



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

October 28, 2007

Pentecost 22, 2007

On Sept 14 in our church's liturgical calendar we celebrate the feast of the holy cross. In the gospel for that day, John (12:31-33), Jesus says "Now is the judgment of this world. Now will the ruler of this world be driven out and I, when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself."

Jesus was not only talking about the way in which he would die but also about the purpose of his death. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment.

Deuteronomy 21:23 makes it very clear that in Jewish Law anyone hanged or crucified is accursed of God. That makes it impossible for Jesus to claim to be the Messiah for the Jews or for the Jews to accept Jesus as Messiah.

To the Greeks crucifixion was culturally offensive. Paul makes this quite clear in 1 Corinthians 1:23, where he proclaims Christ crucified as a stumbling block to Jew and foolishness to gentiles.

Yet here we have Jesus claiming to draw the whole world, not just some in the world, but the whole world to himself through his crucifixion.

Crucifixion was not pretty. Criminals carried the cross piece of the arms from jail to the place of execution and then the cross piece was attached to the top of a vertical stake, giving the cross a T shape. The body was then secured with nails and rope, and then the cross was raised to stand.

The crucifixion of Jesus, his death as a criminal, made him repugnant to Jews and to Greeks, yet it is through his crucifixion that God was making a new covenant with all of God's children.

And so the cross became a central symbol of Christianity. It is recorded in the 2nd century that it was being used to sign foreheads as a blessing. The cross developed from a very simple T shape to hundreds of forms that expressed a particular aspect of Christ.

Even here at St. John's are many examples. The cross on the roof is a Celtic cross. The cross above the door leading from the church to the hall is a Christus Rex. The processional crosses: one is simple, one is ornate. The cross in Hosea Hall is Mexican.

For the early Christians it was the simple cross that was the symbol of their faith. The cross could also be used as a symbol for other things. That was always very helpful when Christian faith brought with it the possibility of persecution and even death.

It has been thought that the simple cross and other crosses were used because Christianity is a resurrection faith, which it is. But resurrection does not make much sense without understanding the death of Christ.

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Established in 1847

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Around the 12 century, the Franciscans used a cross with the body of Christ on it. This image spread rapidly through Christendom as the theology of the Passion of Christ began to make more sense of the Resurrection of Christ.

It was the Franciscans who began to rediscover how the crucifixion of Christ broke through the barriers of culture to show how God chose this way of atonement and redemption for all his children. Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female.

We all know that Jesus did not deserve to be crucified. Yet His agony, his innocence, his humiliation, was the way God chose to draw and reconcile all people to God. 2 Corinthians 5 affirms that if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation and all this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ. In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them.

He also says that through the reconciliation of Christ we have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

The crucifixion of Christ was the way God created a common community for divided and alienated humankind. We call it the Church.

It was the resurrection that made sense of the Passion and fulfilled what God intended through the crucifixion of Jesus.

Unfortunately, during the reformation, all symbols were discouraged in those churches who were protestant to the Roman Catholic Church. Churches in England had beautiful paintings on the walls whitewashed. Any imagery and statues, including the figure of Christ on the cross, were removed so that there was no temptation of idolatry.

Yet idolatry was not the purpose of the Franciscans. The meaning of the crucifixion as affirmed by the resurrection was the intention of showing Jesus on the cross. That is still the intention today.

It was on the cross that Jesus crystallized his gospel in some of the words he said.

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Words of forgiveness that Jesus says to us every day. Words that we are called to live by to exercise forgiveness in our lives.

“Woman behold thy son, son behold thy mother.” Jesus asking for compassion on someone who would be unable to take care of herself. The call for compassion in our Christian life.

“I thirst.” Did not Jesus say, “Whoever gives a cup of water to the least of my children does it to me.”

“Today you will be with me in paradise” the promise that all of us want to hear.

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“It is finished.” No matter how bad it gets it will be over one day.

Millions of people were crucified by the Romans. What the Franciscans did was say, it was not just anybody that was crucified, It was Jesus of Nazareth. Savior of the World. King of Kings, lord of lords, Messiah the Christ.

And so in the garden of St. John's we have a crucifix that gazes on all who pass St. John's.

The cross with the crucified body of Jesus is the message of hope not fear, forgiveness not judgment, welcome not rejection.

The crucifixion revealed life through death. Victory through sacrifice. Light through darkness. Power through weakness. The foolishness of God being wiser than people.

That is the reality God was introducing 2000 years ago with a man called Jesus of Nazareth. That reality is still the same today because we do not live in a world that has allowed itself to be drawn by Christ.

I'd like to finish with one of the most profound prayers in our book of common prayer that is said in Daily Morning Prayer.

It reads:

Lord Jesus Christ you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So clothe us in your spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you for the honor of your name.

Amen.

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