

Why the Cross?

In two weeks, Lent begins, and of course a crucial aspect of Lent is the heightened emphasis on the passion and death of Jesus. The cross is the “crux” of the matter, and so we do well to reflect upon *why* it had to be the *cross* that the Lord used to conquer sin and death.

Question: “The Crucifixion seems irrational. How come an omnipotent (that is, all-powerful) God could not save us without Jesus having to die on the Cross?”

Answer: God, in fact, could have chosen any other way to bring about the salvation of the world. According to the common view, God simply could have forgiven our sins and saved us without any earthly sacrifice. But there are reasons why God chose to do so via the Crucifixion.

By using the Crucifixion to accomplish the redemption, God drew on a theme that 1st-Century Jews would have understood: sacrifice. In fact, this was something that everybody in the ancient world would have understood. The impulse to offer sacrifice is found in cultures all over the world and therefore definitely seems to be innate human nature, providing a way for people everywhere to understand what Christ did for us.

In a sacrifice, people would bring a gift (often an animal) and offer it on an altar. The sacrifice could be a gesture of apology for having sinned or an act of thanks or reverence. Whatever its specific intent, it was meant in a general way to cultivate good relations with Heaven.

In the Crucifixion, Jesus presented Himself as a sacrifice on our behalf. Indeed, He was the sacrifice to which all other Jewish sin offerings pointed, “for it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.” (Heb 10:4)

More fundamentally, God communicated important lessons to us. One such lesson is just now serious our sins are – given that it took the death of the Son of God to atone for them. The Lord also showed us just how much He love us in spite of our sins. “God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8, cf. CCC 604)

God also drew on a theme that had special meaning for Jews: Passover. At the founding of their nation, God led them out of slavery in Egypt through the sacrifice of the Passover lambs, when God’s wrath passed over the Israelites. Now, Jesus, “the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29, 36), was sacrificed at Passover (Jn 19:14-16), so that God’s wrath might pass over us and we might be led out of slavery to sin. Thus, Saint Paul can say, “Christ, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed.” (1 Cor 5:7)

The tension between God’s perfect justice and God’s perfect mercy is not one that is easily resolved or understood in a single Pastor’s Column. The Mystery of the Cross has confounded the whole world and people of all times from the very beginning; Saint Paul himself remarked, regarding the Cross: “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” And the Cross, even today, still is a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others. But for all of us who strive to be strong in our faith, who strive to be active and intentional disciples of Jesus Christ, it is okay to be challenged by the Cross and still be good Christian disciples. Our faith in the supreme goodness of God, even though it is challenged by the horror of the Cross, can be strong, though it may seek understanding all the days of our lives. Enduring this tension and persevering through this Mystery is part of the good fight of faith of which Saint Paul so famously speaks.