The Word of the Cross

Words of Spirituality
by ENZO BIANCHI
This man is Jesus the Just One, who dies as he does because of the unjust world in which he lived; this man is a faithful believer in God

What has always been seen as the ‘scandal and foolishness’ of Christianity is the event of the cross, and as a result, its metaphors and visual symbols. Christians face the temptation of “emptying the cross of its meaning,” as Paul points out in the First Letter to the Corinthians (1:17), and to those who are not Christian the cross and its logic appear inhuman or false as an attempt to respond to the problem of suffering. This has been true since the beginning of Christianity. But given the material well-being in the West today, the obsession with wealth and convenience, the search for pleasure without cost, and the conviction that everything that is technically possible and economically feasible is therefore legitimate and desirable, we have to admit that the removal of the cross is demonstrated daily in a thousand ways - some blatant, others extremely subtle - and that the foundation of Christianity seems to have faded into obscurity as a result. We might think of a number of examples to illustrate this: the attempt sometimes made today to present Christian life as if it were a constant celebration of the resurrection and nothing more, the amount of energy expended in an effort to present to young adults a Gospel that is attractive because it has been liberated of every demand that involves discipline, self-denial, 'renunciation' (an essential element of the baptismal liturgy, reduced today to an unpronounceable word), and the taking up of the cross, all expressions from the Gospel considered 'difficult' to speak about today.

We might also think of the 'gnostic' speakers we encounter more and more often in ecclesial environments, who interpret Christian faith according to their own non-Christian criteria and present their listeners with a form of Christianity emptied of the "foolishness of the cross" and 'enriched' with persuasive intellectual discourse. Celsus is no longer the second-century philosopher who ridiculed Christians because of their Lord - a crucified criminal - and because of the church's extremely low sociological profile: the new Celsus proclaims Jesus a master of philanthropy and commends Christians who are visible and effective in the pólis, but in doing so he relegates to obscurity the event that founded and that continues to inspire Christian life. At Celsus' side is the new emperor, who, like the one described by the great fourth-century church father Hilary of Poitiers, "is underhanded in his flattery; instead of beating us on the back, he pats us on the stomach; instead of confiscating our wealth (and thus giving us life) he makes us wealthy, leading us toward death; he does not lead us toward freedom by putting us in prison, but toward slavery by inviting us into his palace and honoring us; instead of striking our body, he claims the heart; instead of beheading us with the sword, he kills our soul with money" (*Liber contra Constantium* 5).

This is how the cross, without being visibly or directly contested, is emptied of its meaning! Yet how insistently and forcefully John Paul II has asked Christians not to "empty the cross of its meaning!" At least once a year, on Good Friday, the cross is placed in front of believers in all of its reality and truth: Jesus of Nazareth, a man, a rabbi, a prophet, is nailed completely nude to a block of wood. Crucified, he appears anathematized, excommunicated, not worthy of heaven or earth. He is abandoned by his disciples and dies scorned by those who witness his humiliating execution. This man is Jesus the Just One, who dies as he does because of the unjust world in which he lived; this man is a faithful believer in God, even if he dies the death of a sinner abandoned by God; he is the Son of God to whom the Father will respond with the resurrection, making him pass from death to life. And yet the event of the cross, which took place in Jerusalem on April 7 of the year 30 of our era, can also be emptied of its meaning through its metaphors and visual symbols, and as Christians we should be vigilant so that we do not end up like the 'religious' people of every era who see the crucifixion as a scandal, or like the 'wise' of this world who judge it foolishness. The cross is the "wisdom of God," and St. Paul, in coining the expression "the word of the cross" (1 Corinthians 1:18), tells us that the event created by the cross is the Gospel, the good news.

Christians are not invited to respond to the cross with resignation, nor are they asked to think of suffering as having value in itself, or to make the cross their point of departure every time they think about the life of Jesus. They should realize, though, that Jesus' life and the form of his death, the crucifixion, were and are narrations of God: the living God who loves people even when they are evil, the God who forgives those who make themselves his enemies at the very moment when they reveal that they are enemies, the God who, in his desire that the sinner repent and live, allows himself to be rejected and killed. The cross, therefore, is also a denunciation of our sinfulness, our injustice, and our tendency to let ourselves be seduced by evil, since it is our evil that causes the Just One to suffer and be rejected, condemned and crucified.The cross has become the Christian emblem - at times exalted in a triumphalistic way, other times reduced to a decorative ornament, a superstitious gesture, or a banal metaphor for simple daily adversity. Yet unless the cross remains a remembrance of the 'instrument of our own execution,' by which we put to death our “old self" (Romans 6:6), it inevitably becomes a sign not inhabited by an event, an therefore a mystification. Martin Luther, meditating on the cross, echoed the church fathers when he wrote, "It is not enough to know God in his glory and majesty; it is necessary to know him in the humiliation and disgrace of the cross as well (...). True theology and true knowledge of God are in Christ crucified."

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