

Dear Friends,

'An Easter People'

When the enemies of ancient Rome were crucified, the aim of the authorities was not just to kill them but utterly to humiliate them. Their bodies would either be left on the cross for the crows to feast upon or else thrown into a shallow grave to be eaten by wild dogs. Nicodemus' request to Pilate, the Roman governor, that he might be allowed to take Jesus' body down from the cross and bury it, was a request which could easily have been refused.

Crucifixion for Jews was deeply shocking. According to the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 21:22-23) anyone executed by being hanged or impaled on a tree was accursed. St. Paul alludes to this when he speaks of God making Jesus 'to be sin for us' (2 Corinthians 5:21), and the idea of a crucified victim being cursed goes a long way to explaining why, prior to his conversion, he found the Christian message so abhorrent and felt compelled to persecute the Church. Christians were claiming that God's promised king, the Messiah, was this man Jesus who had been cursed and rendered utterly unclean. How could the pure and holy God he worshipped be involved with such a person?

But Paul became convinced he was. The apostle was converted on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-6, 26:9-18), and his encounter with the risen Lord completely altered his way of seeing things. He became convinced that this 'foul Messiah' was in fact genuine – that he has been vindicated by God and raised to new life.

Paul's new-found faith had a profound effect upon him – upon his beliefs about life after death *and* upon his whole understanding of how society should be ordered. It seemed clear to him that, if on the cross God had effectively removed the age-old divide between the clean and the unclean, the blessed and the cursed, the high and the lowly, and the sacred and the profane, then he was a far more inclusive and all-embracing God than Paul had ever in his wildest dreams imagined him to be.

The implications were mind-boggling. Paul was forced into a radical re-evaluation of his whole way of life. What he once regarded as important was now mere rubbish (Philippians 3:7). The Christian message he had embraced subverted the whole hierarchically order of society: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free," he wrote, "nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28). When he penned a letter to a friend called Philemon about an escaped slave he had come across in prison called Onesimus, he asked Philemon to take Onesimus back, not as a slave but as a brother! (Philemon 16). Not all of Paul's letters demonstrate the same level of revolutionary insight, but you can see the direction in which he was heading. It was work in progress.

Jesus during his earthly life broke down barriers and reached out to those like the lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes who were despised by the rest of society and rejected as 'unclean'. Through his death and resurrection this work was brought to completion and the lives of people like St Paul began to be completely transformed. Are we experiencing a similar change in our lives? As an Easter people we worship an amazing, all-embracing God of infinite love.

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