

**The Cross:
A Sign of Hope
The Day the Revolution began**



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The Cross: A sign of hope on “the day the revolution began”

I grew up in Pakistan in a Christian home. My father served as an Anglican priest in the Diocese of Lahore. His diary included names of people to pray for every day. As a curious young man, I once opened his diary and learned his long list included the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose regime had persecuted and terrorized innocent people around the world, especially Iranian women.

My father did not pray for God to punish the Ayatollah but to give him a change of heart to love his people. I wondered where my father learned to pray in such a way, but I knew he was captivated by the sign of the cross. Early every morning, I heard him sing Isaac Watts' great meditation on Galatians 6:14:

*When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.
Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.¹*

My father and early Christians remembered the words of Jesus: “You have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (MT. 5: 43-45)

On the cross, neither hatred of Jews nor Roman power won. “When Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross, something happened as a result of which the world is a different place... Jesus's crucifixion was the day the revolution began.”²

On the cross, Jesus forgave those who shouted: “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” (MK 15: 29-30). With his dying breath, he prayed for all who mocked him - the Sanhedrin, priests, scribes, elders, and the Romans who nailed him there - “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23: 34).

In his final moments of earthly life, Jesus practiced what he taught in the Sermon on the Mount. He knows no hatred. He does not call for revenge. He begs forgiveness and justifies his plea by adding: “They know not what they do.” This was the new model from the new Messiah for humanity to act as community of peace and reconciliation.

¹ Isaac Watts, 1707. Episcopal Hymnal 474.

² N.T. Wright, The Day The Revolution Began, Paper One, P.39.

As proof of this model's lasting power, I offer 30 years of experience in service to the Episcopal Church of Sudan. In all that time, I never heard messages of hatred and revenge from church leaders against the Islamic government that killed 2.1 million Christians and animists and forced 4 million more to seek refuge in other countries. Instead, they held crosses high and prayed for God to forgive the perpetrators of violence and hate, singing verses like these in the face of death:

*"We have decided to follow Jesus
No turning back, no turning back
The Cross before me, the world behind me
No turning back, no turning back."*³

The first century revolution still affects the 21st

The revolution begun by Jesus goes on in our world of wars, oppression, hatred, poverty and racial prejudice. Christ's followers work for peace, reconciliation and the dignity of all human beings. Jesus' revolution for the redemption and release of humanity from sin and false beliefs has proved unstoppable.

In the first century, the cross symbolized the most cruel method of execution practiced by Roman government. Many famous deaths since then have been associated with their cause, such as "the assassination" or "the poisoning." Such a reference to "the crucifixion" would be incomprehensible even in this secular age. Many people know what is meant.

Something in the strange death of the man identified as the Son of God commands special attention. It has universal reverberations no other death can match. The cross of Jesus stands alone in this regard; it is sui generis. Of the thousands of crucifixions in Roman times, only Christ's crucifixion has significance.⁴ The Cross of Jesus has given hope and salvation to humankind ever since. Even the robber dying beside Jesus received a firm promise: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23: 43). The Cross was a symbol of shame and hatred until the sacrifice of Jesus made it a sign of hope and glory.

The Cross and the sacrifice of Jesus are praised in the Book of Revelation:

*"With your blood you purchased men for God
From every tribe and language and people and nation...."*

In the same book, John the Divine heard one hundred million angels or more who circled the throne of heaven and sang with a loud voice:

*"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
To receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
And honor and glory and praise."*

³ Simon Mark, missionary in Jordan, Assam, India

⁴ Fleming Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2017. P. 4.

As followers of Jesus looked back on the first Good Friday, they came up with the shocking, scandalous, nonsensical claim that his death had launched a revolution. By 6 p.m. that dark day, the world was a different place. They believed the one true God had suddenly and dramatically begun his plan to rescue the world. What sort of revolution **was** launched that afternoon? You do not have to be able to answer until you yourself understand.

Saul of Tarsus (a Pharisee of high status better known to most as Paul) was the chief enemy of the cross of Christ until he learned:

The cross reveals God's love and humanity's sin; God's power and man's helplessness; God's holiness and humanity's state of sinfulness.

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Jesus reached out to save Saul's lost soul full of hatred and terror:

"Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute me. Who are you Lord? Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied" (Acts 9:4-5).

After this religious fanatic and enemy of the Cross came to know its redemptive power, he wrote to the church in Corinth:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18).

A 180-degree change in Paul's beliefs made the Cross the central article of his faith.

In my own life as a disciple of Christ, the Cross has been God's searchlight. I've witnessed the persecution of Christians for their faith in Sudan and Pakistan. ISIS in Iraq and Syria have recently killed many Christians and destroyed houses of worship bearing the sign of cross. Instead of abandoning the Cross, many Christians have held tight and raised it high as their faith grew. The Cross symbolizes the only life they want to live - to conquer in its sign the forces of hatred and evil, just as Jesus prayed: "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

On Good Friday, we ask God to forgive the enemies of the Cross of Jesus and to turn their hearts from violence to love. When hate was at its peak, Jesus stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace.⁵ Thus began the revolution.

⁵ Book of Common Prayer, Collect, page 101.

The Cross of Jesus: The ultimate sign of love and healing

Those who learn to forgive discover they not only offer healing to others but also receive it for themselves. We pray today, while standing under the Cross of Jesus, for ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Taliban: "Lord Jesus forgive them and change their hearts that they may repent from their wicked ways." The Cross itself, in short, stands at the center of the Christian message, story, life, and mission. It has revolutionary and transformative power to change our state of sin to a life of victory over sin.

Let us celebrate the revolution that happened once and for all when the power of love overcame the love of power. Victory has been won, and the work of salvation is complete. Our Lord has been glorified as Victor and King. Jesus said, "It is finished." "Father into your hands I commend my spirit." A shout of victory. Death you are defeated. Alleluia!

In the cross of Jesus, God has rescued us from the power of sin and death. Truly, when Christ died and was raised from the death, a new day dawned and a new age began. A day of revolution became a day of hope.

Rejoice now, heavenly hosts and choirs of angels, and let your trumpets shout Salvation for the victory of our mighty King.⁶

⁶ Book of Common Prayer, The Great Vigil of Easter, p.286.

Given recent events in the Middle East, I feel compelled to share this example of forgiveness in times of great trial. - Bishop Patrick Augustine

In October 1979, an assassination attempt was made on Hassan Barnaba Dehqani-Tafti, the first ethnic Persian to become a bishop of Iran since the Islamic conquest of Persia in the 7th century. During the attack on his life, his wife, Margret, was wounded. In May 1980, his 24-year-old son, Bahram, was murdered by Iranian government agents. At Bahram's funeral, the bishop's followers offered this "Forgiveness Prayer":

O God, we remember not only Bahram but his murderers,
not because they killed him in the prime of his youth
and made our hearts bleed and our tears flow.
Not because with this savage act
they have brought further disgrace on the name of our country
among the civilized nations of the world.
But because through their crime we now follow more closely
your footsteps in the way of sacrifice.

The terrible fire of this calamity burns up all selfishness and possessiveness in us.
Its flame reveals the depth of depravity, meanness and suspicion,
the dimension of hatred and the measure of sinfulness in human nature.
It makes obvious as never before our need to trust in your love
as shown in the cross of Jesus and his resurrection;
Love which makes us free from all hatred towards our persecutors;
Love which brings patience, forbearance, courage, loyalty, humility,
generosity and greatness of heart;
Love which more than ever deepens our trust in God's final victory
and his eternal designs for the Church and for the world;
Love which teaches us how to prepare ourselves to face our own day of death.

O God, Bahram's blood has multiplied the fruit of the Spirit in the soil of our souls.
When his murderers stand before you on the Day of Judgment, remember the fruit
of the Spirit by which they have enriched our lives, and forgive.⁷

⁷ Guli Francis-Dehqani, *Cries for a Lost Homeland*, Canterbury Press. P 9.

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