

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

The Cross Of Christ

Last week we took note of the unlikely power wielded by Jesus because he makes the heart of his message *not* something desirable and easy, but something monstrously cruel, which matches our disease rather than our desires. To the astonishment of the Roman Empire, this unlikely preaching took hold of the whole world and indelibly moulded the human spirit.

A great deal has been said and written about the Cross and its strange power. I think we should treat it as a subject on which every one of us has something to say. Why does it have such power over us? I'll try to give you my own answers first.

1 It is an ikon of humanity.

The Cross presents us with an extreme projection of something we can feel is true of us. It represents a man who is trapped, cornered, rejected, nailed to his condemnation, punished, ruined, agonised, shamed: raised up, revealed, naked, pierced, bleeding, doomed, dying. As an image, it simply says: this is what human life is like. In our worst moments, any one of those sensations can unite us to the Cross and the one who is nailed to it.

2 It questions our complacency, and the smooth tenor of our existence.

In its very shape the Cross is an assault on our peace of mind. We know that the one who hangs there is innocent, and that his total suffering is entirely undeserved: but every one of us knows that such a crime is perfectly possible because our world is radically unjust, capable of any iniquity. The smooth tones of Caiaphas, who says "It is necessary for one man to die, so that the people may survive" alert us to the fact that a crime like this can be seen as serving the public good. It was a coalition of practiced politicians that confected this disaster. If they could accept the necessity for the crucifixion of Jesus, what price would we not pay to preserve our security and prosperity?

3 It is an ikon of damnation.

Insurers writing off a car that has been critically damaged speak of the car being "totalled". This eloquent word could fitly be applied to the intention behind the Cross. Crucifixion was designed to annihilate its victims, and it worked. No-one who had been crucified was ever mentioned again, even by his family: crucified people became "non-persons". This was not because of any legal custom: it was written into the Holy Scriptures too. Deuteronomy 21:22 says:

If a guilty man is put to death and you hang him on a tree, his body must not remain on the tree overnight; you must bury him the same day, since anyone hanged on a tree is a curse of God, and you must not bring pollution on the soil which the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage.

Even the keeping of a crucified man in memory, therefore, is a direct contradiction of the Law, and the proclamation of a crucified man as “Son of God” must have seemed particularly blasphemous to the Jews. We have to get back beyond our education, which strangely allows us to see a crucifix as something holy, and see the Cross in its original awful destructive power; only in this way can we sense the shock of the disciples who were told by Jesus that he was going to the Cross, and that they would have to follow him there.

4 It is an ikon of judgment.

In the description of the process against Jesus, especially before Pontius Pilate, we start to wonder who is on trial; Pilate has to remind Jesus that he has been handed over by his own people, and that Pilate has the power to release him or crucify him. Jesus replies that Pilate himself is in a far larger field of power, of which he is unaware: *You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from above.* Pilate might have thought of the Roman Empire: but Jesus is not speaking of the Emperor.

The Fourth Gospel is perfectly aware of the question about who is on trial. When Jesus has been beaten up by the soldiers, Pilate has them dress him up in a *Roman* soldier’s cloak and shows him to the crowd, hoping to shame them into withdrawing their demand for the Cross. He puts an acanthus crown on his head, and makes him sit on his own chair of judgment. There, battered, silent, robed, crowned, and enthroned, Jesus hears Pilate say: *Here is your “king”!* When the priests who lead the people reply *We have no king except Caesar,* Pilate knows he has made them renounce their faith, and he resolves that if his hand is to be forced, he will involve the Jews in the convict’s fate: thus the charge-notice simply reads “King of the Jews”.

The priests then see that in agreeing to condemn “the king of the Jews”, Pilate has also condemned the Jews. This alerts us to the fact that the condemnation of Jesus has, like all unjust verdicts, backfired on the perpetrators: not just the Jews, but everyone who has had a share in bringing about his punishment. This would be significant enough even if the victim were merely a good man. If instead he is who he claims to be, it is infinitely worse. We have shot ourselves eternally in the foot; we have condemned ourselves, and the shameful sight of the crucifixion passes a reverse judgment on the human beings whose world has no room for the Son of God. We have written our injustice in the tender flesh of the Saviour of the World. We have declared our world a no-go area for God.

5 It is the ultimate phase of revelation

In taking on our nature, the Son of God’s ultimate act of solidarity has to be his lying in the grave which devours us all. No coming to be beside us that

didn't include death could be credible, or worthy of our trust. So when we say that God sends his Son to us out of love, that he should die is quite essential. Having said that, we improve upon it by making him die of our unlikeness to God, even making his likeness to God the cause of his death. Nevertheless, the threat of this death never makes him turn from his resolve to be with us. So the Crucifix is an ikon of the distance the love of God will travel to be loyal to human beings. It reveals to us the all-important fact, that God's plan for us includes death, and that death is not off the map, is not the senseless and irredeemable fact we find it to be.

No death is more appropriate as a setting for this revelation than crucifixion. As outlined already, crucifixion was meant to evacuate all meaning from the syllables that make up your name. To contradict death here is most powerful. As we discussed last week, the Cross is above all the ikon of God, and of the divine love which pours itself out unreservedly throughout eternity: it translates into human language this almighty selflessness which confirms in their being the three divine Persons; despite its apparent annihilating effect, the Cross is made creative and eloquent of life through the divine love; the love of the Son makes the Cross a sacrifice to the Father, delivering a total obedience: the love of the Father makes the Cross into the place of resurrection, which Jesus calls "my going to the Father". He also told us that it was necessary for him to "go to the Father" because without that, "the Spirit would not come to you". This coming to us of the gift exchanged between Father and Son is the fulfilment of revelation.



The five areas of meaning above represent my own first responses to the Cross; there are many more. What we have to remember is that despite the multiple realms of significance illuminated by the Cross, it is still one thing: the death of a human being, something we can draw and make into sculpture, which will always be recognised instantly throughout the world. This means that it can be a gathering-point for many different people with a multitude of responses. As I tried to spell out last week, the extraordinary truth is that the Christian faith finds at the heart of this abominable death the purest experience of devotion, of holiness, that we can think of. That means that the deeper our unhappiness, the blacker our sense of guilt, the worse our prospects, the nearer we are to this appalling scene on Calvary; and instead of the traditional virtues of recollection, meditation, ordered life, and moral probity, our religion brings us to this disastrous terminus, a man dying crucified between two thieves. Christianity can never be a religion reserved for the pure or the elite. It can only really be understood by fallen humanity.