

THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS – YEAR C (2025)

In the West, we take it for granted that the symbol of the Christian religion is the Cross, but it was not always so: indeed, the earliest depiction of Jesus on the Cross dates from around the year 200 AD in Rome, and depicts Christ with the head of a donkey, with the crudely-drawn figure of a man standing nearby. The image bears the subscription '*Alexamenos worships God*', and was intended as an insult to Christians, and a mockery of Christianity, by a then still strong and pagan Roman empire. At that time, Christians were still persecuted fiercely for their faith, and crucifixion was still practised as a common and brutal means of execution. This only came to an end in the early C4th, when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, replacing crucifixion with hanging, out of respect and reverence for Jesus Christ, if not for all human life. And, because of the ubiquity of the Cross in Western art and Christian worship since the Middle Ages, it is easy for us to become both sanitised to crucifixion as a barbarous method of killing, and also to the utter shame associated with it.

It was because of this sense of shame that Christians did not depict the crucified Christ for over two centuries after the crucifixion had taken place; and also why the first depiction that we know of is intended to reinforce that sense of humiliation. And this is why, particularly in the writings of S. Paul, we see a development of the theology of the crucifixion, as the early Church grappled with the paradox of how and why the incarnate Son of God could and should

have to be put to death in the first place; and how his death could be good, rather than bad, news. This is what S. Paul means when he says, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, 'We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles' – a stumbling-block because the Jewish Scriptures condemned those so executed as cursed, and the Jewish people sought a conquering Messiah, and not one whose life would end in seeming defeat; and foolishness because the crucifixion contradicted the prevalent Greek philosophy, which likewise insisted that success lay in strength, survival and earthly power. But, as S. Paul came to understand, this is the paradox of the Cross: because it completely inverts all worldly expectations and notions of success and power, and presents us with a God who suffers with and alongside us in the Person of his Son, thus redefining our relationship with the divine, and establishing a new way of being human, in which God's grace and power perfect human weakness. And this is why S. Paul – the fiercest of Jewish adherents and persecutor of the Church, for whom crucifixion would have been naturally abhorrent – could come to utter these extraordinary words in his epistle to the Galatians: 'But far be it from me to boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world'. In this seismic theological shift, the Cross is seen as the glory of Christians, and not our shame; the triumph of Jesus Christ, and not his humiliation; and the means by which humanity might be redeemed, and enter into eternal life.

And it is the conviction that the Cross is triumphant that gives cause for our celebration of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross today: this feast was instituted, like that of Corpus Christi, to be a joyful celebration of the events of Holy Week, which are, in that context, rightly observed with humility, penance and sorrow. But today, we contemplate the mystery and majesty of the Cross in a spirit of joy and thanksgiving – recognising that, by means of Jesus' death, the *Atonement*, sins are forgiven, death is defeated, and we are offered the hope and reward of everlasting life with our crucified and risen Lord.

But, as is the case in so many areas of our common life today, symbols have become detached from their meaning, and this is certainly true of the Cross. Whilst it is universally recognised as the symbol of Christianity, the majority of people know neither its truth nor its power, having reduced it to a fashion accessory or a lurid and tacky piece of body-art. And it is in this culture of indifference and contempt that we Christians are called to witness to the saving power of the Cross, as we recall wayward humanity to the truth of the inalienable dignity of the human person from conception to natural death; and offer our society a vision of what life looks like, and could be, when lived in communion and fellowship with the living God, through Jesus Christ his Son.

We can only do that in the power of the Cross: foolish is the person who thinks that the crucifixion was something that happened to one man a long time ago; and who congratulates him- or herself that we are so much less barbarous and

more enlightened now. The secular doctrine of inevitable human progress by our own efforts flies in the face of all that the Cross reveals. For the power of the Cross is manifested not in human strength, but in our vulnerability, and in our recognition that we need God in our lives, and his grace to forgive, heal, and redeem us. This grace is given to us through prayer, of course; but supremely and most assuredly it is poured out in the Sacrament of the Altar, in which the crucified Christ is re-presented to the Father in an un-bloody manner, communicating to us, and to those for whom we pray, the benefits of his Passion. It is in receiving the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood that the power of the Cross is transmitted to sinful, grace-dependent souls, who live complex and messy lives; but who, at the altar rail, recognise our entire need of God's mercy, and rejoice in the assurance of his unconditional grace and love.

And so, in celebrating the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, we acknowledge once again that at the centre of our Faith lies this paradox: that, at the heart of very existence itself, stands the symbol of humanity's rejection of God, and the sign of his refusal to let us go. I'm sure we would all admit that we are going through a deeply challenging and worrying time: but the Cross reminds us that sin and death will not have the final word; and that the joy that the Cross offers to us cannot be taken away. To many, this seems like credulity and naïve sentimentalism; a false optimism, and a flight from reality. But, to those who know the power of the Cross to embrace and to heal, it is our only hope.

Our task is to convince our fractured and frightening world that that is so: to live as those who have been reconciled to God, and to be ministers of his reconciliation; reminding the world that we were made for life and not for death; for love and not for hatred; for unity with one another and with God, and not for the divisions that so characterise and blight our common life.

This will mean telling unpalatable truths – that there is a God, to whom we are all accountable; and that we are all sinners, in need of the redemption that God alone can provide. So much public discourse is fuelled by an inability to see a common humanity in one's opponents; and by a failure to admit that redemption is even possible, let alone desirable. Our society needs the message of the Cross now more than ever before: because it is precisely in admitting our fallibility that we can accept and offer the grace of forgiveness; it is only in being reconciled to one another and to God that we can make a fresh start. Cancel culture and the refusal to listen to and forgive those with whom we disagree is a cancer that is eating away at the fabric of our society, and the means by which division is fuelled and perpetuated. The Cross of Christ stands as much as a sign of contradiction as it does as a sign of reconciliation; but it is only in and through the Cross that humanity has any hope of salvation, either in this world or the next. If our society is to know and benefit from the healing that it so desperately needs, then the Cross once again needs to be exalted in our nation – not on performatively raised flags, but in lives that have been converted to all that it truly signifies.