

## **The Cross and the Lynching Tree**

One has to have a powerful religious imagination to see redemption in the cross, to discover life in death and hope in tragedy. What kind of salvation is that? No human language can fully describe what salvation through the cross means. Salvation through the cross is a mystery and can only be apprehended through faith, repentance, and humility. The cross is an “opening to the transcendent” for the poor who have nowhere else to turn—that transcendence of the spirit that no one can take away, no matter what they do. Salvation is broken spirits being healed, voiceless people speaking out, and black people empowered to love their own blackness.

And yet another type of imagination is necessary—the imagination to relate the message of the cross to one’s own social reality, to see that “They are crucifying again the Son of God” (Heb 6:6). Both Jesus and blacks were “strange fruit.” Theologically speaking, Jesus was the “first lynchee,” who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil. He was crucified by the same principalities and powers that lynched black people in America. Because God was present with Jesus on the cross and thereby refused to let Satan and death have the last word about his meaning, God was also present at every lynching in the United States. God saw what whites did to innocent and helpless blacks and claimed their suffering as God’s own. God transformed lynched black bodies into the re-crucified body of Christ. Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus. The lynching tree is the cross in America. When American Christians realize that they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross.

God must therefore know in a special way what poor blacks are suffering in America because God’s son was lynched in Jerusalem. Jesus and other subject people suffered punishment under the Roman Empire as blacks suffered in the United States. He was tortured and humiliated like blacks. What are we to make of the striking similarities between the brutality in Rome and cruelty in America? What is most ironic is that the white lynchers of blacks in America were not regarded as criminals; like Jesus, blacks were the criminals and insurrectionists. The lynchers were the “good citizens” who often did not even bother to hide their identities. They claimed to be acting as citizens and Christians as they crucified blacks in the same manner as the Romans lynched Jesus. It is even more ironic that black people embraced the Christian cross that whites used to murder them. That was truly a profound inversion of meaning...

To understand what the cross means in America, we need to take a look at the lynching tree in this nation’s history—that “strange and bitter crop” that Billie Holiday would not let us forget. The lynched black victim experienced the same fate as the crucified Christ and thus became the most potent symbol for understanding the true meaning of the salvation achieved through “God on the Cross.” Nietzsche was right: *Christianity is a religion of slaves*. God became a slave in Jesus and thereby liberated slaves from being determined by their social condition.

The real scandal of the gospel is this: humanity’s salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity’s salvation is available only through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst. Faith that emerged out of the scandal of the cross is not a faith of intellectuals or elites of any sort. This is the faith of abused

and scandalized people—the losers and the down and out. It was this faith that gave blacks the strength and courage to hope, “to keep on keeping on,” struggling against the odds, with what Paul Tillich called “the courage to be.”

The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. Both were public spectacles, shameful events, instruments of punishment reserved for the most despised people in society. Any genuine theology and any genuine preaching of the Christian gospel must be measured against the test of the scandal of the cross and the lynching tree. “Jesus did not die a gentle death like Socrates, with his cup of hemlock... Rather, he died like a [lynched black victim] or a common [black] criminal in torment, on the tree of shame.” The crowd’s shout “Crucify him!” (Mk 15:14) anticipated the white mob’s shout “Lynch him!” Jesus’ agonizing final cry of abandonment from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34), was similar to the lynched victim Sam Hose’s awful scream as he drew his last breath, “Oh, my God! Oh, Jesus.” In each case, it was a cruel, agonizing, and contemptible death.

Can the cross redeem the lynching tree? Can the lynching tree liberate the cross and make it real in American history? Those are the questions I have tried to answer.

As I see it, the lynching tree frees the cross from the false pieties of well-meaning Christians. When we see the crucifixion as a first-century lynching, we are confronted by the re-enactment of Christ’s suffering in the blood-soaked history of African Americans. Thus, the lynching tree reveals the true religious meaning of the cross for American Christians today. The cross needs the lynching tree to remind Americans of the reality of suffering—to keep the cross from becoming a symbol of abstract, sentimental piety. Before the spectacle of this cross we are called to more than contemplation and adoration. We are faced with a clear challenge: as Latin American liberation theologian Jon Sobrino has put it, “to take the crucified down from the cross.”

Yet the lynching tree also needs the cross, without which it becomes simply an abomination. It is the cross that points in the direction of hope, the confidence that there is a dimension to life beyond the reach of the oppressor. “Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more” (Lk 12:4).

Though the pain of Jesus’ cross was real, there was also joy and beauty in his cross. This is the great theological paradox that makes the cross impossible to embrace unless one is standing in solidarity with those who are powerless. God’s loving solidarity can transform ugliness—whether Jesus on the cross or a lynched black victim—into beauty, into God’s liberating presence. Through the powerful imagination of faith, we can discover the “terrible beauty” of the cross and the “tragic beauty” of the lynching tree.

(From *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 158-162)