

Crucifixion Theology with three year olds?

Paul is an extremist don't you think? He preaches nothing but Christ Crucified – or at least he says he does.

He's intensely faithful to crucifixion as the centre of our faith, as THE proclamation, and as THE truth we bear witness to. There are lots of other fine things about God to chat about, and Paul knows them all like the back of his hand, since infancy: the Law, the Prophets, the tribal stories, the Patriarchs. But these can all be rubbish or recycled. Christ Crucified is the essence of what Paul understands to be the action of God in the world, the centre of reality, the reason of history.



Paul is also very extreme in his application of this theology. And how much trouble has his extremism caused, which baldly invites all nations, all genders, all classes, all sinners into this salvation of the crucified Christ? You know what this means, don't you. If this is an all inclusive theological frame, beyond which any thinking or being has no coherence, then it is for everyone. And the Crucified Christ is for three year olds.

Many people struggle with telling the story of the crucifixion to preschoolers. Many think it is just plain inappropriate (I don't let my kids watch Gladiator, why would I traumatise them with the Bible?) there are a few who fearlessly tell the story to children 'because it is the gospel and the right thing to do' and trust the process, but secretly wonder how it is meant to work...how could a three year old possibly understand this story?

As Easter approaches again, let me offer some options for this process, and some ways in which we might proceed with confidence in doing the crucifixion theology with our three year olds.

There are some angles here for us to investigate. Being a fairly extreme person myself, I am compelled by Paul's extremism. His weird, excessive, maxed out theology provokes and engages me in a wrestle and a reaction. I can't just nod nicely along. And surely, surely if this is our God, our creator, our source of life, our hope for redemption, we can't just be nodding along nicely.

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And here's my first point. Paul's radicalism is worthy, and he's onto something good here, that we ought not resist, reduce or modify. We create more difficulties with the story of the resurrection when we try to 'tone it down' or 'soften it' for children, or for anyone.



Stories are built to create a safe haven for things that we must apprehend, but really, in all their fullness are too much for us.

I'm not talking about 3 year olds in this particular instance, but witness the difference between reading the Harry Potter novels and watching the movies. The movies need to carry an M rating. The books don't. Think about Mel Gibson's Passion of Christ – many people (and I have to admit I am not one of them) who saw this movie were extremely traumatised by it, even though they had read the scriptures countless times – and had their lives moved and shaped by those scriptures. I am unsure whether I have heard anyone who found the Passion of Christ very confronting yet testify to it reworking their life.

So I know this is not a well researched idea, and I'm open to revision on this one. But I think it's worth considering the power of the story to transform without traumatising.

I have heard sermons which elaborate the scriptures, that describe sinew by sinew being torn apart by each blow of the hammer. This is not the extremism that I hear from Paul. His extreme insistence on the crucified Christ is not about guiltning people, or scaring people, or emotionally manipulating people. Paul's focus is theological. He re-iterates this phrase keeping the image fresh before the readers eyes because in it he sees, not just a bloodied corpse, but a revolutionary affront to our pretensions of power, a critique of our devotion to hopelessness and abandonment and a model of vulnerable, inarticulate, powerless suffering that will ultimately turn evil in on itself and provide liberation and life for all.

This is a story that we need to tell our children. This is a culture that we would want our kids to grow up with, from the very youngest of days. To hear of the way God does things. That the powerful and the violent, the angry mob, plotting factions, the self righteous and double dealers aren't on God's team, and don't win. And if we don't tell the crucifixion story, with its drama and clear image of Jesus pushed to the very bottom of the pile, our children, looking around at the church and politics and culture might think that God thinks big and powerful and winning is good. They might miss that God places himself at the bottom of the pile. And he does it for us. Because sooner or later, we end up there.

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How hard is it (and Paul struggling with his fledgling faith communities in the New Testament epistles will tell you exactly!) How hard is it to remember, that the centre of our faith is not the glorious expression of power and victory but the self giving, other-centred service of love – whether for neighbour or for enemy.

Over time I have become more and more convinced that we can tell the story of the crucifixion to our very young children as we have received it. It boils down to how core I think the biblical witness to the passion of Jesus is. What power am I willing to ascribe to the Scriptures. Perhaps another extreme claim, but I think this is part of Paul's extremity as well. He placed a lot of faith actually in Jesus, in the crucified Christ as the agent by which radical life transformation of the complete and salvific kind actually occurs. In fact, this was an exclusive claim for him, as it is for me, that there is no other means by which a person is reconciled to God. No other. So no other for three year olds. If three year olds are to receive the grace of God, it is through the crucified Christ his very self, and not through reciting certain concepts about faith, and not through apologetics.

Lest I am tempted to question whether it is possible for a three year old to understand the crucifixion, I am stopped in my tracks as I confess that it is not possible for this forty three year old to understand the crucifixion. Apologetics doesn't save me either. Simply to the cross I cling.



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Often times we fall into the terrible mechanistic didactic habit of trying to teach a story. Stories, good stories (and Paul and I both think this is the greatest of all), great stories do not need to be taught. They become our wallpaper, or our window frames. They are the multi-veggie soup we feast on. They bury themselves deep in our lives. And they sprout things – ideas, passions, sensitivities, revolutions, which over time bear amazing fruit, and scatter their own seeds.

When we resist the urge to 'teach' them the story, and simply share the story with them, include them in our communal remembering of the stories we give our kids a good chance of growing up not just knowing the story, but being shaped by the ethics and the energies of them. And by stories here, I mean speaking out the words received as Scripture in the gospels and the epistles and the prophets and the law, all of which with their own accent tell us the story of the passion of God.

When we share stories with our children - stories, not just that we know, but that we believe in, and not just that we believe in but that we live - children can find themselves living in those stories too. And that, when you stop and think about the story that we might be living in, is a very extreme thing. An **extreme risk**, an **extreme life makeover**, an **extreme joy**.

