

The great curtain had been hanging there for years. It looked as if it might hang there forever. Embroidered in blue and purple and scarlet, that massive curtain stretched from ceiling to floor, acting as a silent barrier. Behind it lay the Holy of Holies, a chamber fifteen feet square, which housed the sacred Ark of the Covenant, the Cherubim and the Mercy Seat — the supreme symbols of God's Presence with His chosen people.

Then, suddenly, say the Evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke, on one unforgettable day, that curtain was ripped from top to bottom, as though by a pair of unseen hands. People apparently compared notes afterwards and were startled to discover that that ripping of the curtain had happened at the precise moment when Jesus, on the hill of Calvary, had breathed His last. Immediately they connected the two events. They said it was no coincidence. The death of Christ beyond the city wall, and the tearing of the curtain before Holy of Holies had somehow been related. They went further; they said they had been directly related as cause and effect - it was the death of Jesus that had torn the curtain.

That was what they dared to believe. Today, the verdict is: they were right. That torn curtain stands for something so profound it tests the limits of our imagination.

That torn curtain is the disclosure of a secret — the revealing of the inmost heart of God. When the people worshipped in the Temple in the old days, they were always sure that there must be something there behind the curtain, but what? That was what no one quite knew — something awesome, they thought, and formidable, something that might be called “the terror of the Lord.” It was characteristic of temple religion that as you passed in from the outer courts, through the inner courts, toward the center, the lights were progressively dimmed and lowered, until the Holy of Holies itself was bathed in darkness. And then, say the Evangelists, Jesus died, and the curtain was torn; an end to secrecy; the heart of God laid bare.

They may not admit it, but many people today still want to know: is there a God behind the curtain? Is He the kind of God to Whom it's worth my while to pray? Is He a God Who knows anything about it when things in my little corner of the world go wrong, and my heart is hurt? Is He a God Who can lay any hand of healing upon me when I'm disappointed and frustrated? Is He a God Who knows anything about the heartache of the world? And above all, is He a God Who can give me hope and a new beginning when I have done something that makes me hate myself? Has He got any courage or forgiveness for me when I'm feeling miserable and ashamed? These are the questions with which many people are grappling and finding only a silent barrier. There is an answer that tears the curtain. If you want to know what God is like, you must go out, beyond the walls of Jerusalem, to the hill of the Skull, and see Jesus, bleeding, suffering, and dying, all for love. Out there, on the cross, the heart of God is revealed, and his heart is vulnerable. His love is sacrificial. You can come and see everything about Him. The invitation is from God himself. From heaven to earth. Torn from top to bottom. Come in.

That torn curtain is the offer of a way in. In the Jerusalem Temple, as you made your way from the entrance gate toward the inmost shrine, it meant not only the lowering of lights, it meant also the heightening of barriers.

First, you had the outer court, where anyone at all, Jew and Gentile alike, might come; then, the inner court, which was reserved for true-born Jews; and then, beyond that, the Holy Place, where only the ministering priests might enter; and finally, the Holy of Holies, which could be entered only by the High Priest; and even he could enter it on only one day in the year, the great Day of Atonement, when he went in there to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people. You can just picture the people standing outside while the High Priest alone went in; and then, when he came out, they looked at him with awe! They had never seen God, but here was a man who had. And that was as far as religion went—no access to the Mercy Seat for them — no clasp of God’s hand. What that frowning curtain seemed to say was, “Stand back! Keep your distance!” But, say the Evangelists, one day on Golgotha, between two criminals, the Friend of sinners gave His life, and that old curtain was ripped in half, and the road of access opened up for all.

Jesus opened up the road to God with His life! This is the holy faith which it is our privilege to proclaim to all the world. The road to God is open to all who care to travel it. I’d like to add this: that it is an open road for sinners; it is the sinner’s highway.

Dr. John Duncan, who taught Hebrew in New College, Edinburgh, many years ago, was at a Communion service in a little Highland church in Scotland, and he was feeling so personally unworthy that when the elements came his way, he felt he could not take them -- he would allow the bread and wine to pass. And he was sitting there feeling absolutely miserable when he noticed a girl in the congregation who, when the bread came ‘round, allowed it to pass, and then broke down into tears. And that sight seemed to bring back to the old man a truth that he had somehow forgotten; and in a carrying whisper that could be heard across the church, he exclaimed, “Take it; take it; it’s meant for sinners!” And he himself took it.

Listen to these words from Hebrews 10: “And so, dear brothers, we can boldly enter heaven’s Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus.” The cross and the curtain have opened the way.

And what do we find when go in? Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft said it like this:

*When we begin to understand the significance of the Man of Sorrows [Jesus], sorrow and suffering seem far less threatening than they do at first. Indeed, when history is seen as “His Story,” suffering is seen as the dark spot in a magnificent painting, heard as the low note in a harmony whose high notes are lost in heaven, a dance descending from archangels to a stable, through a cross to an empty tomb and back to heaven with the promise that He will also empty the tombs of ourselves, our children, and our ancestors.*