

# **The Cross and Salvation in the Reformed Tradition**

Some reflections on John Bunyan's concept of the cross in Pilgrim's Progress.

John Burgess  
February 2012

In the Celtic spirituality that we have explored, the cross becomes something of a talisman for protection against the evil and natural forces that affect people's lives and livelihoods, and it is also something to be invoked for blessings, peace, healing and prosperity. Prosperity in the sense of providing the necessities of life and ensuring procreation - itself often seen as a blessing and favour from God. So the idea of salvation associated with the cross of Christ is associated primarily with this life, the here and now and we have found little that speaks of eternal life. This is understandable in the context of the 8<sup>th</sup> - 10th centuries and even the Hebridean islands of the 18th and 19th century, when life could be very fragile and insecure.

When we move to the 17th century to explore the ideas of salvation found in the Reformed tradition we are also in a time of insecurity and uncertainty. In this case it is a result of the religious and political turmoil of the times, and the legacy of the Civil war. Christopher Hill says that it was a time of great despair in England when there were many suicides. This was probably as a result of the religious and economic situation:

*They were years of great economic divide, in which the lucky few might prosper whilst the mass of their neighbours were plunged into deeper poverty (Hill, 1988, p. 68).*

Added to this was the great religious upheaval coming out of the Civil war and the overriding influence of Calvinism and predestination that led to anxiety about sin and salvation.

So let us turn to Bunyan as an example of one understanding of Salvation in the 17th century.

Bunyan's theology is said to have been influenced by a number of people. He is considered to have been a Calvinist, believing in Predestination and Covenant theology.

We see these ideas in the story of "Pilgrim's Progress", Bunyan's most famous work, but they are also found in other writings such as "Grace Abounding to the Worst of Sinners", "The life and Death of Mr. Badman" and "The Holy War," and also in his disputes with other radical groups.

Pilgrim's Progress starts with this picture:

*"I saw a man clothed in rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his house, a book in his hand, and a great burden on his back. I looked and saw him open the book and read therein, and as he read, he wept, and trembled; and not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, "What shall I do." (Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, 1907, p. 7)*

The book is the Bible and the burden on the back is both the man's sin and the awareness of the sin that will bring him to Judgment. This is what makes him so anxious and depressed. Having encountered the Word of God he sees his sin and knows that he needs salvation. This is the most important thing in Christian's life and he believes there is nothing more important than to find salvation. In his conversation with Mr Worldly Wiseman, he tries to deter Christian from this spiritual enterprise by reminding him of all the horrors that face him:

*Thou art likely to meet with, in the way which thou goest, wearisomeness, painfulness, hunger, perils, nakedness, sword, lions, dragons, darkness, and in a word, death and what not!*

But Christian replies:

*Why, sir, this burden upon my back is more terrible to me than all those things which you*

*have mentioned; nay methinks I care not what I meet in the way, if so be I can also meet deliverance from my burden.* (Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 1907, p. 19)

But he does not know how he will be saved and at first is persuaded that there is an easier way to remove his burden. This is through living a moral life, and so Christian goes in search of Mr Legality. However in this short episode Christian's burden is now even heavier, because he has added to his sin the intention of avoiding the truth. He passes by Mount Sinai, representing the Law and legality, and the implication then is that trying to keep the law does not lead to salvation, but rather makes the burden of sin even greater. Bunyan's belief in the strong Protestant doctrine of Justification by grace and the centrality of the cross is now expressed in the following dialogue between Christian and Evangelist. This allows Bunyan to have a discourse on salvation by works and salvation by faith. Morality and legality (symbolised by Mount Sinai) are ways of trying to avoid the cross but that would also be avoiding the truth. Evangelist reminds Christian, that however difficult the journey seems, salvation only comes through the cross.

*No man was as yet ever rid of his burden by him [Legality]; no, nor ever is like to be: ye cannot be justified by the works of the law; for by deeds of the law no man living can be rid of his burden. .. Believe me there is nothing in all this noise, that thou hast heard, but a design to beguile thee of thy salvation, by turning thee from the way in which I had set thee.* (Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 1907, pp. 25 - 26)

Christian continues on his journey of exploration - his journey to salvation and the heavenly city - and reaches the Wicket Gate. Although his encounter with the gate and the gatekeeper is quite short, it is an important part of the story, for here in a sense the pilgrimage begins. Christian is only allowed through because of the "good-will" of the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper is Christ, although at first we do not know this and it is only made clear in Part 2 of the *Pilgrim's Progress* when Christiana reaches the gate.

Christian is only allowed through because of the "good-will" of the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper is Christ, although at first we do not know this and it is only made clear in Part 2 of the *Pilgrim's Progress* when Christiana reaches the gate. We are told that the pilgrim has to knock many times:

*He that will enter in must first without  
Stand knocking at the Gate, nor need he doubt  
That is a knocker but to enter in;  
For God can love him, and forgive his sin.  
May I now enter here? Will he within  
Open to sorry me, though I have been  
An undeserving rebel? Then shall I  
Not fail to sing his lasting praise on high.* (Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 1907, p. 27)

That the Pilgrim has to knock hard on the gate shows us that this is the first stage of salvation and conversion. *[Christian] has to be aware of what he is doing. ... This is his first definite response to the call. He accepts that Christ is the way. The first great hurdle is passed. The awareness of the centrality of Christ for salvation, is the first essential step towards it.* (Burgess, 1984, p. 10)

Let us continue. He still has his burden, and despite the time at the interpreter's house, where he is taught many things about the Christian life, he is still carrying his burden. It is only when he comes face to face with the cross that he is relieved of it. Bunyan deals with the encounter very briefly:

*Now I saw in my dream, that the highway up which Christian was to go, was fenced on either*

*side with a wall, and that wall was called salvation. (Isa.26: 1.) Up this way, therefore, did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back.*

*He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in and I saw it no more.*

*Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said with a merry heart, "He hath given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death." ( Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, 1907, p. 42)*

The conversion experience - the gate and the cross, undoubtedly reflect something of Bunyan's own conversion. In his autobiography, he describes an extended period of soul searching, even after he has come to faith. He seems to have had a preoccupation with sin, even though many of the episodes he describes would seem trivial to us, today. Yet it is only when he sees the enormity of the cross that he can know and feel that his great burden of sin and guilt are taken away. He describes Christian's experience as one of both great sadness and joy. The joy is that he is free from his sins, his rags are changed into white "raiment", and he has become a new person. The sorrow is for the sacrifice of Christ that necessitated this

*"Thus far I did come laden with my sin;  
Nor could aught ease the grief that I was in  
Till I came hither: what a place is this!  
Must here be the beginning of my bliss?  
Must here the burden fall from off my back?  
Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?  
Blest cross! Blest sepulchre! Blest rather be  
The man that there was put to shame for me!" (Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, 1907, p. 43)*

Bunyan expounds his understanding of the work of Christ on the cross, when Christiana's journey brings her to the cross. Here we read nothing of Christiana's emotions or experience, but rather are led into a protracted discourse about the Cross. She understands that the cross is the source of forgiveness, but needs to understand how. She says to Great-heart that she knows

*That we should have pardon by word and deed; by word, that is, by the promise; by deed, to wit, in the way it was obtained. What the promise is, of that I know something; but what it is to have pardon by deed, or in the way that it was obtained ... please let us hear you discourse thereof (Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, 1907, p. 249)*

The discourse centres on the nature of Christ and righteousness and becomes rather convoluted. In essence he says that we are made righteous by the righteousness of Christ, which emanates from his Godhead and his pure humanity and his role as mediator. It is this third aspect of righteousness that he can impart to believers.

*[This] righteousness which standeth in performance or obedience to a revealed will; and that is it that he puts upon sinners, and that by which their sins are covered. Wherefore he saith, "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners; so by the obedience of one, shall many be made righteous." (Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, 1907, p. 250)*

*Sin has delivered us up to the just curse of a righteous law; now, from this curse we must be justified by way of redemption, a price being paid for the harms we have done (Rom. 4: 24);*

*and this is by the blood of your Lord, who came and stood in your place and stead, and died your death for your transgressions. (Gal 3: 13.) Thus has he ransomed you from your transgressions by blood and covered your polluted and deformed souls with righteousness. (Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, 1907, p. 252)*

Therefore Bunyan seems to believe that the result of sin is to " ... *have lost communion with God, Christ, saints and angels and a share in heaven and eternal life.* " (Bunyan, Grace Abounding & the Life and Death of Mr Badman, 1909, p. 151) and that sin will lead to a person into " ... *fall[ing] into the hands of revenging justice, that will be always, to the utmost extremity ... punishing of him in the dismal dungeon of hell*". (Bunyan, Grace Abounding & the Life and Death of Mr Badman, 1909, p. 151)

And that the work of atonement is through imputation and substitution, also using the term redemption, and the forgiveness of God is freely given, not because of a reward for a good life.

The cross then, becomes the means of salvation, not in terms of protection in this world, for we know that many at that time, Puritan and separatists suffered privation, hostility, imprisonment and the loss of their material goods. The story of Pilgrim's progress is the story of the 17th century Puritan struggle in faith to reach the Heavenly city. With the influence of Calvinism's doctrine of predestination, the almost unhealthy dwelling on sin, and the fear of judgment, the cross is the only way to be made righteous with God. Their concept of salvation was otherworldly and their concern was whether they would be fit for the Heavenly kingdom. They were not asking for protection from the cross, but a passage to heaven.

While this is, as in Christiana's discourse with Good-Heart indicates something that is a fact that we need to come to know, it is also something that has to be experienced. Christian's encounter with the cross is much more of an holistic experience, as he rejoices, weeps and feels to be a different person. Perhaps Bunyan is reminding us in the two parts of the story, that while he would recognise in his own life the experience of Christian, this is not the only response to the cross. There are many different experiences of conversion and salvation. Yet the cross is essential both for salvation and for knowing and experiencing salvation. Without encountering the cross there is no redemption and no joy in the Christian life. And it is through this encounter that the redeemed sinner can respond to God's love .

*... if the most burdened man in the world was here [at the cross] and did see and believe as I now do, it would make his heart the more merry and blithe" says Christiana. To which Great-Heart responds "There is not only comfort, and the ease of a burden brought to us, by the sight and consideration of these, but an endeared affection begot in us by it; for who can, if he doth but once think that pardon comes not only by a promise, but thus, but be affected by the ways and means of his redemption, and so with the man that hath wrought it for him?" (Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, 1907, pp. 252 - 3)*

Christian's response to the cross was tears of sorrow and jumping for joy; Christiana's was thankfulness and commitment. *"Oh, thou loving One! Oh, thou blessed One! Thou deserves to have me; thou hast bought me; thou deserves to have me all; thou has paid for me ten thousand times more than I am worth!"* (Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, 1907, p. 253)

For Bunyan, the cross is not only the means of salvation - the means of entry into heaven, it is also brings a response of praise and commitment to God and Christ. So the whole is the work of God. Salvation is both experiential and personal bringing the feeling of being loved and forgiven. (Furlong, 1975, p. 141)

It reminds us of John Newton's Words:

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear  
And Grace my fears relieved  
How precious did that Grace appear  
The hour I first believed.

..

### **The Cross and Salvation – Conclusion**

The two papers about the cross have explored two approaches to the Cross and salvation, both coming from times of material insecurity. The Celtic tradition perhaps indicates that the cross becomes a talisman for protection in this life - from evil, the natural world and disaster, and a source of blessing for life and health. It is a means of coping with life through calling upon God to act. Life and salvation is in God's hands.

Through exerts from Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, which we have used as an example of the 17th century Puritan tradition, the cross is also a way of coping with the disasters and difficulties of life, not just those that are thrown at us by the world, but of our own making through sinful actions. Salvation then, is from the world and resides in the hope of a future in the heavenly city.

In both cases, the poetry of the Hebrides and the stories from Bedford, salvation is personal. It is found through a personal experience of the grace of God through the cross. Today we are told we too are living in times of crisis and insecurity. What is our society looking for in terms of salvation, and which if either of these two approaches might speak to the context of church and society?