

Hangings by a Thread: The Questions of the Cross
Lent 2022

Samuel Wells, Vicar of St. Martin in the Fields, Trafalgar Square, London, invites us to go deeper into the questions stirred by the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. As he writes in his Introduction, “there was a time when the cross was an answer... Today the cross is a question. It’s a question about God, about existence and about us.” (1).

Through the varied lenses of story, trust, life, purpose, power, and love, Wells bids us see the cross in a new way, not as the answer to all our questions, but as the question itself, not as the satisfaction of a debt to an angry God, but as the bridge from death to life, not as an image confined to a time and place long past, but as a mirror to see ourselves near to the very heart of God.

In the cross, Wells suggests, we discover the true identity of God and our true identity as humans, friends in the divine life. He concludes, “The Christian faith is this: despite our meanness, despite our faithlessness, despite the danger and disgrace of doing so, God chose to become our friend (61).

Some Passages and Questions for Reflection

“The cross does not invite us to dodge the searing questions of sufferings, doubt and evil, in the assured confidence that it was all part of The Plan; instead the cross calls us to go to the bottom of the slough of despond, knowing that the resurrection (though predicted) would lose its power if anyone had seriously seen it coming.” (Wells, 4)

“The cross confronts us with the fragility of Jesus. He’s no superhuman who leaps down and says, ‘Only joking!’ He suffers to the end. We wonder how this awful spectacle can possibly be necessary for our salvation. We’re supposed to wonder that...” (Wells, 9)

What wonderings does the cross stir up for you?

“Once we may have not liked authority figures, but we still trusted them; today we may like them, but we don’t trust them.” (23)

Do you agree with this assessment of our relationship to authority? If so, how might it change or challenge your understanding of the cross?

“On Palm Sunday everyone wants to be Jesus’ friend... You can’t trust a crowd. You can’t place your faith in popularity. It blows with the wind.” (24)

When and where might you have seen the blowing wind of the crowd? How have you seen it affect the activity of an individual or group?

“The Passion of Christ shows us that Jesus is stretched out between heaven and earth, hanging by a thread between the limitless possibilities of human goodness and the fathomless horror of human depravity....If we were all good, it wouldn't be so poignant. If we were all bad, it wouldn't be so painful....” (29)

This is at the core of Wells' argument about the cross, the thin thread between heaven and earth, the human and the divine. How do these images of nearness help or challenge you?

“There's no way to avoid death. You can't spend eternity hanging by a thread. Jesus went to the cross, and made his way through death to something beyond life.” (36)

Do you spend your time avoiding death and mortality? Do you ever feel like you are simply hanging by a thread? What would it look like for you to honestly confront death and finitude?

“On the cross, Jesus goes to the heart of it all....And when we see his heart on the cross and open up the lid of his toy bus, what we see there is the surprise, mystery and miracle of the Gospel. What we see there is us?” (42-43)

Have you ever considered the heart of Christ in this way? What difference does it make for you to know that you are at the very heart of Jesus on the cross?

“God always intended Jesus to come among us. Not to fix a problem, but to embody God's love. Incarnation came with a risk – a risk that Jesus would be treated like the sunflower in the story. When that risk was realized, God did not slink away, lash out, or call time. Instead, God underwent the full and horrifying consequences of that risk. But God also did one more thing. God disclosed the way the story ends.” (49-50)

Have you ever considered God's risk in the incarnation and cross? How does this change the narrative for you?

“We try to make the cross the ultimate *for*....Being *with* is what it was all about. God being with us is what creation, exodus, covenant and cross are all about. Being *with* is what eternity is all about.” (53,55)

Is this distinction between *for* and *with* helpful for you? If so, how?

“God didn't just create us, didn't just love us from afar, didn't just work in history to rescue us and strengthen us and heal us. God's real glory, God's true nature, appears in the real, substantial, material, physical reality of Jesus among us, Jesus just like us, Jesus beside us.” (60)

What have these reflections stirred in your own life and journey of faith, particularly as we prepare to approach the annual pilgrimage of Holy Week?