

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,  
 St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,  
 on 17 September 2006 (Proper 19):  
 Isaiah 50:4-9; James 2:1-5, 8-10, 14-18; Mark 8:27-38

## The Cross

Questions: In a complex and very often confusing world, I am realizing more and more how important questions are.

As student, I had an inkling that questions mattered, but in that context it was deceptively easy to view questions as opponents that were to be conquered by the right answer. When life is seen as some game to be won, questions appear to be obstacles to be overcome. Answers are the key to victory. Answers are what people pay for.

Yet, for me, the turning point about questions came when I was a junior in college. (I admit that I am a late bloomer!) My American Literature professor gave us the option of taking home our final exam. The take-home option consisted of one requirement: To create from the course experience three final exam questions of our own. We would be graded solely upon the quality of the questions we posed. No answers were accepted.

That take-home exam was the most effective testing experience I ever had. It was then that I realized that the true test of whether or not someone understood the content of a course or appreciated the real nature of a problem –the true test manifests itself through the quality of the

questions. The questions – good questions – are like disciplined bird dogs that have the ability to point out the hidden prey. You have to know your stuff to ask a good question. You have to be involved personally to ask a good question.

This is an appropriate time to mention to you something I have said in the past: namely, that it seems to me there are two basic types of questions. There are questions that are interesting, and there are questions that are helpful. Helpful questions are questions that guide the inquiry into the meaning of things. Helpful questions are worthy of the risk it takes to live into them in order to discover the answer. Helpful questions tend to dazzle those who ask them with their power to transform rather than simply answer.

Questions – good questions -- matter.

I have often thought that a good idea for a book or at least for a rousing focus for a Bible Study would be to list all the questions one finds in scripture and to give them the space and time to blossom fully in our presence. For those of you who might be intrigued by such a perspective or someday be a contestant on the television quiz

show, *Jeopardy*, the first questions in the Bible come from Genesis, as one might expect. It is the serpent who utters the first question to an immature and unprepared Eve: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” Eve’s response to this question exemplifies those answers that are merely memorized but not lived. She gets the answer right, but still fails the test.

The second question in the Bible emerges shortly thereafter in this same story of Adam and Eve. This second question comes from the lips of God. For when Adam and Eve had fallen to the temptation of being their own gods by eating of the forbidden fruit (it’s not an apple, *Jeopardy* players!), they hid themselves in shame and fear from the presence of the Lord. And the Lord God, sensing that the sacred Communion of creation had been broken, sought them out, crying: “Where are you?”

And ever since, that question has haunted the soul of every man, woman, and child who has ever walked the earth, because there is no hope of discovering a life-giving answer, when we are hiding ourselves from God.

In this morning’s gospel, we have two questions that belong in our book. One is quite famous, even in our biblically illiterate culture. It is Jesus’ show-stopping question to the Twelve, as they were in the area of Caesarea Philippi. Prefaced by an initial testing: “Who do people say that I am?” the show-stopper cuts to the bone: “But who do *you* say that I am?”

Most of us know the answer Peter offered, and how for the moment he could bask in the glow of getting a good grade from the teacher. Yet, poor Peter got slammed, when the consequences of his right answer proved to be too uncomfortable to live. Peter’s answer, that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah – that is, that Jesus is the long-awaited One who would put things right and, thereby, save us from all that is wrong – this answer is correct. However, the meaning of this answer, as Jesus explains it, has to do with the cross, and on this one most of us find ourselves in line with Peter.

This is to say that we do not want to have to deal with the cross. We do not like the cross. We are uncomfortable with the cross. So, we ignore the cross and lose touch with its meaning.

As with questions, there are two types of crosses; or so says a story that I have told to you before. This story bears repeating (especially in the context of a sermon about the cross) because it not only actually happened but also because it shows how easily we turn our backs on God’s truth simply because it makes us uncomfortable.

Those of you who remember the story, I bid your patience. For others, the story goes like this.

A man was interested in purchasing a lavalier necklace with a cross on it for a Confirmation gift. He was strolling through a mall one day, when he spied a jewelry store and decided to see if he could find

the gift there. A young, pert woman stood behind the counter and greeted the man with an eager but polite marketing presence. “May I help you, sir?” she asked. The man explained that he was looking for a lavalier cross as a gift and wondered if this store carried anything like it. With bright eyes, the clerk responded in the affirmative. “Oh yes sir, we have any number of lavalier crosses. Some are made of gold, silver, pewter, wood, ceramic, and glass. In fact,” she continued, “there are crosses that are made of just about every material imaginable, but basically there are two types of crosses.”

She stopped her sales pitch for a moment to let her customer realize how helpful she was being. When she saw him raise his eyes to hers in silent inquiry, she provided him with the answer. “Yes sir, there are two types of crosses: Plain ones and ones with little men on them.”

*If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me...[For] [w]hat good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?!*

Yes, in this morning’s gospel there are two questions posed. The first one asks us personally who Jesus is for us. The other poses an inquiry as to who we are. “What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul

for?” When I dare to listen to these questions, the implication is that the question about Jesus will be of great help in answering the question about ourselves.

“Where are you?” “Who are you?” “What are you?” If you want to know what these questions mean so that you might also know what the answers mean, the first place to look – once again – is to that ostensibly simple creation story in Genesis.

Here’s the *Jeopardy* answer. (Now remember to put your response in the form of a question AND to tithe your winnings to St. Martin’s! I don’t work cheap!!)

The answer is: “There are two of these stories in Genesis.” The correct question is: “How many creation stories are there in the Bible?”

From the second creation story, we gain a simple but deep insight into the questions of the “Who, What, Where” of our lives. This story says that “the Lord God formed man [“adam” in Hebrew] of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being, a living soul.<sup>2</sup>

There is your answer. We are of the elements of the universe, the very dust of the cosmos. When God breathes into us, when God “inspires” us, we become; we have being; we are. When dust and God’s Spirit combine, we have soul.

<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Mark 8:34-37, page 1389.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:7-8

*[For] [w]hat good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?<sup>3</sup>*

*If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*

The question that faces us in all this has to do with the cross and our souls, our real selves. What could the cross possibly have to do with our life, our real life, our life with God? With baffled Peter, can we glean any good news from Jesus' cross that might possibly compel us to take the cross up in our own lives and follow the one we claim as our Lord for life? What's all this about?

With necessary humility, I declare that these are good questions, even though they are not easy ones. These are good questions that demand that we live them, if the answers are to be worthy of our need, if the answers are to be life-giving.

*If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a person, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a person give in return for his soul?*

Am I different from Peter? Is my response to Jesus' cross naturally more faithful? No, truth to tell, I fear death. I fear the suffering that death

creates. Like Peter, I want to talk Jesus out of this pathway, but I also know that Jesus is what each of us needs: eternal life; perfect Communion. Therefore, I need to be as present as I can be to him.

While the world worships death because death appears as the ultimate, unavoidable end, the source of all intimidating power, Jesus reveals a deeper, truer perspective. Jesus reveals the deep truth that death is real, but it is not the end. Life with God always entails more than fear and death. This is the cross.

Two quick comments about the cross and its meaning: Two admittedly incomplete points in hopes of raising a conversation all of us need to have more often and more clearly.

The first is that the cross symbolizes the worst that the world can do and the best that God does.

Our natural tendency is to worship death, to give it ultimate homage and to tremble in fear at its presence. Every time a man is cut down, every time a woman is used, every time a child is preyed upon, every time manipulation, abuse, intimidation, torture or terror is put forth, death is being worshiped and the cancer of fear and despair is spread.

Those of us who are so familiar with the cross must never forget that in Jesus' day the cross was the sign of death's power and influence in the hands of the Roman Empire. The cross was intimidating,

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Mark 8:34-37, page 1389.

humiliating, loathsome, terrorizing, always fatal. Then and now, the cross represents the worst that the world can do.

Yet, to followers of Jesus, the cross also presents the very best of God. It conveys this meaning: That God so loved the world that the Holy One allowed the world to do its worst so that God's best might be seen, overcoming fear with sacred, healing, eternal Communion. The cross in this light speaks to a life that death cannot contain – or comprehend. When the world did its worst, God offered his transforming best; and death was put back in its proper place.

Given this first, quick observation about the cross, there is a second one I need to mention. It is one that presently surrounds us in nature as the autumn arrives and one that punctuates our celebration of the Eucharist.

It is this: In order for us to be what God has made us to be (and we see this calling perfectly in Christ) – this life we know now must be broken open in order for us to receive the larger life of God.

For instance, in nature, to look at an acorn, who would ever think that a mighty oak awaits its release? Yet, in order for that new life to emerge, the acorn must suffer loss of what it knows and what it is. I believe that this is also what lies at the heart of the cross: the paradox of larger life breaking through.

From the acorn's perspective, I am sure that this fraction is

terrifying and quite naturally to be avoided. From the perspective of the oak tree, however, the fraction is known as labor pains and birthing.

To the extent that I am too much an acorn, I tremble and rebel at God's birthing me from what I know to what God knows. It is the reason that every time I celebrate Holy Communion and raise the symbolic bread and crack it in two, I must pause in silence to tremble at such a fraction of life, of my life, of our life. Yet, I also want to be more than an acorn; and even now I feel the pressures of the oak tree within, seeking more room to be alive, pressing against the puny confines of what is now.

To be sure, the cross speaks of breaking, fraction. Yet, with Christ and in Christ, we can and do proclaim with trembling joy that emerging life with these words: "Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast. Alleluia."

*If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a person, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a person give in return for his soul?*

Questions and the unexpected answers of the cross. Amen.