

The Great Transformation

By Dr. Dave Neale

Behind the Text¹

During the course of the church year have come the full cycle from baby to the cross.

Last week we talked about the destruction of the temple and asked the question, ‘How do we think about the unthinkable?’

What we saw in the biblical narrative was a God who always brings transformation from the unthinkable. We learned that transformation is the hope and certainty of the Christian life.

Well, in the Luke passage we have the crucifixion of the Son of Man, the most unthinkable event of the entire biblical narrative. And we find that, true to form, the unthinkable leads to what we call this morning the Great Transformation. The underlying principle is that, in God, from disaster arises transformation.

Building from our lectionary texts this morning in Luke and Colossians we have, on the one hand, the raw unthinkable event of the crucifixion, and on the other, the mature reflections of Paul on that event thirty years later. We said that if we have enough perspective on unthinkable events in our life we will always see the hand of God in them.

In the Text

In hindsight, there was never any question that what happened that day in Jerusalem so long ago would lead to a blossoming of God’s plan for humankind. But close up, at the time, in the raw, no one could see that.

Given the months and years that followed, the gaining of perspective, resurrection, Pentecost, the spread of The Way to Judea, Samaria and beyond, the Great Transformation *slowly* became evident to at first a very few people. In time, the importance of what had happened became a mass movement and then a religion.

The lesson for life from last week’s message. We walk in endurance (holy patience) ***because*** we have faith that the long game is in God’s hands.²

Here is the Great Unthinkable, in Luke 23:

When they came to the place that is called The Skull (κρανιον, kranion); they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left (Luke 23:33).

The Luke passage is ***what*** happened. Here we find ourselves stupefied, unable to process the raw unthinkable event. It is unfiltered and grievous, a visceral disappointment beyond imagination. We stand almost motionless asking, ‘Why?’

Our Zacchaeus in Jericho hears the news and falls stricken with disbelief and sorrow. ‘Jesus is dead. He was just in my home.’ The news ripples out to the regions of Judea and Samaria and to his home village.

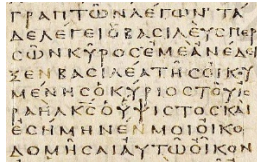
Our Colossians passage is about ***why*** it happened.³ Paul writes with three decades of mature reflection on the meaning of the event described in Luke this morning. [Paul is thought to have become a Christian about 3 years after Jesus’ death].

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (Creed: The only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father);

Do you hear the echo, the resonance of this in the Creed? The Creed is Bible. The Bible is distilled in the Creed.

for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible (Creed: *Maker of heaven and earth, of all this is, seen and unseen*), ***whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him*** (Colossians 1:15-16; Creed: *Through him all things were made.*).

This is core faith. Thirty years of mature reflection on the meaning of the crucifixion. The one through whom all things were made, mounted the cross. The question always looms in my mind, 'Why did it all have to end this way? On a cross. With mockery. In unthinkable suffering and loss. In the furnace of injustice. Why this way?' I still find it incomprehensible to understand *why* it had to be a suffering death and *how* the Messiah's death and resurrection brought about the Great Transformation.



Here is an interesting sidebar. Paper was so valuable in this period that no spaces between words or punctuation were used. It saved on papyrus. So you see here in this photo of what is called a Greek uncial manuscript. Even so, the UBS edition of Greek New Testament today does use punctuation of course, and it has 214 words in one sentence (vss 9-20), of which what I just read is part.

Of all we could say today this, is the most important phrase from Colossians that interprets the raw unthinkable crucifixion. Here is the 'why.' The last words of the 214-word sentence – the culminating idea:

...and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:20).

To make it all the more disheartening, it really wasn't for anything about what he taught that earned him the death sentence. He was executed as a political threat to the powers that be.⁴ The Romans had a saying, Worship Christ, Obey Caesar. They didn't care what anybody believed in religion. As was Alexander the Great and the Persians before him, and the Assyrians before them. But there could only always be one king. And the Christians said Jesus was their king.

The theology of atonement is one of the most complex aspects of systematic theology. There are a variety of ways various NT authors talk how "the life, death and resurrection of Jesus have changed the human situation..."⁵

There are five different views in the NT on how the atonement works.⁶

Even the same author (Paul) can use "a bewildering variety of models and images to describe" what happened on the cross that day and in the days to follow.⁷

As Howard Marshall said, the NT “is more concerned with the nature of salvation than with the precise way in which it has been achieved.”

Atonement theology explores *how* it is that the death of Jesus that makes the Great Transformation possible.⁸

The word of the day is juridical: “Of or relating to the administration of justice, legal in nature.”

Much of atonement theology has a juridical tone.

The language of “sacrifice” implies the cultus, “redemption” implies ransom, “victory” over evil powers implies judgment. I think it is all of these things and more. It’s complicated.

But let’s focus on reconciliation this morning, because this is where the meaning of the crucifixion gets not juridical but personal for us. We are now speaking about the meaning of Jesus’ work on the cross that brings about a **Great Transformation** in the heart. Historical perspective is valuable, but the Great Transformation permeates both all of history and all of the human heart.

That bond to God which had been severed is reconnected. The relationship that had been shattered is restored by what our Saviour did on the cross that dark Good Friday.

From the Text

The theme of reconciliation is found throughout God’s story. It is seen poignantly between people: Jacob and Esau are reconciled after 20 years (Gen 33:1-14); Joseph is reunited and reconciled to his eleven brothers (Gen 45); the prodigal son is reconciled with his father (Luke 15).

This reunion is ours today, but now between God and humanity. Remember God is pleased to reconcile to himself all things, He wants this. Jesus said ***I came to seek and to save the lost.***

The passage itself defines reconciliation as the ***making of peace***. It is said that this peace brings those of us who were ***estranged***, that is alienated and hostile; that union with God which was severed is reconnected. That which has been shattered is restored.

Where does this reconciliation of peace pervade? Which things that were estranged are now reconciled? ***Whether things on earth or things in heaven.***

Do you know where this almost exact phrasing also occurs? ***Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.***

As difficult as it is to accept, I think Paul’s language here is clear and unequivocal. Where does this reconciliation of peace pervade? Which things that were estranged are now reconciled? ***Whether things on earth or things in heaven.***

The reconciliation of peace permeates from the furthest reaches of the cosmos to the remotest, even darkest corner of each human heart. God is pleased to shed peace and reconciliation on all things. So efficacious, so all-encompassing. If this doesn’t change the way the world looks to us – it’s because we don’t understand the nature of this Great Transformation of all things.

But still we cry, ‘Sure, I get it Pastor Dave. But not me!’ The prodigal son felt the same way. So did the brothers of Joseph when they learned the Governor of Egypt was the brother they had betrayed. So also with poor Jacob who quailed before the brother he had cheated out of his birthright 20 years earlier. Not me!

Do you remember that temple scene between the Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18) we longed to see a reunion, a reconciliation between them.

Likewise, God scooches toward us on that altar, and we scooch toward God, wanting to be found. And somehow, through Christ, we are reconciled, reunited with God.

One of the most profound aspects of the crucifixion is that Jesus is positioned between two criminals that day. What an eloquent picture of reuniting all people to himself. Where else could he go, but to an execution between two criminals to say that the hope of extends to the furthest reaches of the human condition.

And who among us cannot but admire Dismas, the traditional identification of the man, and since known as the patron saint of prisoners [Ron Corcoran, *Jesus Remember Me*], the theologian on the cross next to Jesus. A man who, by his own admission having wasted his life in crime, finally sees God at his side. Jesus says to the man, ***Truly, this day you will be with me in Paradise.*** This is gospel!

¹ Let's talk about why we are thinking about the crucifixion today and how this fits in our annual cycle. It is great that church has a weekly cycle around which we can order our lives. We depend on it. It's lovely. But it is also a great blessing that we have an annual cycle as well. There is this broader orientation to life as we live out year after year. So just as the seven days of the week help us live out our faith, so does the annual cycle of Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and then "Common" time, the rest of the church year. Normally we associate reflection on the cross as something that we do on Good Friday. We dwell in the dark recesses of sorrow and disbelief, we are overwhelmed as the first followers were, with the unthinkable. We stay in that space on Good Friday in anticipation of the Great Transformation. Today, on this last Sunday of the Common year, we return to a contemplation of the meaning of Jesus death as a *culmination* of the ministry of Jesus. We have come the full cycle from baby to cross.

² And as our Jeremiah passage for the week tells us, out of the smoldering ruins of the temple, God will raise up a new shepherd: ***I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land!*** (Jeremiah 23:5). These familiar words of the opening of Luke, speaking about John the Baptist: ***You child... will go before the Lord to prepare the way for the Messiah... to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*** Out of the disaster of the unthinkable, light dawns anew. The long game is in God's hands.

³ You will understand that this is Paul writing to a church he did not plant and probably never visited. It is about 30 years after the crucifixion and resurrection.

Sometimes a group will adopt a term of contempt that has been leveled at them and turn it into their name. In the political divisions just south of us Hillary Clinton was caught calling the followers of Trump as "deplorable." So they adopted that name and call themselves the deplorables.

The term Pharisee means "separated ones." It was an insult that became their name. Remember how the Pharisee in Luke 18 "stands apart" to pray to God? So also with followers of Jesus. They were "Christians" in Antioch as an insult, not a compliment.⁴ In a somewhat amusing exchange between Agrippa in Jerusalem and Paul when the latter was hauled before him to give account of his faith. After Paul gives his testimony (Acts 26), Agrippa wryly says to Paul, ***Do you think to so quickly persuade me to become a Christian?*** You should hear the mild mockery in the question. Paul says, ***"Whether quickly or not, I pray go God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am- except for these chains"*** (Acts 26:29).

Andy Stanelly describes it as a political designation, not a religious one. "Christian was analogous to other political associations such as *Caesariani*, a follower of Caesar; *Herodiani*, a follower of Herod; or later, *Neroniani*, a follower of Nero. Non-Christians in Antioch, where the term *Christian* was first coined, viewed followers of Jesus as *political partisans* of a king" (*Not In It to Win It*, p. 4-5). Christians were considered undesirables because they followed their king, Jesus. Now Rome didn't care who you worshiped. "Worship your Christ. Obey Caesar

⁵ "Atonement in the NT", *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 1, p. 518, written by C.M. Tuckett.

⁶ The five are sacrifice (cultic model, as in Hebrews), redemption (ransom), victory over evil powers (resurrection), reconciliation (focus on making peace between God and humanity), and finally that the atonement led to the revelation of God (this last one most characteristic of the 4th gospel, "The dominant theme is of Jesus as the one who brings light and knowledge and who reveals the true nature of God.").

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ In the excellent *ABD* article referenced above, the subject is organized around five main aspects of the theology of atonement that is present in the NT: sacrifice (cultus), redemption (ransom), victory over evil powers, reconciliation and revelation (this last one most characteristic of the 4th gospel, "The dominant theme is of Jesus as the one who brings light and knowledge and who reveals the true nature of God.").

Some pronouncements about the reason for Jesus' death in the NT have a juridical tone, such as dealing with sin in as a legal problem for God. If you see individual sin as the main human problem you might be fasten on to the juridical notion of atonement (sacrifice). Paul uses this kind of juridical/substitutionary language at times (***But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God*** (Romans 5:8-9).

If you see the powers of evil as the main human problem you may well be fastened on the cross as a victory the powers of death and evil. If you feel the main human problem is our moral failure you may see the selfless suffering of Jesus as a model for the healing of humanity