

A cruciform theology

I sometimes talk about having a cruciform view of Christianity, but I have found this is a phrase that often confuses people including many Christians. It comes from Martin Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, in which he contrasts a *theology of glory* with a *theology of the cross*. For me, it has become a shorthand for a radically different understanding of God, but it needs unpacking to be meaningful to others.

A theology of glory begins in the obvious places: success, visible power and rescue from above expecting that God will answer our prayers by intervening at the last moment. This is the *deus ex machina*, the god lowered onto the stage from outside to resolve a plot the writer cannot. A theology of the cross looks where we would least expect to find God: at a man being executed. It says that this is where God is most clearly revealed.

Luther's twentieth thesis describes the theologian of the cross as comprehending "the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross". The next thesis is blunter: "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it is." This means experiencing reality as it is, not how I would like it to be, including the shadows and pain from which none of us can fully escape. It means discovering that God has been there with us all along.

I say God, but I could just as readily say Jesus, because Jesus shows me what God is like. To put it another way God is like everything we see in Jesus and more. There is no good cop and bad cop here. Richard Bauckham, writing about Jürgen Moltmann, puts this better than I can: God "not only reveals himself and the world's future in the contradiction of cross and resurrection, but himself suffers that contradiction in solidarity with the world". (Richard Bauckham, *Moltmann: Messianic Theology in the Making*. 57)

In the aftermath of the Second World War, and in the face of the Holocaust, a number of theologians began to speak more urgently of the suffering God. Karl Barth suggests that God's divinity is seen most clearly in the lowliness of the cross. But Simone Weil had already found her way to something close to this from inside the Catholic tradition while the war was still going on, at much the same time as Dietrich Bonhoeffer was finding it in a prison cell: God hidden, God self-emptying, whatever victory there is coming through weakness and apparent defeat rather than through the forms of domination we instinctively mistake for power.

The cross is therefore the decisive revelation of who God is. I have come to believe that, if the Gospel cannot be spoken truthfully even at the gates of Auschwitz, then it cannot honestly be preached anywhere. For me, this makes the cross more than one Christian doctrine among others. It becomes *the* way I read Scripture and test what I say about God. The crucified Christ is the lens through which every claim about divine power, judgement and love must pass.

A cruciform theology is the ultimate deconstructor. It strips away the gods I construct in the image of human power. It still leaves me with questions, though better ones than I had before. The God I am learning to trust is not untouched by the worst that can

happen to us but has entered into it. The implications of that I am still learning to understand.