

## Saved by One Man's Sacrifice



**We are saved by the death of Jesus!** All Christians believe this. This is a central tenet within the Christian faith and the center of almost all Christian iconography. Jesus' death on a cross changed history forever. Indeed, we measure time by it. The effect of his death so marked the world that, not long after he died, the world began to measure time by him. We are in the year 2011 since Jesus was born.

**But how does this work?** How can one person's death ricochet through history, going backwards and forwards in time, being somehow beyond time, so as to effect past, present, and future all at the same time, as if that death was forever happening at the present moment? Is this simply some mystery and metaphysics inside of the Godhead that isn't meant to be understood within any of our normal categories?

Too often, I believe, the answer we were given was simply this: It's a mystery. **Believe it. You don't have to understand it.**

And there's wisdom in that. How we are washed clean in the blood of Christ is something we understand more in the gut than in the head. We know its truth, even when we don't understand it. Indeed we know its truth so deeply that we risk our whole lives on it. I wouldn't be a minister of the Gospel and a priest today if I didn't believe that we are saved through the death of Jesus. **But how to explain it?**

In my quest as a theologian and simply in my search to integrate my Christian faith, I have searched for concepts, imaginative constructs, and a language within which to understand and explain this: How can one man's death 2000 years ago be an act that saves us today? One of the things that helped me in that quest was a counsel from Edward Schillebeeckx who, in his ground-breaking book on Jesus as the Sacrament of God, stated simply that we have no metaphysics within which to explain this. C.H.Dodd, whom I will quote below, simply states, "there was more here than could be accounted for upon the historical or human level. God was in it" Part of this is mystery.

But, with those limits being admitted, I want to offer here two passages, one from Thomas Keating and the other from C.H. Dodd that, for me at least, have been helpful in trying to understand something which is for a large part ineffable. Keating's insight is more mystical and poetic, but wonderfully stunning; Dodd's is more phenomenological, but equally helpful:

**Thomas Keating** offers his comment in response to a question: Have we ever really understood how we are saved by Jesus' death more than two millennia ago?

Scripture provides examples of persons who actually had an insight into this - for instance, Mary of Bethany, anointing Jesus at Simon the leper's house. By breaking the alabaster jar of very expensive perfume over the whole body of Jesus and filling the house with that gorgeous scent, she seems to have intuited what Jesus was about to do on the cross. The authorities were set on killing him. What her lavish gesture symbolized was the deepest meaning of Jesus' passion and death. The body of Christ is the jar containing the most precious perfume of all time, namely, the Holy Spirit. It was about to be broken open so that the Holy Spirit could be poured out over the whole of humanity - past, present, and to come - with boundless generosity. Until that body had been broken on the cross, the full extent of the gift of God in Christ and its transforming possibilities for the human race could not be known or remotely foreseen.

**C.H. Dodd** describes how Jesus' death ricochets through history in these words: There was more here than could be accounted for upon the historical or human level. God was in it. The creative purpose of God is everlastingly at work in this world of his. It meets resistance from the recalcitrant wills of men. If at any point human history should become entirely nonresistant to God, perfectly transparent to his design - then from that point the creative purpose would work with unprecedented power. That is just what the perfect obedience of Jesus affected. Within human nature and human history he established a point of complete nonresistance to the will of God, and complete transparency to his design. As we revert to that moment, it becomes contemporary and we are laid open to the creative energy perpetually working to make man after the image of God. The obedience of Christ is the release of creative power for the perfecting of human life. A decision taken by a great man or woman can alter every aspect of life, for the present and for all that comes after.

Our moral actions all leave a trace, and sometimes if that moral act is equivalent to splitting the atom that effect lasts forever. Jesus' death split the moral atom.

Ron Rolheiser, OMI