

An Ordinary Cross

by Mike Tucker *

The cross," someone said recently, "has become so ordinary that we hardly see it anymore." Can this be true? How could an image once shameful enough to bow the proudest heads become ordinary?

Theodore Prescott is a sculptor who has spent a great deal of time thinking about the cross. In the 1980's he began working on a series of crosses using different materials, forms, and processes hoping to reconstitute the cultural and scriptural imagery of the Roman cross. The Roman cross was a loathsome manner of execution that inflicted an anguished death; the Cross of Christ held a man who went willingly—and without guilt. Though a reflection of beauty and sacrifice, the cross is also an image of physical torture, inseparable from flesh and blood. There was a body on these beams. Its image bears both startling realities—the presence of outstretched limbs and the mystery of being scandalously vacant. The cross has become so ordinary that we hardly see it anymore.

But if the cross has become merely a symbol of Christianity, an emblem of one religion in a sea of others, it is still a symbol that stands secluded from the others. Even as an image among many, it remains conspicuously on its own. The symbol of the cross is an instrument of death. Far from ordinary, it suggests, at the very least, a love quite beyond us. Perhaps it is we who have become ordinary, our senses dulled to unconsciousness by the daily matters we give precedence. Even in his own time, the apostle Paul lamented such a blurring of the cross, calling us to a greater vision. "[A]s I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the Cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:18-20).

For those who will not look carefully, the cross can be perceived as foolish or not perceived at all. It can be stripped of meaning or emptied of beauty, hope, and depth. But it cannot be emptied of Christ. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34-35). The message of the cross may be nothing to some, but to those who will stand in its shame and offense, scandal and power, it is everything.

The Gospel of John reports that Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the beams of the common cross that bore the radical rabbi. It read in three languages: "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS." There is nothing ordinary about the manner in which this king died, the cross on which he hung, or the symbol of death on which he inscribed a hope that would be carried throughout the nations. There was a cross in history with his name on it, and he went to it with nothing short of revolution in mind.

(Adapted from "A Slice of Infinity" by Jill Carattini)

With Love,
Mike

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