

The Crisis of the Cross

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood. How shall I say what wood that was! I never saw so drear, so rank, so arduous a wilderness! Its very memory gives a shape to fear. Death could scarce be more bitter than that place! But since it came to good, I will recount all that I found revealed there by God's grace.

So, begins, the most famous of Epic Poems, *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. How many people at the midpoint of life can find themselves disorientated and alone in a dark wood? We often refer to it as a mid-life crisis. Such a time in a person's life can be characterized as this drear, rank and arduous wilderness. Such times in our lives can have about them the taste of bitterness. If, however we make room in that place for God it can also become an encounter with meaningful and amazing grace.

That such a crisis is common to our human experience is brought into focus on this Good Friday. For here is the greatest crisis the world has ever witnessed. Here is the dreariest of dark woods, the place where the bitter vinegar was offered to the Lord on that wood from which the greatest good has ever come. It is here that Dante's words find their fullest expression:

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Golgotha, that place of the Skull is the darkest wood of all. It is the place where the Crisis of the Cross speaks into every human life. For those who allow the Cross to confront them with its full impact, the Crisis of the Cross becomes the place that changes them for the good.

The etymology of the word "crisis" means "a judgment resulting from a trial". It also means to "sift, to distinguish and to separate". At Calvary, the Crisis of the Cross is the place of greatest sifting. For there at that Cross Roads of history, are three crosses that bring into the focus the crisis at the heart of every human life. Each of us is asked, "How will you respond to the Reality of the Cross"?

There are only two ways to respond as represented by the crosses on either side of Jesus. On the Lord's left we see the response of the Cross of Rebellion. To his right is the response of the Cross of Repentance. Rebellion or repentance are the only two possible reactions to the Cross that is at the centre, the Cross of Redemption. Not only do the two thieves represent those who rebel and those who repent at the reality of the Cross; we see also amongst the Twelve Apostles these two responses. Judas Iscariot rebels before the reality of the Cross. Simon Peter repents before the reality of the Cross.

Rebellion against Jesus is depicted by the thief on the left. His disdain and reviling of Jesus are such that with him we witness a soul that has become so bitter and hardened to goodness and grace. The Crisis of the Cross entrenches this one in his rebellion.

We also see this with Judas Iscariot, who in finding Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane brings with him a military cohort of at least 200 soldiers to arrest Jesus. The dark wood through which Judas walked on that First Holy Thursday left him so disturbed and disorientated that he was bent not on Jesus' destruction, but ultimately on his own. For we know that on the morning of Good Friday he ended his life by hanging himself. He concluded his rebellion was so great that there was no forgiveness possible and so cut himself off from Grace.

Here is the thing we discover about those who rebel against Jesus. While they may think such a response to his cross will free them, it results in their bondage, and if not repented of will result in their eternal damnation.

In Dante's Hell, the first part of the Divine Comedy, Judas Iscariot is seen in its deepest level. Dante does not depict hell ultimately as a Lake of Fire but as the Frozen Lake from which Satan protrudes, his torso flaying from left to right as He is stuck forever in this static state. From one of his three mouths, he is continuously eating Judas Iscariot but never consuming him.

How true this is. Rebellion against Jesus brings people to that place where their soul is eaten away and life becomes unbearable because it becomes like a frozen waste land.

How different the experience for the one who is on the Cross of Repentance. Here we see the other thief whose appeal: "Jesus remember me when you come into your Kingdom", is his realization that Jesus is who the title on the Cross declares; "The King of the Jews. But not only of the Jews, but of all those who truly take to heart the Lord's words to Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world".

All those who come to this realization, like Peter, also journey through the dark wood. For Peter that Holy Thursday night was one of deepest anguish as he wept deeply after Jesus looked him squarely in the eyes, as he had said for the third time: "I swear to you I don't know the man". That look and the cock crowing did something in Peter's soul that brought him face to face with his own sinful humanity.

How like us, how like Peter are we frail human beings. When we see ever more clearly that state of our interior life that waxes and wanes in our commitment to Christ Jesus we can feel what Dante did in that dark wood.

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In the Divine Comedy Dante moves from Hell to Purgatory where he sees people journeying up a seven-story mountain. On each of the levels he encounters people who are being delivered from one of the seven deadly sins, pride, envy, anger, sloth, gluttony, avarice and lust. As they progress upwards they then come to Purgatory's summit. And what do they discover there? The Garden of Eden, the entrance to Paradise. The way of repentance is an ongoing experience in this life and will only be completed in that purgatorial state after death.

Once Mount Purgatory is summited then we will come to know the full effects of the third Cross, the Cross of Redemption. In this life, we do not know absolutely the redeeming work of Christ. But listen to what happens to Dante as he finds himself in Eden. There are two rivers, one called Lethe and the second called Eunoe. Lethe means “forgetfulness”. As Dante drinks deeply from its waters he forgets all of the sins he had ever committed. Eunoe means “good mind”. As Dante drinks its waters he can recall of every good he had done in this world and it is deeply established in his mind.

A maiden named Matilda administers Lethe and Eunoe’s waters so that penitents reaching the Garden of Eden at the top of Mount Purgatory are first washed in the waters of the river Lethe so they forget the memories of their mortal sins. They then pass through Eunoe to have the memories of their good deeds in life strengthened. Only once a person has drunk from both can they begin the wonderful journey up the nine levels of Paradise. This Dante does. As he comes to the end of his journey he is enveloped in the life of the Blessed Trinity. Such is Dante’s destination.

Oh by the way he is the narrator and protagonist of his Poem. The dark wood was not just a literary device but was autobiographical. His own dark wood was his suicidal preoccupation where he had decided to end his life.

From that place, he wrote the Divine Comedy, begun in 1308 and completed one year before his death in 1320. Dante Alighieri clearly identified with the Cross of Repentance which in turn lead him to fully convey in his writing the effects of the Cross of Redemption.

In this world, these three crosses are the true dark wood. The Cross of Rebellion leads further into that wood’s darkness resulting in meaninglessness and eternal despair. This is not what Jesus wants for anyone. He wants all to find their place on the Cross of Repentance. For it is from that Cross we can find our way out of the wood and journey towards the redemption that Jesus won for us on the Cross that is the most precious wood of all.