

Trinity 13 2019

Yesterday the church celebrated Holy Cross day.

"Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people unto myself," says Jesus in our Gospel reading for Holy Cross day.

Holy Cross Day has been associated with the dedication of a group of buildings that were built by Emperor Constantine in Jerusalem on the sites of Christ's crucifixion and his tomb. This dedication occurred on September 14, 335. During the excavation, a relic that was believed to be the cross was discovered by Constantine's mother, Helena. From the fourth century on, the Church of Jerusalem claimed to have this relic in their possession and had a feast to celebrate its discovery. This feast also celebrates the exposition given at Jerusalem on the matter of the cross by Heraclius – the Byzantine Emperor. It is said he recovered the cross from the Persians who seized it from Jerusalem around the 7th century when they sacked the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The authenticity of these claims remains unproven.

Jesus once told his followers that "unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and remains a single grain; but if it dies, bears much fruit" and "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." It is in the context of these verses, that the festival of the Holy Cross is to be interpreted.

In our society, the cross has come to be a ubiquitous symbol. It pops up everywhere. It is made by pious football players (over their breasts) before they run on to the pitch. It has even become "all the rage" as a fashion statement. One only has to look in the pages of trendy fashion magazines or go to hip clothing boutiques to see cross elaborate "cross inspired jewelry" hanging from the neck, ears, wrists and God knows where else on models and mannequins.

The notion that our society is all "crossed up" may or may not be a good thing. Indeed the fact that it is a cross, and not a symbol of another religion that is popping up all over tells us that some Christian memory or at least some Christian superstition is still very active in our nation. It certainly does not make us a "Christian nation," but perhaps it makes us a "Christ haunted" nation. Not sure of what the faith is really about, not sure who Jesus really is, but none the less fascinated by some of the concepts of the Christian religion.

The calling we have as Christians in a Christ haunted, but not Christian society is to lift high the Holy Cross. In terms of name recognition Jesus is up there with all the leading celebrities, yet so many of the population know of Jesus but do not know Jesus. Many drive by churches every day and have yet to walk inside a church door. We need to roll up our sleeves and lift high the Holy Cross.

The way to lift high the cross for the biggest effect is for each individual Christian to lift high up the cross in his or her ministry in daily life.

As we seek to lift up the cross in our ministries, we are to lift it up as Jesus did. The lifting up which suggests exultation is a reference to the crucifixion. Jesus was lifted up on the cross and died. He gave his life as a ransom for many. Philippians makes it clear what lifted up truly means:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross..." (Philippians 2:5-8)

The whole ministry of Jesus, and thus the whole ministry of the church is cruciform in shape. One of the most prevalent image for walking in the way of faith is that of "taking up the cross" and following Jesus. Jesus said that those who would be his followers were to take up the cross and follow him. Those who seek to save their lives would lose them, but those willing to lose their lives would find them.

Many in Jesus' day could not understand the concept of a servant Messiah or crucified Lord. Even in the gospel text when Jesus tells those gathered that he must be lifted up, the crowd answered him "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say the Son of man must be lifted up? Who is the Son of Man?"

Still today there are those who have the same puzzlement. How can the Messiah die? How can the Lord be a servant? And "Who is the Son of Man?" The scandal of the cross is just as bewildering for many to understand as it was when Jesus lived.

For many in our world, the church is an alien concept. Church buildings are curious but foreign territory. Many seekers are looking for God but are reluctant to enter the doors of the church, because they are bewildered by it all. For some, the closest they may get to the Christ and the cross is the Christ

and the cross they see in us. That is what it means to be a witness for the Lord, that is why we are called to be disciples. That is why we are to be ambassadors for the Lord, because many come to faith by first seeing faith in others.

Really, the central purpose of the church is to lift up the cross. To let the light of Christ's life, death and resurrection shine forth in the world. The light shines forth as the church and each Christian walks in the way of the cross in the world. The light shines as we love one another, and show others that we are his disciples. The light shines as when we do not hide it under a basket but let it shine forth in lives of love and humble service.

On this day dedicated to the Holy Cross, let us recall the cross traced upon us in baptism. The sign under which we live and move and have our being. Let us lift up the cross before others by leading Christian lives until the day of Jesus, Christ. In the words of the hymn:

"Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adore his sacred Name...."

Amen.