



The Finality of Jesus Crucified and the Global Mission of the Church

MARK THOMSEN

Division for Global Mission, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chicago, Illinois

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Cor 2:2)

“If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34, alt.)

The heart of the Christian mission and message is the affirmation that God raised Jesus crucified from the dead! The resurrection is God’s proclamation that Jesus crucified lives, sits at the right hand of God (Acts 2:33). Jesus’ message *is* God’s message; Jesus’ mission *is* God’s mission; Jesus crucified *is* God’s way of being, speaking, and acting in the world for the world’s sake. This Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, empowers his disciples for mission in the world (Acts 2:33). If the church is to participate in God’s mission and if the church is to witness to Jesus crucified as Lord of Lords and King of Kings, then Jesus crucified must first have finality in molding the mission and message of the church.

Jesus crucified must be allowed to challenge us anew to radical discipleship which wants only one thing—life and mission with God in Jesus’ name. Jesus crucified must re-create for us a vision of the depths and breadth of divine grace—a vision with such Spirit-inspired power that it will literally sweep us out of our sanctuaries and into our streets in Jesus’ name.

I. JESUS CRUCIFIED AND THE FOCUS OF MISSION

Jesus crucified identifies the focus of God’s mission. The cross makes it overwhelmingly clear that God has moved into the lives of broken and suffering people. The passion of Jesus embodies the com-passion (the

suffering-with-us) of God. The gospel proclaims that God’s love is so deep, passionate, and powerful that God enters our lives, and there agonizes with us in our brokenness and pain.

Biblical faith does not say that Jesus’ death on the cross was God’s original and only participation in human brokenness and suffering. The compassionate God incarnate in the crucified Jesus is also the suffering-with-us God who: heard the cries of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt (Exod 3:7-8); shared the brokenness and destruction of the Kingdom of Judah (Jer 9:10; 31:20); and hears the cries of the sinful (Luke 18:9ff.). Where is the focus of God’s mission? Wherever people are broken spiritually, psychologically, physically, socially, communally. Wherever people cry.

The suffering of God incarnate in Jesus crucified has radical implications for our mission.

To be Christian witnesses is to be captured by the crucified and risen Christ who sweeps through our lives, turning us inside out in order that we might take up our crosses and follow Jesus into the depths of life. There are afflictions to be seen, cries to be heard, sufferings to be known. It is within that pain that witness to Jesus authentically takes place, and the good news becomes the order of the day.

II. JESUS CRUCIFIED AND THE MISSION OF GOD'S REIGN

Jesus crucified defines the focus of God's mission. Jesus crucified also defines the nature of God's mission. Jesus' crucifixion makes it clear that God is in a life and death struggle to bring light and life into the realm of darkness and death. The biblical witness describes this encounter as a cosmic struggle between demonic "principalities and powers" and God's kingdom. The conflict, however, is neither mythical nor fought in the heavens. In Jesus it is fought in the human world of flesh and blood, in the realm of sweat, dust, and matter. Jesus gave his life in the struggle. God raised Jesus, indicating that God's kingdom, embodied in Jesus, shall not be ultimately destroyed. It is Satan, seemingly victorious, who totters at the brink of death.

The Kingdom of God was embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. The principalities were embodied in priests, scholars, governors, soldiers, disinterested peoples, disciples, and raging throngs. To those oppressed by the demonic in all of its forms, Jesus cried salvation and liberation, and they were free. The Kingdom of God was sweeping into history, and someone stronger than Satan was on the scene (Luke 11:14-23). Joy and hope and gospel (good news) were the order of the day. To the poor and oppressed, who questioned whether God knew or cared for their plight, Jesus said that God's kingdom comes first for you. To those condemned as sinners by society or their consciences, Jesus proclaimed forgiveness in the name of his Father's kingdom that was present among them. To those who were leprous, crippled, or blind, he spoke or reached out, and they were healed. To those oppressed by the demonic, Jesus cried liberation, and they were free. To those enslaved in sin by the demonic and violently opposed to his presence, he cried repentance and offered a future in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus prophetically spoke of and acted for the reign of God. In so doing, Jesus challenged the religious and political establishments. It was Jesus'

struggle to bring life into the midst of death that enraged the religious and scholarly elite and aroused the hostility of economic and political powers. Jesus' protagonists fought against the liberating power of forgiveness for the damned. Their religious tradition proclaimed that God's favor was to be earned and was never a gift. Jesus' friends and enemies were confounded by his message for the poor and marginalized. What kind of a world is likely when the rich and powerful are identified as those whose future with God is most questionable (Mark 10:23-24; Luke 16:14-15; 19ff.)? How does one keep an orderly world when God seems to turn everything upside down?

The enemies of Jesus rightly understood that the very existence of their religious and social structures was at stake. It was a struggle of life and death. This struggle spiked Jesus to a cross outside the Holy City. A pierced body and an unanswered cry raised questions of God and the future. An empty tomb shouted that God, Jesus, and life are the future!

The cosmic struggle still swirls within human life and history. The risen prophetic Jesus,

marked by pierced hands and wounded side, breathes on us the Holy Spirit and promises, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21). Whether in a local congregation or in broader arenas—in the United States, Madagascar, or Peru—the struggle is still intense.

The world is still marked by Satan, sin, and all their consequences. Human lives are still painfully distorted by faithlessness, selfishness, loneliness, and irresponsibility. Human lives still agonize under bigotry, poverty, and oppression. Where there is pain and suffering, Jesus Christ calls the church into divine-demonic struggles. There are battles to be waged and a crucified and risen Jesus to be announced in order that good news might be the order of the day.

III. THE FINALITY OF JESUS CRUCIFIED AND THE HEART OF THE MESSAGE AND MISSION (THE GOSPEL)

Jesus crucified defines the focus and nature of God’s mission. The focus of God’s mission is human suffering. The nature of God’s mission is a transforming struggle. Jesus crucified also defines God’s manner of operation in the world.

Our discussion has focused on God’s suffering and struggle in the world. The resurrection proclaims that Jesus crucified is God’s way of being in the world. Jesus is the decisive, unsurpassable, and normative incarnation and revelation of the mystery of God. Jesus crucified and risen is constitutive of the reality of God and God’s saving mission. That means Jesus’ vulnerability is God’s vulnerability. Jesus’ struggle is God’s struggle, and Jesus’ cross is God’s cross. Faith asserts that it was there on that particular hill and in this particular Jesus of Nazareth that God absorbed the fanatic and tragic rejection of God’s very best, God’s own final truth, God’s own son (Mark 12:1-12). God accepted into God’s own being the costly pain and suffering inflicted on Jesus in order that God may continue to reach out and encompass the whole of humanity and all creation.

This heart of the message, this proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified for us, offers broken humanity a future with God. Forgiveness of sins in

Jesus’ name will be at the heart of everything we do and say. God’s persevering love in Jesus Christ is the power and possibility of our own life and mission. God promises that in spite of our own total failure in embodying God’s love and mission we are still usable. God’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ alone enables us to participate in the mission of God as disciples of the crucified Jesus. In Pauline terms, justification, being right with God, is God’s gift, made possible through the infinite suffering of God and the crucified Jesus. We “are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24). The privilege and peculiar vocation of the church as Jesus’ community of disciples is to share the good news of God’s saving, steadfast love and forgiveness.

This is the heart of it all—forgiveness, reconciliation, atonement through Jesus crucified and risen. Forgiveness and reconciliation are infinitely costly. Atonement has its roots in the suffering God who enters human pain and struggles within it and in the tragic life and crucifixion of Jesus. This heart of the message also molds the heart of the mission. God in Jesus Christ limits God’s transforming power within history to the power of love which draws and persuades. God has chosen not to call on any authoritarian forces to protect or enforce God’s ultimate will within life. God, rather, appears as that one who empties himself and takes the form of a servant. It is

the Lord who kneels half-naked to wash the feet of stumbling, unfaithful disciples. The call of Jesus to the church is to embody the vulnerability and sacrificial service of God and God's own son.

Go and make disciples of every nation, says Jesus. We are called to preach the heart of the message—to preach it, share it, half-naked and kneeling at the nations' feet.

IV. THE FINALITY OF JESUS AND THE WORLD OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The resurrection of Jesus is God's promise that seeming universal relativity is transcended in Jesus. Jesus incarnates God uniquely, normatively, unsurpassably. That one who is universally normative has been among us as the one who is most inclusive and most vulnerable. In Jesus crucified, God is revealed as that one who wills not to fulfill our expectations of God. God appears, and God is not immutable but vulnerable, not omnipotent but resistible, not overwhelming power but persuasive compassion, not closed intolerance but open comprehensiveness, not imperial Lord but suffering servant. This incredible truth makes it possible—obviously not necessary—to confess as Lord one who is universal and normative—and yet to be divinely pulled into the depths of human pain and suffering. Within those depths we are called to witness to the crucified Jesus. We are called to participate in God's compassionate struggle of persuasion in order to bring life into the midst of death.

Contemporary theology is often marked by a universalism and relativism which challenges the validity of Christian witness among peoples of other faiths. People ask, "Why witness to those who already know and experience another form of God's revelation and truth?" Religious relativism assumes that God is universally present and that God's revelation and sav-

ing power are universally present to the whole human community. Relativism claims that all of these revelations are in some sense authentic, and none of them is the normative revelation by which all other revelatory claims are to be judged. The bottom line for this position is that Jesus is one among many revelatory events. The human challenge is to seek, through Jesus and all these revelatory events, an understanding of the ultimate mystery within the universe. In Hindu terms, we are all on paths toward God's truth, and meaningful conversations will facilitate our common human journey.

There are some very attractive aspects to this approach to truth. First, there is the recognition that God is universally present to the whole of creation and to the whole human family. That is clearly a major biblical theme which is manifest in: God's creation and care of the whole universe (Gen 1), God's universal presence in every corner of reality (Ps 139), God's universally present wisdom which works within human personalities and structures (Prov 8; Rom 2), God's covenant through Noah with the entire human family (Gen 9), God's planting of the human search for God within all people (Acts 17), and God's plan to re-create and restore all of creation (1 Cor 15:22-28; Eph 1:9-10; Phil 1:10-11).

Within the biblical accounts this universal presence and wisdom of God is seen in concrete people outside the household of the biblical faith, such as Melchizedek (Gen 14), Jethro (Exod 18), Ruth, Job, the Roman centurion (Matt 8:5), and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24). Jesus pointed to the same universal reality in his first sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:24-27), his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), and in his announcement that, "Many will

come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness” (Matt 8:11-12).

This biblical theme is supported by the universal Christian experience which continually encounters persons of integrity and authentic openness to God’s will and truth outside the Christian tradition.

The church witnesses to the finality of Jesus within this universal presence and awareness of God. The church witnesses to Jesus crucified knowing that God the father of Jesus has preceded the church’s witness. Human experience will be marked by sin, but it will also be marked by God and the human thirst for God. Human community, however, outside of Jesus crucified has not yet had the privilege of truly knowing God. It has not yet experienced the Way, the Truth, and the Life. “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (John 1:18). That is at the heart of the message!

It must be noted that this celebration and proclamation of the normative revelation of God in Jesus is not to be mistaken for the assertion that the eternal destiny of every person depends upon meeting this Jesus through the preaching of the gospel within history or upon being recognized members of our Christian ecclesiastical institutions. The Bible clearly states that to meet Jesus Christ is to have confronted judgment and life (John 3:16-21).

It is clear that a positive or negative response to Jesus has present and eternal consequences. The Johannine passage, like many other biblical texts, makes a pronouncement about those who have had the privilege of meeting

Jesus. Those who have met Jesus and trusted in Jesus have already passed from darkness into light, from death to life. They already dwell within the incredible reality of God’s truth, incarnate in Jesus; they know the magnificence of the messianic reign of God in Christ. They have called upon the name of the Lord, and they have been saved (Rom 10:13-17). They have known and experienced the reality of Jesus’ messianic reign because they have heard the reality of Jesus Christ proclaimed. “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (Rom 3:17).

Further, the Johannine passage (John 3:16-21) and similar texts indicate that those who have met and rejected God’s truth incarnate in Jesus have already been judged to be outside the messianic kingdom because they “loved darkness rather than light.” This text and similar texts do not make any statement about those who have not met the truth or seen the light in Jesus. They have not yet been through judgement. One can also speculate that there may be many who have never met the truth and light of Jesus even though they have heard of Jesus. It seems probable that we Christians have so distorted Jesus Christ that we have made it impossible for grace and truth (John 1:14) in Jesus to be known and experienced by those that we have oppressed and crushed. The contemporary Jewish community would certainly be one example.

Questions are always raised as to how God will ultimately deal with those who have never heard the gospel. One can leave that in the hands of God, knowing that the same compassion, grace, and forgiveness is offered to them as to us. Their salvation, like ours, will be grounded in the pain and suffering of God embodied in Jesus. When and where they will meet that salvation can be left with God.

What does it mean then to say that there is salvation in Jesus’ name? It means that

everything—re-creation of the cosmos and the whole of human history, the reconciliation of the world and of every human being, the eternal destiny of every individual person—depends upon the vulnerability, compassion, and grace of God embodied and defined in Jesus Christ. In Jesus crucified, God took the ultimate rebellion of humanity (the rejection of God's Son) into God's own being, accepted all of the pain and suffering, and reached out to draw all humanity to the foot of the cross.