

The Symbol Interprets Us

a sermon preached on the

Feast of the Holy Cross

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at

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Lecture: Numbers 21:4b-9, 1 Corinthians 1:18-24, John 3:13-17

We assume that we interpret the symbol. This, I think, highlights a fundamental dead end in the religious life, more so since the Reformation and Enlightenment perhaps than for our forebears beforehand. So accustomed are we to figuring everything out as though it were a mathematical equation, so reductively-rationalist have we become. When we encounter the symbolic we instinctively look for a neat and tidy 'explanation'. And if we are able to 'explain' the symbol we do feel as though something wild and uncontrollable has been tamed and made orderly. And this is probably the nub of the matter, in the face of the symbolic we feel a loss of control, so our tidy explanations give us a feeling of power over the chaos. Yet, in spite of this valiant effort at some point even our best efforts leave us wanting. Because we do not interpret the symbol – the symbol interprets us.

Consider the story of the poisonous serpent: "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."¹ Attempts to 'explain', rationally, this symbol abound, yet in spite of all the effort none of them really explains anything. Just as the numerous attempts to explain God all run out of puff eventually, leaving us in the darkness with nothing explained at all. It is noteworthy that the writer of the book of Numbers offered no such explanation, but simply left the children of Israel with a potent symbol of life and death. The very thing which caused their death, the poisonous snakes, was the same thing which would bring about their life. The serpent remains an ambivalent sign, capable of both life-taking and life-giving, as in the doctor's insignia. The symbol of the serpent on the pole examines the children of Israel and finds them wanting. Yet if they will look at it, if they will meditate upon the serpent on the pole – which means voluntarily giving up their ego-centric claims – then they will find life. The symbol interprets the people.

Likewise, Nicodemus' attempts to explain rationally how anyone can be born after growing old, how a person can enter their mother's womb for the second time.² The symbol of Jesus' Divine Sonship has examined Nicodemus,³ and found him wanting, and this is actually a state which leads to death – 'night', in John's symbolic language. And like the Moses generation, if Nicodemus will look at the symbol, which is the Son of Humanity lifted up, then he will find life. The symbol interprets Nicodemus - and all of us.

Speaking personally, the symbolic has been a long struggle. In all of my various studies I have striven to find a language to 'explain' the symbolic. Efforts which began with the scientific, linguistic and related disciplines were in due course applied assiduously to the symbols of Christian faith. And it has taken a long time to realise that all my efforts to interpret the symbol are at best partial, at worst simply misguided. And I think the impediment is the matter of humility, or the lack of it. For power over the symbolic life is power over my environment, and especially over other people. And it has to be admitted that the mastery of such power makes all sorts of organisational accomplishments possible – as the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition's exercise of power over the symbol of the 'ten commandments' amply reveals. And it's true that many of these accomplishments are without doubt positive and good.

¹ Numbers 21:8b

² John 3:4

³ John 3:2

However, somewhat late in the day, I have finally come to see that rivalry and competitiveness in my own life, as well as in the life of the institutional church, arises from this power-hungry need to gain mastery over the symbolic life – hence the church’s many bitter fights over doctrinal matters, its attempted mastery over the symbolic life employed in the service of defining and shoring up the boundaries of the institution. That is why I say that the impediment is humility, in fact my lack of it. For when I am attempting to interpret the symbol I am attempting to remain in control.

But when I submit to the infinite wisdom of the symbol I am relinquishing control, which is true humility. Because the symbol interprets me, I am bound to be humbled by its deeper truth. Before the infinite wisdom of the symbolic, which is a manifestation of the Divine, I voluntarily hand over my demand for individual sovereignty – just as Jesus voluntarily handed himself over to the religious and political authorities who claimed to have interpretive power over the symbolic life. ⁴ Perhaps the writer to the Hebrews realised something like this when declaring that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” ⁵ In the Sinai, those Israelites who were able to stand before the infinite wisdom of the symbol which was the serpent on the pole, and voluntarily accept the symbol’s ‘interpretation’ of them, found life. Likewise, according to Jesus, whoever among us is able to stand before the infinite wisdom of the symbol which is the Son of Humanity lifted up, bearing in his own flesh the contradictory opposites of the creation, and voluntarily accept the Cross’ interpretation of us, we will live. Indeed, not merely live, but experience the totality of life! ⁶

So we began our feast of the Holy Cross today, proclaiming Christ crucified, ⁷ with our reverence, in faith. When we talk about ‘faith’ in the Cross of Christ, and other related symbols of the Christian tradition, this does not mean ‘believing’ in them in the rationalistic sense which we associate with believing in the existence of the Oxygen atom, or the date of the European conquest of the Americas. And we are certainly not talking about a mere historical event. The symbol is living, present, vital, arising precisely in order to bring to consciousness that aspect of reality which we have avoided or denied. That is, we do not interpret the Cross - the Cross interprets us. The Cross sees us, knows us, examines us, reveals us to ourselves - and wills us to life. The very thing which feels to us like foolishness, ⁸ which we feel might annihilate us - the agony of consciousness, of waking up and remaining alert in the face of all contradiction, even ultimate contradiction – this is that which saves, which gives birth to life, to the whole cosmos, ⁹ which is God’s eternal desire.

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⁴ John 10:17-18, 18:36

⁵ Hebrews 10:31

⁶ John 3:16b

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:23

⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:18

⁹ John 3:16