

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, March 29, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE MAGNETISM OF THE CRUCIFIED ONE"

John 12:31,32

A good movie I saw last year and which some of you have seen was the Batman movie called "The Dark Knight." It was not a Christian movie but had Christian themes woven into it like sacrifice and rejection and redemption. Now I mention this because of something I read about Heath Ledger, who gave such a magnificent performance in the movie as "The Joker", then mysteriously died shortly after the filming. A co-star wrote this about the on-set personality of Heath Ledger. "Heath was magnetic. He was loved by everybody. Heath was electric - we all watched him. People were in awe of Heath."

Well, there are people like that aren't there? - people whose personalities are magnetic, who have a way of drawing others to them, whose very entry into a crowded room causes heads to turn. There is no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth had a magnetic personality. Much about Jesus attracted people to him, though apparently not his physical appearance. Years before Isaiah told us that the Christ would have "no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." In this image conscious age Jesus might not have made it as a media star. There may not have been a "Jesus of Nazareth" television show. But you never know. After all, we do have Dr. Phil. Yet there was something about Jesus that strongly attracted people, his personality, his unique combination of godliness and earthiness, his teachings, his works, his arguments with the religious authorities which appealed to common folk. Now of course not everyone was attracted to Jesus. Some rejected him, and in the end rejected him violently. But during his ministry he did draw so many to himself - drew men and women, young and old, children, fishermen, tax-collectors, Jews and Gentiles, people of every social class. They knew instinctively that when they were near him, they were in the presence of greatness, someone very special.

In John 12 we read that at Passover, some Greeks were visiting Jerusalem. They came to Philip and asked to see Jesus. When Jesus heard of their request he knew that the time had come for him to make his final appeal to all people. That appeal would be through his death. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (12:

23,24) Then in verses 31 and 32 Jesus says, "Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of the world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." John explains, "He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die."

It's ironic, isn't it? A crucifixion was the most painful and despicable death anyone could suffer. But Jesus called his death the hour of his glorification. He wanted the Greeks and wants all of us to see him lifted up on a Cross. He knew that his death above all else would draw people to him and move them to receive Him as Saviour and Lord. And it happens. That's why that movie of several years ago "The Passion of the Christ" had such a powerful impact. Even though Jesus' crucifixion was portrayed so graphically in the movie, it powerfully opened peoples' hearts and moved them to faith. When Jesus is lifted up on a Cross he draws us to himself. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Why does Christ crucified have such magnetic power? What accounts for the strange appeal of this man dying on the Cross?

First, because the Crucified One is the source of courage.

Roman Catholics display a crucifix; Protestants have an empty Cross. And both are right. We need to hold together both Jesus' death and his resurrection victory. Ideally, every Christian church should display both crucifix and empty cross. And sometimes we Protestants need to take a long look at that man dying on the Cross. For when we do see a man of extraordinary courage. Jesus said, 'Now is my soul troubled.' And what should I say, "Father, save me from this hour?" No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.' (12:27) Of course, Jesus was troubled as he faced death. He would suffer far more than other victims of crucifixion. In some way far beyond our understanding all our transgressions were laid on him as he died. Who can imagine what it was like for one person to bear all the sins and griefs of the entire world for all eternity? And yet with great courage he went forward to die in spite of the rejection, the pain, the lashes and the spikes, and the burden of human sin and guilt that was laid on him.

How often we need courage in our lives, courage to do the right thing, courage move forward and to face difficult situations, courage to speak up in the face of injustice; courage to bear suffering; courage when to face the hour of death; courage to stand firm when all others are falling away.

And one reason the Crucified One attracts us is that he had that kind of courage. Whenever you feel cowardly and afraid, look up to him in faith. For you not only see an example of courage, but by God's grace, Christ's courage flows

into you and moves you to act with courage.

A teenager named Sylvia put it like this, "Because Jesus is my Saviour I can find the courage I need to stand up for what is right. When one of my schoolmates wants me to do something wrong - like help them get even with someone who's hurt them, or hate someone because she's different than me I remember how hard Jesus tried to stand up for what he believed, and it helps me to say no to them."

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself." Christ Crucified attracts us because he is the source of courage.

Secondly, the Crucified One attracts us because he is the source of healing.

We really should be repelled by the Cross, by this ancient form of capital punishment. But strangely we are attracted to it. And that's because healing flows from the wounds of the Crucified One, healing for our souls. Isaiah again, "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his wounds we are healed."

And so many of us, gazing upon that Cross, find healing for our souls and balm for our inner wounds. From the Crucified One flows acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation with God, a new beginning, and strength to face tomorrow. Paul says of Christ crucified, "He loved me and gave himself for me." Under the outstretched arms of Jesus there is a place for everyone of us. Those arms are stretched wide, so that no matter where you've been, no matter what you've done, no matter how far you've wandered, there is a place for you, if you will take it. For all who turn towards home, there is a homecoming.

Last week I watched some of the memorial service for the victims of the helicopter crash in Newfoundland. Many comforting words were spoken and at one point the camera focussed in on the crucifix. And I thought what a source of comfort that is - a symbol of God's presence with the people in their suffering and loss, a sign of God himself entering into the broken world in Christ and sharing it with us, a God who suffers with us and for us. But we need the empty Cross too, for it points beyond Christ's death to His resurrection victory which we share by faith. From the Crucified One flows light and the hope of eternity.

The Crucified One attracts us because he is a source of healing for your soul and for mine. "By his wounds we are healed."

“And I when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”
Finally, the Crucified One attracts us because he reveals the deepest truth of life.

That truth has to do with sacrifice. All that is good comes through sacrifice; through giving yourself, even your very life, for the sake of another. Jesus said it and did it, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Now in our self-centeredness we tend to resist sacrificing much of anything, but nothing worthwhile happens without it. Instinctively we know it. Parents sacrifice for their children; soldiers sacrifice to defend their fellow citizens; Christians sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel. This is life’s deepest truth - that every good thing comes through sacrifice.

Father Maximilian Kolbe was a Polish priest. In the 2nd World War this Christian man helped Jewish people, and so was imprisoned with them in a Nazi concentration camp. Every time a prisoner escaped, guards took a remaining prisoner and starved him to death as punishment and warning. After one escape, the guards randomly picked out Francis Gajowniczek for starvation. He fell to his knees and began to cry, “My wife! My children! I will never see them again.” Father Kolbe stepped forward and said quietly, “I will take his place.” His request was granted and on Aug. 18, 1941 Maximilian Kolbe died instead of Francis. Years later, when the Pope canonized Father Kolbe at the Vatican, Francis Gajowniczek was there with his wife and children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. One sacrificial death bore much fruit.

The story of human sacrifice is very moving. But even more so the sacrifice of Jesus. For his was not just a human sacrifice. His was the divine sacrifice - the God-man dying in our place. He gave his own perfect life to redeem us from the power of sin and death and bring us to eternal life. His sacrifice was for sinners sake, our sake, and has a strongly attractive power. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to me.”

And when we are attracted to Christ Crucified we are expected to do something about it. We are called to trust Christ and follow him in a self-giving way of life. For the Kingdom of God will only grow, and the Church will only flourish, and the Gospel will only spread as Christians take up Christ’s sacrificial life-style. We die to self in order to live for Christ. As Paul puts it, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Jesus said, “Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” (12: 25,26) If you feel the pull of the crucified One today then look up to that cross, and in these moments say to him, “My Lord and my God.”