaps more so than anything else, can help us understand the love that makes for heaven. It's this love that we celebrate when we celebrate Christ's death. The love that emanates from the cross of Jesus is not something to be admired, adored, but is something to be seized and lived under.