The Old Rugged Cross



A minister of the gospel as a travelling evangelist, the author George Bennard, on one occcasion, after a difficult season of ministry, reflected deeply on the power of the Cross of Christ. He later said, "I was praying for a full understanding of the Cross...I read and studied and prayed...The Christ of the Cross became more than a symbol...It was like seeing John 3:16 leave the printed page, take form, and act out the meaning of redemption. While watching this scene with my mind's eye, the theme of the song came to me." It took several months for the words to formulate in his mind as he travelled. Bennard would carry the words with him, working on them, polishing them, and sometimes singing them in his meetings. At last, his hymn finished, George went to the home of his friends, Rev. and Mrs. L.O. Boswick, and sang it for them. After the last note, he looked at them and asked, "Will it do?" The Boswicks were so moved that they helped pay the fees to have it printed, and it soon began appearing in hymnbooks across America. Before long, this hymn was sung by many of the most famous and accomplished Christian singers in the world.

Historians tell us the actual imagery is probably poetic rather than an actual picture of the scene of the cross of Christ. The cross of Jesus wouldn't have been on a hill far away. It would have been on the side of a busy roadway. Romans crucified the condemned both as a punishment to the individual perpetrator and as a warning to everyone else. They would have crucified in a public place just outside the city walls. The forlorn cross on a hill far away is a bit sentimentalized. Nevertheless, the great reversal of appropriation of the Roman instrument of crucifixion rarely surpasses this attempt. The cross, in this hymn, is to be cherished, and clung to. It is a wonder of beauty and a wondrous attraction.

Perhaps the positive feelings toward the cross could be dismissed as sentimentality. But the author's life story suggests otherwise. It suggests that the cross, despite its tragic ugliness, speaks a word of peace and comfort to those who see the cross in its larger context—the instrument not just of Roman torture of an innocent man, but the sacrifice of God to bring salvation to each of us who take up our own cross and follow the One who died for us. In this sense, the cross is not far away at all, but near to each of us who cling to it for life.

© 2010 Eric Howell