



Note: The reference in the text to the “Third Week” is to the third week of the month-long *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits.

The Meaning of the Cross: Jesus stands within our Story

If ... the Cross reveals that the true nature of God is to love totally, and if we are created in the image of this God, then the call to respond to this God in Jesus is in order to fulfil our nature in selfless love. Contemplating the Cross should create in us the willingness to die on a cross for our fellows. The freedom of the Third Week is not, therefore, merely a deepening of the freedom from personal sins of the First Week but is also a freeing from that centring on self that prevents us from loving as we desire and as the call of Jesus demands.

Individualism can falsify the contemplation of Christ's death because it will turn us back into ourselves and contradict the movement out of self towards Christ who suffers in a continual conflict with the 'powers of darkness' in our world. Even the *Official Directory of the Spiritual Exercises* (chapter xxxv, 10) suggests that an appropriate attitude for the Third Week is zeal for souls 'whom God prized so highly, loved so affectionately, redeemed at so great a price'.

The Cross carries on it the full weight of human sinfulness which issues in unmerited suffering, division and conflict, the barriers of injustice. It is not merely for the 'forgiveness of sins' in the sense of pardoning personal, individual sins, but it is also the ultimate destruction of the deadness of human history. In the Cross are broken down all the barriers created in our historical, actual world by every kind of sin. On the Cross Jesus becomes in himself 'the peace between us' (Eph 2, 14), creating a solidarity within all humanity. Insofar as a retreatant is able to move beyond seeing the Cross of Jesus merely as the death of one innocent person to seeing it as representing and gathering into itself the countless crosses on which men and women continue to suffer in powerlessness, his or her entering into the mystery of Christ and his call will deepen immeasurably.

Philip Sheldrake, *Theology of the Cross and the Third Week*.

Theological Note

In Holy Week our thoughts turn spontaneously to the Passion narratives in the Gospels. A trawl of the web reveals that Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion* is the primary contemporary reference for thinking about the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Evangelical Christians, in particular, have hailed this film as a vindication of a traditionalist understanding of Jesus' role as the Saviour, the one who redeems us by his death on the Cross from our sins.

However, in recent years, there have been a number of theologians from varying perspectives who have sought to explore how to interpret the person of Jesus and his death by crucifixion against the background of what we have learned from cosmology, evolutionary theory and anthropology.

As in other areas of our Christian faith, the old answers simply do not work any longer. The atonement model of redemption whereby Jesus died on the Cross because of our sins made sense to Saint Paul; it does not make sense for us.

There was, simply, no original sin (understood in its traditional catechism exposition), for which atonement had to be made.

Instead, beginning with theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, there has emerged a growing conviction that God is not outside the world but rather within the process. God suffers with the

world and God's love is everywhere present in the world. God as a suffering God of love is the underlying spiritual dynamic of the thrust towards life and consciousness that is ultimate dynamism of the Universe.

In Jesus this dynamic was uniquely present, as it is similarly present in each of our lives, so that in the selfless and suffering love of Jesus we come to know the boundless love of God who suffers with us. This is the point of Sheldrake's reflection from an Ignatian perspective on the meaning of the Cross. God is near to us in our suffering and suffers with us.

While many would see this as revolutionary thinking in theology, there are others who would cite Irenaeus of Lyons as anticipating in broad outline this 'process' view of God's relationship time, history and Creation.