

Seeds of Fire

This is a summary of the closing talk given by [Alastair McIntosh](#) on Sunday 8 February 2015 at a conference organised by the *Sisters of the Cross and Passion* at the Drumalis Retreat Centre in Larne, Northern Ireland. It owes much to a previous Ecocongregation presentation given at Fitzroy Presbyterian Church in Belfast, and to Cork Quaker Meeting.



Mosaic of *Christ Pantocrator* – the “Cosmic Christ” - holding open the Gospel of John, 8:12: “I am the light of the world, who follows me will not wander in the darkness but will have the light of life.” Cathedral of Cefalù, Italy, Wikimedia Commons, courtesy of José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro, 2015.

During this weekend we have explored *Climate Change and the Well-Being of the Community*. We have seen that global warming is significantly driven by consumerism. This can be understood as an attempt to fill an emptiness within the human soul.

Consumerism can be defined as consumption in excess of what is needed for dignified sufficiency in life. In excess of what is materially needed to live life “abundantly” (John 10:10). In theological terms, it is a version of idolatry. It posits a false God, a false satisfier of fundamental human needs that, to paraphrase a great English theologian: “can’t give no satisfaction.”

The prophet Jeremiah shared the same insight (2:13): “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”

No living water. No satisfaction. We can therefore diagnose the human condition in terms of what African healers call the “loss of soul”. The challenge of our times is thus to call back the soul. How does that happen? In the Christian tradition it means reaching out beyond ego. It means inviting God back into our lives.

But here we have a problem. The “church” should be understood to be the Christian community in the widest sense. The word comes from the Proto Germanic, *kirka*, which in turn comes from the Proto Indo-European word, *keue*, meaning “to swell”. The church should be the swelling of the buds on the Vine of Life that ripens to sweet fruit and makes the wine that lifts the human spirit. But we’re all well aware of the condition of the churches, especially the largest denomination here in Ireland. It’s not just been the abuses of power. It’s also that the mainstream Christian message is, to many people, simple *incredible*, and that in the sense of, “not credible”.

We don’t even have to get as far as the virgin birth, Adam and Eve or the terrible violence, seemingly in the name of God, through much of the Hebrew Bible, our “Old” Testament. I’m talking about the crux of the matter. The meaning of the Cross itself no longer being credible, and in consequence, a loss of social traction from the gospel stories. You can no longer assume that young people will know what’s meant by the feeding of the five thousand, or by the Gadarene demoniac, and the significance that his mind was colonised by “Legion” – we might infer the Roman legions, it being they for whom (in that society) the pigs were most likely kept. In other words, even to attempt a liberation theology lacks the shared social framework of meaning that we could have taken for granted through most of the 20th century.

Let me put the crux of the matter into the cross-hairs. *Imagine*. If a stranger asks - “Why all this fuss about the Cross?” - what would you reply?

Would it be the answer from most of Christianity’s first millennium, and still, in large degree the answer of the Orthodox or Eastern church today? Namely, as the Apostle’s Creed has it, “He descended into Hell” or “to the dead.” He achieved victory over the Devil and liberated captive human souls (1 Peter 3:19). Would this *Christus Victor* theory – Christ, the Victor – of the “atonement”, be your answer to the stranger?

Or does that theory, quite apart from its baroque feel, give too much power to “the Devil”? That was what Saint Anselm of Canterbury thought when he was writing at the start of the second millennium, just after the Roman Catholic Church had separated from the Byzantine (Orthodox) Church.

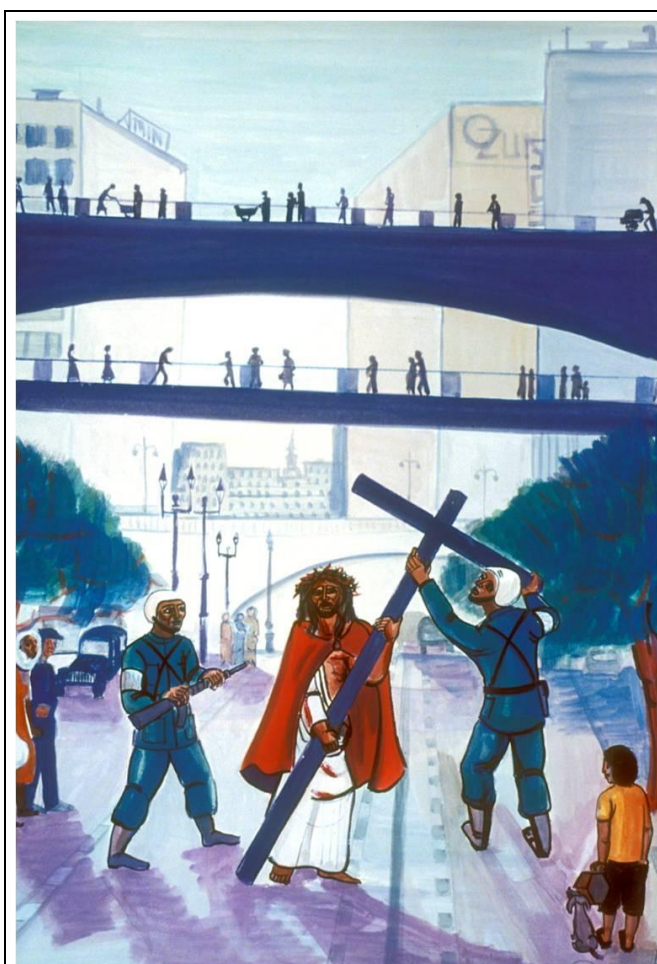
Anselm’s theory, known as the “satisfaction theory”, was that God’s feudal honour had been grievously offended by human sin. Christ’s death restored God’s honour, thus giving “satisfaction”, though not, perhaps, in the quite the way imagined by the aforesaid great English theologian.

If such a psychology of the holy family us not troubling enough, John Calvin upped the ante still further in the Protestant Reformation. His was the “penal substitution” theory of blood atonement on the Cross. Here, God was “armed for vengeance” at the knock-on consequences of Adam’s sin. Christ took our place as sinners in the dock. He took God’s righteous punishment, on our behalf.

These theories in both their Catholic (“satisfaction”) and Protestant (“penal substitution”) versions established a strong hold in Ireland. This was especially so because the Dutch Jansenism that entered Irish Catholicism during the time when priests had to be trained in France because of the Penal Laws has many parallels with authoritarian Dutch Calvinist thought. Both, arguably, are the violent theologies of violent men of violent times. Both may have served certain past needs, but today we must ask whether they are “time-conditioned”.

I ask you: short of forms of preaching that stir up intense self-loathing in vulnerable people, is it really our experience that blood atonement theories speak to people’s condition today? Or might we have been blinded to the Cross? Might there be something more? Might there be an even bigger vision of the “wondrous Cross” to which humankind is only just awakening?

Bear in mind that Jesus never promised us the letters of Paul; not even the four gospels. However, if we listen to Saint John’s gospel – and that was the favourite of both the Celtic Church and the Christian mystics – then we find that what Jesus did promise was, in Greek, the *Paraclete*. This is the “comforter”, “companion” or “advocate”, usually understood to be the ongoing movement of the Holy Spirit. This alone is the principle alongside which the holy scriptures, and other means of insight, should be discerned.



[*Stations of the Cross from Liberation Theology*](#), by Adolfo Pérez Esquivel of Argentina, 1992.

The effect of understanding the Spirit in this dynamic (or “continuationist”) way is that we don’t get stuck in the religious kindergarten. The work of God is freed to grow, and that, as God continues to reveal Godself through human history. Here is Roman Catholic *liberation theology* as theology that liberates theology itself. Here is the great Reformation principle of *semper reformanda* – the principle that the reformed church should be continually reforming itself.

Can we bring this to bear upon our understandings of the violence of the Cross?

Jesus warned: “Until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force...” (Matthew 11:12).

Note the prophesy inherent in those words. *Until now*.

They beg the question: *what next?*

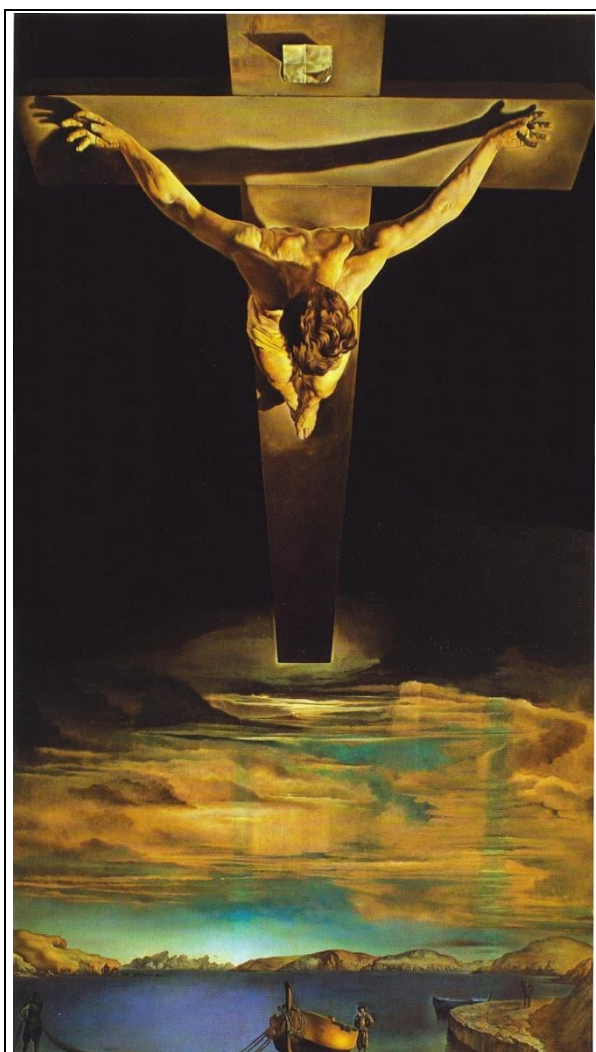
What might the suffering signs of these, our times, reveal about the nature of the Cross? How might climate change, war, poverty, and a pervasive nagging sense of meaninglessness perhaps be speaking to us?

Could they be apocalyptic wake-up calls? *Apocalypse*, in its original Greek sense, as a *revelation* of the underlying truths of reality?

It is not enough to refer such a question back to the theologians of previous generations, or to defer it forward to those of the future.

We are not just talking about a God who has been and gone, or is promised and yet to come again.

Rather, we are talking about the *eternal now*, the realm of God within the human heart, moving in our midst (Luke 17:21). The God of the “*I am*” that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush, and which John’s gospel carries forward in his various “*I am ...*” statements that utter from the mouth of Christ.



Christ of Saint John of the Cross, Salvador Dalí, Glasgow City Council.

Here, we are talking about Christ “transfigured” (Mark 9:2). The Greek word in the New Testament is *metemorphōthē*. It means to be metamorphosed, morphed or changed, *to reveal the form of one’s own true inner essence*. Here is the Christ of the prologue of John’s gospel - that was “in the beginning” and through whom “all things emerged.” This is the Christ to which Salvador Dalí’s great apocalyptic painting nods - *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* – the “Cosmic Christ.”

Let me dwell upon that term - what the Orthodox tradition in particular emphasises as *Christ Pantocrator* – the “Creator of All”.

Last year I was invited to speak on the spirituality of climate change in an Ecocongregations event at Fitzroy Presbyterian Church in Belfast. Sr Catherine Brennan of the Saint Louis order, who, mercifully, is with us here today, was unable to attend. Having edged close to death in a serious illness, and still unsure of her prognosis, she phoned me from her Dublin hospital bed. She just said: “*Tell them about the Cosmic Christ.*”

That “eternal now” in which we are living is what Jean-Pierre de Caussade called, “the sacrament of the present moment.”

The reason why we cannot simply defer to the authority of the past, or await greater wisdom from the future, is that we, in this very moment, are on the cutting edge of consciousness unfolding through our evolution on this planet.

It is from here, right here and now, that we commence the work of calling back the soul.

I have had several conversations with some of you this weekend, all of which spoke to the same experience. That the church is weak and scattered. That its message has lost traction. That the traditions to which many of you gave vowed lives no longer hold their power.

“Fear not.”

I put it to you that we, today, are like those gathered at the foot of the Cross. Powerless but for their presence. Voices crying in the wilderness. But remember: it is from the sheer silence of the wilderness that voices carry furthest.

It is the *Sisters of the Cross and Passion* that have brought us to their centre here in Larne this weekend.

I put it to you, that before us is a *double passion* of the Cross.

Passion as suffering. Passion as love.

And that we must walk two-legged, as walkers between the worlds.

One foot in the broken suffering of this world; the other, in the love that binds the spiritual world.

The late Norman Macleod of Bridge House on the Isle of Harris told me something. He was a lobster fisherman, one of those Outer Hebridean Presbyterians of the most mystical disposition. He said in a letter before he died: “My God, Alastair, *inhabiteth* eternity.”

We came here to Larne to talk about climate change, about a symptom of malaise that affects the planet we inhabit. Think about *inhabitation*. One inhabits a household.

The Greek word, *oikos* or “ecos”, is the root of our English words, ecology, economy, ecumenical and even parochial (as *para*, or “alongside” the *oikos*).

It means: “the household.”

And so, we glimpse the household of Creation. The household, not of the ever-plodding mathematical concept of *infinity*, but of the ever-present divine milieu of *eternity*.

Now we see the true power and significance of the Cross, understood not as punishment, but as the supreme transformative symbol of nonviolence. “My kingdom

is not of this world,” Jesus said to Pilate. “If it was, my followers would *fight*....” (John 18:36).

Now, too, we see the love that cannot die.

Resurrection is intrinsic to the Cross, because it stands both incarnate and outside space and time; and so we “do this in *anamnēsin* of me” (Luke 22:19) – where *anamnesis* is “memory”, but memory in that Ancient Greek sense, *of bringing back to real presence*. As Plato put it, a form of knowledge that is “written in the soul of the learner ... and knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing” (*Phaedrus*, 276a). Put another way, this is *apocatastasis* as the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21), sometimes interpreted as “the Second Coming of Christ.” The “second coming”, I am suggesting, that comes within our consciousness, and this, the deeper meaning of being “born again”.

I put it to you - that’s the Cosmic Christ - the double passion of both worldly suffering and transfigured radiance. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” – and the Greek translated as “comforted” is *paraklēthēsontai* – our friend the Paraclete again, the Holy Spirit.

And us, here and now? Where does this all leave us?

I put it to you that we are a little like those fourth century mothers and fathers, scattered to the deserts by the violence of their times.

To borrow a Gaelic expression from Daniel Corkery, these were the *siolta teine* – the “seeds of fire” - who kept alive the fire of love.

“I have come to bring fire to the earth, and wish it were already kindled” (Luke 12:49).

It is our task to gather the remnant, to constellate the seeds of fire, to help to make a blaze. Brighde’s fire, that “turned back the streams of war.”

Said Patrick Kavanagh: “Only they who fly home to God have flown at all.”

A story is told about the Desert Fathers. Abba Lot told Abba Joseph that he already observed the monastic rule. What more could he do?

Abba Joseph lifted his hands to the heavens. His fingers blazed like lighted candles.

“Why not,” he said, “become wholly fire?”

Holy, holy, holy