

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

The Cross

This is an area where we really can ask one another for insight. What do we each understand about the Cross of Jesus? He says it is essential for each of his followers to “take up their Cross and follow him”. What we find is an immense wealth of meanings in this one event.

The meaning we each accept for the Cross is a judgment on us.

We need to know why this cruel and unusual form of torture becomes so important a feature of Christian life. Despite our perception that there is plenty of pain in the world already, some ascetics take the step of inventing new sorts of gratuitous pain, which they dedicate to sharing in the pain of the Cross. Can we identify *anything* irksome or painful as “the Cross”? Even pain we bring on ourselves?

- Where do we find the true Cross of Jesus? (*St Helena, help!*)
- What is *my* Cross, and what makes it *a Cross* rather than just *trouble*?
- Does God ordain that we should suffer in this precise way?
- If you wanted to, could you evade carrying the Cross?

Here are some of the pointers in the Gospels, which might come into play:

1 First, the determination of Jesus to carry the Cross - in the teeth of Peter’s dismay. This is the adult fulfilment of the “being about my Father’s business” which brings pain to Mary & Joseph in the story of his childhood. There’s an intention that Jesus doesn’t (or cannot?) share with his followers. There’s a whole theme of mystery in the Gospels, in Mark even of secrecy.

(The Synoptic story of the Agony in the Garden explores the complex mystery of Jesus’ mind on the threshold of his Passion. John’s Gospel spends four chapters - Jn 13 - 17 - on this same exploration.)

2 The opposition of the authorities which eventually procures his condemnation and execution. Jesus has made himself someone who has to be silenced by those in power. Despite that, it becomes clear that the Jewish Priests and the Roman Prefect - uneasy allies - are going to have to work together. Luke even involves Herod in the recipe.

3 The innocence of Jesus: he is condemned for different reasons by different people, but Pilate and the criminal crucified with Jesus agree that he has done nothing wrong. So the character of the Cross as *punishment* seems sharply at odds with the truth.

Is it significant that we are saved by an act of our own injustice?

4 The will of the Father, as Jesus *alone* perceives it. Everyone else sees the Cross as a horrific accident: a man is coming unstuck. What is mysterious to them all is point 1 above - the mind of Jesus.

5 The changeable attitude of the crowd, welcoming Jesus with joy, buying for his blood, and (in Luke alone) filled with remorse and compassion when they see the death he dies (this blend of feeling is a biblical speciality, see Zechariah, chapter 12).

6 Apocalyptic signs (Synoptics): the darkness, the Temple veil torn in two, the earthquake that opens the tombs (Matthew); a sacramental sign: the blood and water flowing from his side (John).

7 Silence: the “astonishing” silence of Jesus before his judges: the retreat (Synoptics) or dismissal (John) of the disciples: the silence of his mother and the Beloved Disciple whilst he is dying (John), the silence of the crowds after his death (Luke). The denials of Peter constitute a retreat into silence.

In John particularly the significance of what has happened is spelt out in the signs, not in any dialogue between spectators. No centurion passes any verdict in John.

These pointers may help us to reach an understanding of the Cross. But there's never an exhaustive definition of what it means. Looking into the Passion account is like looking into a kaleidoscope; the pattern constantly changes, as we find our lives reflected, challenged, illuminated, and judged by the death of Jesus. The way in which the Cross forms Christian holiness and Christian saints is always new; the story of every saint is about how he or she responded to the Cross, appropriated it - or, in Jesus' own words, *carried it and followed him*.



Christ sent me to preach the Gospel; and not in the wisdom of language,
wise words which would make the Cross of Christ pointless.

The message of the Cross is folly to those on the road to ruin, but for those on the way to salvation it is the power of God...whilst the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks wisdom, we preach a crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot pass, to the gentiles foolishness; but to those who have been called, a Christ who is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1Corinthians 1