

THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

These days, when many people deny the creation of the world as the Bible reports it in favour of evolutionary theories, it is necessary to assert that even from the marvels of creation around us people may know God's eternal power, wisdom, and Godhead (Rm 1:19-20). Yet we have to remember that this is only natural knowledge of God, and it has its limits. We cannot know God's grace and salvation through Jesus Christ from natural knowledge. That has come through the cross. We have to beware a "theology of glory."

In May 1518 the Pope asked the general of the Augustinian Order to silence Luther after the Ninety-five Theses had been circulated. Against the advice of his friends Luther went to Heidelberg, to take part in a disputation that Staupitz had arranged, to acquaint the Augustinian brothers of the "new" evangelical theology. As was customary, Luther prepared 40 theses, to be debated. Theses 19-21 were particularly significant:

19 *That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon 'the invisible things of God' as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened (Rm 1:20).*

20 *He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.*

21 *A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.*

Luther didn't deny that a person could perceive "the invisible things of God" from His works in creation. What he denied was that this perception of God was of any use. It does not make people worthy or wise or change their relationships to God. "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21). This preaching is the word of the cross (1 Cor 1:18). The theology of the cross understands Him by sufferings and by the cross.

The theologian of glory looks upon the world, the works of creation. He uses his reason to reflect on God's power, wisdom, and goodness. But God remains invisible for him. The theologian of the cross looks upon the One who has been crucified. Here there is nothing great, beautiful or sublime. There is nothing but humility, shame, weakness, suffering, and painful death. In this frightening aspect God lets us see Him, as God let Moses have a glimpse of God's glory on Mount Sinai (Ex 33:18-23). The Lord did not let him see His face, but His back.

We don't really see God in creation, but on the cross, as far as human eyes are able to see Him. The cross is God's great revelation. When Luther explained his thesis 20 he said,

When according to John 14 Philip, just like a theologian of glory, said, "Show us the Father!" Christ at once called back those flighty thoughts that wanted to see God elsewhere, and focused them on Himself by saying, "Philip, anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father" (Joh 14:9).

There in Christ Crucified, there is true theology and knowledge of God. Luther referred to such passages as John 14:6, "No one comes to the Father but by Me", and John 10:9, "I am the door, etc. *Luther's Works* Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, vol 31 (1957) 40,53.

The cross shows the mistake of trying to understand Jesus' work as that of a triumphant conquering hero. He cried from the cross, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" We should also not understand His miracles from the standpoint of a theology of glory. He did manifest His glory in His miracles. His disciples believed in Him, but not the people of Cana (Joh 2:1-11). Not the 5000 men whom he fed, not the sick whom He healed. We don't even know that those whom He raised from the dead believed in Him. Only in faith do His disciples see His glory. Even His resurrection was not a demonstration for the world. Like His healings (Lk 11:28), it too could be explained differently, and it was (Mt 27:64).

Faith always deals with hidden realities. When God was manifest in the flesh, He was hidden under suffering and shame. God's revelation has been hidden under the cross. So it is also with the church. The one holy Christian and apostolic church is hidden, and the saints are concealed from human sight. We should not look for a majestic visible impressive visible body.

All objects of faith are hidden. We don't see God's forgiveness, the risen Lord, Christ's power in baptism, or His body and blood in the Supper. We hear the word of the Gospel, which assures us that these things are so. Faith and the cross of our Lord belong together. Both the cross and everything that is important for the Christian require faith against the evidence.