

Why the Cross? – Lent 1

Genesis 2:15-17; Psalm 22:1-6; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 3:1-17

Every religion and ideology has a visual symbol to illustrate a significant feature of its history or beliefs. Ancient Judaism avoided visual signs and symbols for fear of infringing the Second Commandment that prohibits the manufacture of images. Modern Judaism has the Star of David, which speaks of God's covenant with David that his throne would be established forever and that the Messiah would be descended from him. Islam is symbolised, at least in West Asia, by a crescent originally depicting a phase of the moon which had been a symbol of sovereignty in Byzantium before the Muslim conquest. Secular ideologies also have universally recognisable signs eg the Marxist sickle and hammer.

Christianity is no exception in having a visual symbol and the cross was not its earliest one. Because of persecution early motifs painted on catacombs were fairly non-committal such as a peacock (supposed to symbolise immortality), a dove, the athlete's victory palm, or in particular a fish. Only the initiated would know that *ichthys* (fish) was an acronym for *Jesus Christos Theou Huios Soter* (Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour). But it didn't remain the Christian sign, doubtless because the association between Jesus and a fish was purely acronymic and had no visual significance. So the visual symbol needed to be about something highly significant to its beliefs. There were paintings of Noah's ark, Abraham killing the ram instead of having his hand raised to Isaac, Daniel in the lion's den. They were symbolising redemption without being incriminating. The Chi-Rho monogram was a popular cryptogram often in the form of a cross, sometimes with a lamb standing before it or a dove. A universally acceptable symbol obviously needed to speak of Jesus Christ.

There was the crib, or manger, the carpenter's bench, the apron for washing feet, the boat, and the stone rolled away from the empty tomb. Other possibilities were the throne, symbol of divine sovereignty, or the dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost.

But the chosen symbol came to be the humble cross.

Its two bars were already a cosmic symbol, from remote antiquity, of the axis between heaven and earth. But its choice by Christians has a specific explanation. They wished to commemorate as central to their understanding of Jesus neither His birth nor his youth, neither His teaching nor His service, neither His resurrection nor his reign, not His gift of the Spirit, but His death, His crucifixion.

Christians from at least the second century onwards not only drew, painted, engraved the cross as a pictorial symbol of their faith, but also made the sign of the cross on themselves or others. Tertullian, the North African Lawyer-theologian around about AD 200 wrote:

At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, or seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign (the cross).¹

Constantine, the first Emperor to profess to be a Christian albeit late in his life, gave quite an impetus to the use of the cross symbol. On the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, the battle that gave him supremacy in the West (AD 312-313) he saw a cross of light in the sky, along with the words *in hoc signo vinces* (conquer by this sign).

Yet the choice of the Cross as a symbol of the Christian faith is still very surprising when we consider how crucifixion was regarded in the ancient world. It is why Paul says the message of the cross is foolishness, or even madness to those who are perishing. It was a message of being condemned as a criminal and subjected to the most humiliating form of execution. The combination of death, crime and shame put the person hanging there unspeakably 'beyond the pale' of respect.

Crucifixion had been invented by the barbarians on the edge of the known world and was taken over from them by the Greeks and the Romans. It is probably the cruellest method of execution ever practised, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The Romans regarded crucifixion with horror and usually did not crucify their own citizens. The Jews also regarded it with horror especially for theological reasons. They made no distinction between a 'tree' and a 'cross' and so between hanging and a crucifixion. They therefore applied to crucified criminals the terrible statement of the law that '*anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse*' (Deut 21:23).

So it is easy to see why early enemies of Christianity, whether they were Romans, Greeks or Jews, ridiculed the claim that God's anointed Saviour ended His life on a cross. There is even graffiti from the 2nd century in Rome showing a caricature of the crucifixion. Yet despite its early repulsion and rejection by those who did not know Jesus the risen Lord, the symbol of the Cross has endured and endured because it is truly the symbol of:

- The power of God.
- The symbol of the Love of God reaching out to all humanity.
- It is a demonstration of the saving action of God offered to all humanity.
- It is a symbol of how God turned the biggest disaster in human history that had separated us from Him for eternity into a glorious homecoming and inclusion into His Kingdom.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

¹ Tertullian, *De Corona*, Ch III, p 94

The cross is the place where all wrongdoing was paid for. Where all black sins were washed as white as snow. When we realise that a cross was the worst place for the worst wrong doers – criminals, thieves, murderers, the rebellious, then when we look at The Cross we see it is also a strong symbol of taking all sin there. From being a place of execution for wrong doing it became with Jesus nailed to it The Place of Execution for all the sins of the world. It became the place where all sin; all wrongdoing was fully paid for. It was the place of The Living Sacrifice, a never to be repeated sacrifice that appeased the demands of justice and righteousness. It was the place where the death we all deserved - a criminals' death – copping the wrath of the call for justice – happened. But instead of each of us taking that punishment Jesus substituted Himself – He put Himself in our place and 'took the rap' for us, allowing justice to be fully done.

Everyone wants to see justice done in the face of wrong – well there it is for all to see – lifted High – but the surprise and relief is that it is not each of us there but the innocent One – the only innocent one - being treated so badly as if He was the scum, as if He deserved to die. The Innocent One lifted high like a shocking criminal saying 'I put myself here instead of them, and them and them and all of them. I freely choose this out of love. Father, take me in their place. Let me take Your wrath and pay for them.'

Folks we can forget it is us who should be hanging there.

Why the Cross?

Let's not forget that the Cross was the place of execution, the place of punishment, for wrongdoing, where sin, death and evil were executed fully, once and for all. When someone is executed – it is complete, finished. So when we look at the Cross, we see not just a symbol of our faith that is know world wide, but we see Jesus substitutionary sacrifice where He died to save us from death. Remember God said to Adam and Eve not to "*eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die*".

For the wages of sin is death!

But the real question is: Why is it Jesus on the cross and not us?

There is only one answer – LOVE. Demonstrated Love. Love in action!

Jn 3:17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through Him. Because as the well known verse before this one tells us that God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Why the Cross?

When Jesus is lifted high He will draw all to Himself.

John 3:14 *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.*

It was on the Cross that Jesus did save the world from the worst natural or unnatural disaster we could imagine on earth. The fall created a chasm of separation that separated all of creation from our loving Creator and it was bigger and more un-bridgeable than any black hole.

The reality of what Jesus did on the Cross changed the whole of creation around from a complete and total tragedy to one of hopefulness and restoration of a glorious relationship with our loving and resourceful God. Rom 5: 25 *He (Jesus) was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*

This Lent we will delve deeper in understanding of the cross and of the blood shed for us by the living sacrifice, Jesus. We live differently when the knowledge of this lives inside us enabling us to see even more how God sees the achievements of the cross.

A powerful way to pray into a worrying situation is to pray the cross of Christ into it. When there is violence and disagreement, pray the Cross of Jesus into it to transform it. When there is disharmony and greed pray the cross of Jesus in to bring peace and unselfishness. Everything Jesus achieved on the cross can be appropriated in our everyday life: For it is the power of God and the wisdom of God for us who believe.² Praying, in the understanding of that, transforms situations. We can be praying for Japan that way – praying the Cross of Jesus in to bring hope, salvation, restoration and eternal certainty. When we pray the cross of Christ into the broken things going on, into the hopeless situations or people, into the black and evil, into the deadly and repugnant, we who believe tap into the achievement of the cross to transform all things and to save them.

The achievement of the cross is for all time. There is a power of God to save a situation when we pray that way and I believe God wants us to know it. I have been in a meeting that was getting difficult and under my breath prayed the Cross of Jesus into the middle of the meeting and seen God transform it and people stop attacking each other. When we don't know how to pray simply ask for the Cross of Jesus to transform it. That is how we can be praying for Queensland, Christchurch and indeed Japan at this time. The words are simple: *Father I pray the cross of Christ into this situation, in Jesus name.* But the faith that goes with those words is about an understanding of the depths of what Jesus achieved on the cross. Those achievements cover every situation or circumstance that the world, the flesh and the devil can throw at us. Jesus' achievements on the Cross include: life triumphing over death, good over evil, forgiveness over sin, love over hate, selflessness over selfishness, and so it goes on. This Lent I invite us to go deeper

² 1 Cor 1: 18 & 23

and deeper in our knowledge of what Jesus achieved on the cross and in the shedding of His Precious blood.

Pray the Cross of Christ into situations that are distressing for God and us - For the big things like Japan's suffering and for those nearer to us. Let us become committed to praying for Tina's husband for full healing of the cancer; for Chris Canham, for full healing of the cancer; for Chris Richardson's sister to come to Christ; for John Mordike for full healing from Leukaemia; for ... for ... and in fact we seek God as to who to pray for here and around the world.

This parish is already mature in praying – let this Lent be a sacrifice of prayer in the power of the achievements of the cross and we will experience another reason for 'why the Cross' as we hold each challenge or each global disaster up for God's transforming love and power to touch.

We can devalue the Cross by our ignorance or by our neglect. In our prayer life and in our demonstration of our faith let us never devalue the cross. Rather, let us value and honour Jesus and the symbol of what He did when He was lifted high for us.

Over this Lent our prayer life can be our Lenten sacrifice where we offer living intercession for the things that are on God's heart. For what is important to Him is important to us and what is important to us is important to Him.

Let us pray: