

**“By one single offering he hath perfected for ever those who are sanctified”**  
(Hebrews 10.14)

This line from the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, in my mind, summarizes the whole of this Epistle. Jesus perfected the old system of offerings, which itself could never be perfected. His death on the Cross was the way he did it.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer, Martin Luther, saw it this way too. In his Heidelberg Disputation from 1518, he first wrote about two opposing theologies. One, which he rejected, he coined a “theology of Glory”. A preacher who was a theologian of glory would say that humans have the capacity to the good which lies within them, they would say that despite the original sin of Adam and Eve that humans still have some ability to choose the good, and they would say that humans cannot be saved without participating *in* or cooperating *with* the righteousness given by God. For the theologian of Glory, reason and personal perceptions should be employed to increase knowledge about God and the world. Thus, because an action appears to be good, it must be good.

In contrast, the theologian of the Cross preaches things that seem foolish to the world, as we are told in 1 Corinthians, chapter 1. This theologian preaches that humans can in no way earn their own righteousness – no matter what we do, or what we think is good. They would preach that humans cannot add to or increase the righteousness of the Cross – for the righteousness derived from there is perfect, not too little, not too much. And the theologian of the Cross preaches that any righteousness given to humanity comes from outside of us, not from within us. For the theologian of the Cross, it is only from the self-revelation of God that people can learn about God and their relation to God—and the most perfect self-revelation of God is God's Word become flesh, Jesus the Christ. Thus, even if an action appears good, still Christ died on the Cross for human sins and sinfulness, so the action is not as good as it appears.

It does sound foolish to the world, doesn't it? As Christians in this increasingly secular world, doesn't this idea of the Cross sound particularly foolish when talking to those with no knowledge of this faith? Perhaps it even sounds foolish to us. St. Paul describes the Cross as a stumbling block and a folly – it is something that without careful reflection can pass right over our heads.

Luther's theology of the Cross encourages us to reflect upon anything and everything in light of the Cross. We can read the story of creation in Genesis – but how does this relate to the Cross? We can read about the construction of the ark of the covenant – how does that relate to the Cross? Jesus' birth – the Cross. Jesus' healing of the sick – the Cross. Jesus' resurrection – the Cross. Jesus sitting at the right hand of God – the Cross. All things flow through the crucifixion. It is the fixation of our eyes as we try to make sense of the world – because through the Cross flows the Grace of God – the supreme free gift he gives the world in love even though the world doesn't deserve it. No matter what we do, we fall short, but because of the grace of the Cross, we are made righteousness where we could not before.

For Luther, our Epistle reading from Hebrews is a perfect illustration to compare the theology of Glory to the theology of the Cross. While the Law was given to Moses by God, the Law by its very nature makes the people work for their righteousness. It sets a standard, the people always miss the standard, and something has to be done to make up for the difference. The bar of righteousness is always held up high, and the people have to work to meet it. The demanded sacrifices would be made over and over and over again, yet that high bar was always *just* out of reach. Even if you could meet the high bar once a year through

ritual purification, you would fall off shortly thereafter. The author to the Hebrews says that when the sacrifices were made, it would bring to memory past sins, so they never truly went away. Luther put it this way, “The law says, ‘do this’, and it is never done.” But Grace? “Grace says, ‘believe in this’ and everything is already done”.

Rather than hold the high bar of righteousness as a goal to climb up to, the Grace of God in Jesus lifts us up to that bar every time we fall. We don't have to do the work to get there, for it is already done perpetually. “He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” (Heb. 10.9-10, 14).

It is the Cross that does this. It is Jesus' perfect sacrifice which takes the onus off us, for he took it upon himself. He bore the weight of the world in that instant which, by Grace, granted all people their righteousness before God. No matter how good we are, we can never measure up. No matter how well meaning we are, we are all sinners. No matter how comforting we think we are, we can hurt people. No matter how loving we are, we have the capacity for hate and resentment. But Jesus, through his death on the tree of Calvary fills up the gap we leave, and shows us to God as righteous even though we don't deserve it.

It is a joyful thing to know, yet here we are at this muted, sombre remembrance of Jesus' death on the Cross. We are brought here intentionally. We dial back the decorations through Lent, we read the Passion narrative each day for a week, we strip the sanctuary bare of all the beautiful objects and colours, and we meditate at the foot of the Cross. We think about the innocent blood that was spilled, the tears that were shed, the distraught that was felt, and the anger that was kindled. We wallow in the sadness of this day, but we have the advantage of Dramatic Irony – we know something that the people in the stories don't. We know how the Cross has changed the world, and we know what happens two days later. We know how this otherwise terrible Friday is, indeed, good.

So, as we sit here at the foot of the Cross, and think about all that it means for ourselves and for the world around us, let us not forget just how central it is. Let's not forget the way that salvation and righteousness flows out from this most terrible act, only by the grace of God. Those who killed Jesus didn't know what consequences their actions would have. They didn't realize how God was going to use their blindness for salvific purposes.

As we come to the foot of the Cross, may we place there all of our sins and shortcomings and know that Jesus takes them up in his one, perfect sacrifice as the new High Priest who atones for our sins before God.

*“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.” (Revelation 5.12)*

Amen.