

The Holy Cross

Today we are celebrating Holy Cross day, which commemorates a series of events: first, the Empress Helena visiting Jerusalem in 326 and rediscovering the cross of Christ. Then Constantine dedicating the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in 335, and then the Emperor Heraclitus recovering the cross again in 629, after it had been captured by the Persians. Quite how Helena identified the True Cross, is understandably vague in the accounts, and we may understandably be sceptical. But it's worth a thought that Jesus's cross could – just - still have been around – it could, in fact, only recently have been decommissioned, when Constantine abolished crucifixion after 314.

The Romans didn't make a new cross for everyone they crucified. You don't waste wood, certainly not tree trunks straight and strong enough to hang a man on. Jesus's cross had probably been used already dozens, if not hundreds of times. It was already soaked with the blood and sweat and other bodily fluids of victims. And Jesus's bodily fluids will have soaked into the wood and mingled with the hundreds of victims that came after him.

The mingling of Jesus's body with the bodies of other victims symbolizes the way Christ saw his work on earth. To touch, to be in touch, to know by experience. On the cross, he held the traces of all those others as closely to him as in life he had held the sick and bleeding and outcast. And everyone who hung there after him hung in the imprint of his arms and body. Making one body.

It also symbolizes the way Jesus wanted us to see ourselves. Again and again in his teaching he comes back to the unity of human lives, with each other and with God. What hurts us hurts other people just the same: "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you (Mt.7.12)." We are all children of the same God: "I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit (Jn. 15.5)." We belong together: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (15.12)." We are one: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself (Mt. 22.39)."

At the most basic level we are physically one. We are all made up of the same particles and chemicals and energy. Every being comes together from the worn-out materials of other beings, miraculously re-engineered and resurrected. Whether we learn it through science, or faith, or love, we are one body. What is good or bad for others is good or bad for us. When one person is hurt, the whole world is hurt, because we are the world. Learning to believe and feel our oneness is a fundamental task of Christian life. Because it's when we understand that, that we realize how wrong is anything that separates us from one another or from God.

The other place where Jesus emphasized our oneness is in the Eucharist, which is so closely tied to the cross both in time and in meaning. When Jesus says, "This is my body which is given for you," he is not only foretelling his death, but telling us that our life hangs on it. My death creates life, Jesus says. And because we are one, my death will change the world, if you can only see it. A lot of the hard work in religion is in learning to see it. It's a strange thing, because if another person loves us unconditionally, it's

impossible not to know it; it changes us. But somehow it's much harder to see how the love of God in Christ changes the world. It is famously hard to explain theologically - no theory of the atonement is really satisfactory - but it's also hard to accept emotionally.

Imagine, for a moment, in the style of the author of *The Dream of the Rood*, how the cross itself might have felt. "The worst thing is that it was just another day. Day after day, the slaves and petty criminals, the freedom fighters and army deserters die in my arms and my fibres drink their blood. Year after year. How many times do people need to prove that two wrongs don't make a right? That violence is not the way to peace? Such inhumanity. I didn't want to kill anyone. A carpenter least of all. The Creator's Son - well, if it had made a difference... But what difference did it make? None that I can see."

Until one week - years later, the cross might have forgotten the carpenter except that it didn't forget anyone it carried - one week, no crucifixions. Surprise. The next week, nothing. The next week, nothing. Silence on Golgotha. And eventually, perhaps, a couple of slaves coming up - casually - knocking the crosses down and ... dumping them somewhere? Putting them out for firewood? And that was it. Because it turned out that the new Emperor was a god-fearer and following Christ was the new cult of the Empire. All those three hundred years when the cross thought everyone had forgotten Jesus, things had been happening, here and there, mostly underground, which added up to something you wouldn't believe. And now all of a sudden everyone was talking about Jesus and rushing to repent. How astonished the cross must have been, lying there, right at the centre of all the new world maps and the new order. Never expecting to be rediscovered.

That train of events is perhaps the place where we can most easily see the love of God in Christ touching and changing the world. It tells us we are one body. In the most hostile times and places we have not broken, and it's worth practising to be one body now.

As we do, the cross goes with us. It reminds us of the scale of evil that we have to overcome to be united - not just individual and opportunistic, but routine, respectable, state-sponsored evil. It also tells us that good has to reach out and touch evil to change it. Christ came into the world not to avoid evil but to engage with it, and we need to do the same. And the cross is a witness to all the things that make it so hard to reach out. All the competing interests, fears, the anger and hatred and lovelessness, the wounds, physical and psychological. It shows us starkly what we need to overcome in order to be one.

Above all, the cross stands for responsibility. Because the world is one, we share responsibility, for the bad as well as the good. We may be the body of Christ, but we are also Romans, and passers-by, and fugitive disciples, and the vast majority that stayed at home and tried not to think about it. Where everyone is connected, no-one is innocent.

This takes us to the heart of today's feast, because when Helena sought out the True Cross, she was doing something very remarkable. She was taking the Romans' weapon of destruction and making it a holy thing. It's worth taking a moment to reflect just what a shocking idea that is. In a sense the cross is the last thing we should venerate. But this is

the challenge. We are one body. The only way to God is as one body. To be one, we have to dissolve the things that make us separate, which means forgiving each other for being part of a world that lets evil flourish, and being forgiven for being part of it ourselves. There's no doubt that the damage and the injustice we have all suffered are agonizingly real and cry out for satisfaction – compensation – revenge. But, “You have heard it said, that you shall love your neighbour... But I say, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous...” (Mt. 5.43-8).

As we celebrate the feast, that's the challenge the Cross puts to us.

Amen

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