

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## Sign of the Cross

*“The very name of the Cross should be far, not only from the body of a Roman citizen, but also from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears.”* Thus said Cicero, the great Latin orator, who had no doubt witnessed crucifixions. A girl in a Glasgow jeweller’s asks to see a gold cross and chain. “D’you sell the ones with the wee man on?” she enquires. There it is: the cross as an item of jewellery...isn’t it *strange*? How would you react to someone wearing a little gold electric chair in the same way - with or without a wee man in the process of receiving twenty thousand volts? We have made the Cross of Christ into an acceptable ornament, and thus neutralized its horror - and its power. It is far more than an instrument of torture: it is a mechanism for annihilation, and in destroying the convict it destroys his work, his ideas, his influence, even his name. In Jewish thinking it is equivalent to the comprehensive cursing of the one crucified: Deuteronomy says: *Any one hanged on a tree is a curse of God* (Dt 21:23). So the image of crucifixion should do for us what it was intended to do in the ancient world: strike a unique note of fear and horror in us, make our blood run cold.

### Unthinkable

This should illuminate the behaviour of the disciples of Jesus when he warned them about the Cross. They found such language literally intolerable, such thoughts quite unthinkable. It must illuminate our minds as well: we have got much too used to the Cross as a concept; we fail to shiver when we hear its name, we find it easy to associate it with holiness, we are happy for it to sit on our sideboards and to adorn (!) our places of worship. We embroider it on vestments, and we sign ourselves with it almost thoughtlessly in our rituals. How can we be so *blasés*? The point is that, before the Cross can become a religious reality, we have to understand it as a simple fact, understand the awesome way it functioned in the ancient world, and then why it had to happen to Jesus. We should not be so casual when we remember his saying: *If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him take up his Cross and follow me.* Here the unthinkable is offered to us as a career; how could we have got so used to the idea that we don’t hear the *terror* of it any more?

### Who Is The Greatest?

The Gospel moves directly from the prediction of the Passion to the need for humility. Crucifixion was associated with slaves rather than with senators, so the Christian must throw away ambition more or less from the beginning if there is to be any question of reaching the Cross. We are seeing Christianity in an extraordinary light: it contradicts so much of what makes up human motivation. The instinct for survival, the urge for liberation, the desire for human respect, the longing to possess or to dominate, the ideal of self-determination, the yearning for fulfilment - all of these things, which fuel the labours and fill the dreams of so many people, are so many blind alleys for a follower of Jesus - because they cannot lead to the Cross.

### If Your Right Hand Cause You To Sin...

*...cut it off and throw it away!* The question being debated by the disciples “as to which of them was the greatest” could not have been less appropriate. They had clearly failed to appreciate the significance of their journey. If we cherish the thought that we can couple our Christianity with achieving our ambition, gratifying our greed, or fulfilling any other substitute motive, we shall be entering into “vanity, and weaving of the wind”. *The Cross* is the one great defining truth about humanity; it is the one key that God offers to the human puzzle. Anything that offers an alternative view is a simple dead end.  
*Fr Philip*