

Holy Cross Day 13.09.2020
Philippians 2.6-11; John 3 13-17

“Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the Saviour of the world!
Come let us worship...”

Recognise these words of course? They are part of the proclamation of the cross that is included in the liturgy of Good Friday for thousands of churches across the world – but this is September, so why do we have such a feast day in our calendar? After all, since we know that the strife is o'er, the battle won and the cross, like the tomb, is empty – why do we need this further observance?

Why indeed! Certainly the origins of the feast might well give you pause, rooted in St Helena's pilgrimage to the holy places of Jerusalem, and her conviction that she had found the site of the crucifixion and of Christ's burial – and close by, 3 crosses buried. Various early chroniclers insisted it as certain that one of these crosses was that of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the other two were those of the thieves who were crucified with Him.

I'd guess most of us would be inclined to approach this great discovery with a certain amount of scepticism...However, in no time Helena had overseen the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and as the years passed, the longing of the faithful to have access to even a splinter of the true cross snowballed until it was drastically out of hand. Hardly a church or monastery was without its relic so that at the Reformation Calvin complained “If all the pieces that could be found were collected together, they would make a big ship-load. Yet the Gospel testifies that a single man was able to carry it.”

So if we see today as but an excursion into cultic extravagance and superstition, then it is only right and proper to be cautious. But, touch woo [oops, sorry] the cross seems to have survived this. It remains a popular symbol, chosen as jewellery, as tattoos, as memorials by many who would never claim to follow the crucified one. Strange indeed. It is hard to imagine anyone choosing to wear a little golden gibbet or a beautifully crafted electric chair pendant round their neck. But it is not this that creates a scandal.

The shock, the scandal comes when the Saviour of the world hangs here - HERE upon that instrument of death... How can this be...? Can

we grasp, even for a moment, what Paul is celebrating as he quotes that early hymn that we have heard in the epistle today? This is God – GOD – the creator of all, the one who holds the universe in being, deliberately choosing to throw in his lot with his creation, to identify with us in an act of such deep and utter commitment that he not only lives a human life but dies a human death, entering into the darkness and experiencing for himself that moment when he can do nothing but surrender. Total abandonment – to the human condition and to the ultimate purpose of love. How can this be?

It is though actually, nothing new. God has always been utterly committed to and connected with his people, their rescue and renewal prefigured by Moses but perfected by Christ. Those who looked at the bronze serpent erected by Moses, trusting in God, escaped death...They looked at an emblem of their trouble, and were healed. Jesus, lifted high and suffering death himself, offers the route for all of us to eternal life embraced in God's love. But we have to look with the eyes of faith – to really see the true light that has come into the world, to recognise that God's glory is present as fully as Christ hangs on the cross as it is when he bursts from the tomb in the joy of Easter morning. We have to look – BEHOLD the wood of the cross...

Some words from the Reproaches always touch me . “Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by” – and I feel real sadness that for so many people it doesn't matter. So many who wear the cross as a lucky charm, don't care, simply don't understand. Maybe there is a seed planted within them somewhere that they choose to wear this talisman. And yet it seems obvious that the cross demands a decision, a response... You cannot truly SEE the One who is hanging there and do nothing... He hangs there to draw the all people to himself but He will never constrain, never demand. Instead, he opens his arms in an embrace wide enough for all the world and says “SEE how much I love you” but it is your decision whether or not to accept that invitation to be loved. To accept carries with it the responsibility to pass on the love we have been given, to do all that we can to communicate its overwhelming reality, to live so that others can see for themselves the truth of what Love can do. We are to lift high the cross, and with it the Son of Man, so that all may see the route to eternal life.

In Holy Week we are often caught up in the liturgical drama, already emotionally exhausted by the highs and lows of the journey from triumphal entry to empty tomb, but straining ahead to Easter joy. Today is something quite different. Today we can simply pause and ponder.

I came across this poem by the poet-priest Malcolm Guite. It is part of his series of sonnets for Holy Week and it kind of says it all:

“See, as they strip the robe from off his back
And spread his arms and nail them to the cross,
The dark nails pierce him and the sky turns black,
And love is firmly fastened onto loss.
But here a pure change happens. On this tree
Loss becomes gain, death opens into birth.
Here wounding heals and fastening makes free
Earth breathes in heaven, heaven roots in earth.
And here we see the length, the breadth, the height
Where love and hatred meet and love stays true
Where sin meets grace and darkness turns to light
We see what love can bear and be and do,
And here our saviour calls us to his side
His love is free, his arms are open wide.”

So – beyond excess and superstition, beyond apathy and over-familiarity, let us glory in the cross of Christ once more...and let us ask, too, for the grace to empty ourselves so that we may be filled with and transformed by the Love that is hanging on the tree.

Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the Saviour of the world.

Amen.