



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE

in the City of New York

The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector

www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 15, 2019

The Feast of the Holy Cross

*Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Canon Robin Ward,

Principal of St. Stephen's House, Oxford, United Kingdom

on

Isaiah 45:21-25, Galatians 6:14-18, and John 12:31-36a

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For in him was all the fullness of God pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his Cross. – Colossians 1:20

One of the most underrated of English saints is Benedict Biscop, who was founder of the monastery at Monkwearmouth in the kingdom of Northumbria (where he brought up the Venerable Bede), founder of the monastery at Jarrow and then Abbot of St Augustine's, Canterbury. His is the prototype of that instantly recognizable sort of Anglican clergyman whose delight it is to go on holiday to Rome and come back loaded with good things. Benedict went to Rome no fewer than five times in search of nice stuff with which to fill his churches, and on each occasion he returned loaded with relics, books, pictures and lots of good ideas for the first edition of the Anglo-Saxon *Ritual Notes*. He is credited with introducing to England the use of stained glass and of stone with which to build churches. On one occasion his powers of persuasion were such that he got the arch-chancellor of the Holy Roman Church to come back with him and teach his monks how to sing the psalms properly. Oddly the Pope didn't seem to mind losing him; perhaps the Sistine screamers have a tradition of awfulness even more venerable than is generally supposed.

Bede records in his *Life* that for the church at Jarrow he brought back two pictures, *most cunningly ordered*: one of Moses lifting up the Serpent in the wilderness; and one of the son of Man lifted up upon the Cross. We know that images of the Crucifixion were hardly known in the West before the sixth century: Benedict's enthusiasm for being entirely up-to-date with the mother See meant that the extreme northern wilds of the civilized Christian world possessed in his day an iconography richer than anything to be found outside the old empire of the Romans in the East.

The great impetus which had caused devotion to the Cross to spread throughout the Church was two-fold: firstly, the emperor Constantine had a vision shortly before the battle of the Milvian bridge, which gave him supreme power over the Roman Empire. Looking up to the sky at the moment of crisis, he saw a shining Cross, upon which stood the inscription *In this sign, conquer*. So the Cross became the ensign which presaged the overthrow of paganism and the triumph of the Catholic faith. Secondly, the emperor's mother Helena went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land shortly after her son's victory, and there discovered with the aid of bishop Macarius the True Cross itself. During the persecution of the Church we know of visions of the Cross sent to console the martyrs, who venerate the sacred sign even as they are devoured; after the peace of the Church, the Cross itself becomes the focus of the Jerusalem pilgrimage and the greatest treasure of the church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The English always had a great devotion to the Cross from the time of their conversion until the destruction of the Reformation: in this Benedict Biscop was typical of his time. Saint Oswald like Constantine set up a Cross and dedicated his soldiers beneath it before the battle of Hexham, by which he saved Christianity in Northumbria; great carved Crosses were set up in the open air to be places of worship and signs of Christ's dominion over the land, one of which at Ruthwell in Scotland has carved upon it runic lines from the greatest of Old English poems, *The Dream of the Rood*. And in the liturgical observances of Holy Week, it was the Creeping to the Cross on Good Friday which really captured the imagination and attention of the people, not the rather attenuated rites of the Paschal Vigil.

Despite all the antagonism which the Reformation attached to ritual gestures we recall too that in the teeth of bitter Puritan resistance the composers of the Book of Common Prayer insisted on the godly retention of the sign of the Cross in Holy Baptism, in expectation of better times. Nor should we forget the sacrifices made by our Catholic forefathers to bring back the Cross to the Church of England: the Cross in their churches despite the ferocity of legal and illegal iconoclasm; the Cross preached from their pulpits; the Cross imprinted in their hearts and shown forth in their lives.

This Cross which now stands so imposingly on the east wall of this Church is a worthy successor to this long tradition of devotion, painfully maintained. It is a Cross which stands above an altar, and here we see demonstrated an important lesson which is beginning to be re-learned. For the past forty years in so many churches, Cross and altar have been separated. Liturgical researchers have told us that no one put crosses on altars in the early church, and contemporary liturgical style has devised unhappy ways of fiddling about with off-centre processional crosses and so forth, which have dissipated the classic simplicity of the western altar as we have known it since the middle ages. The happy restoration of an architecture and iconography which places priest and people together facing Cross and altar restores the integrity of the liturgical celebration. It draws our attention away from any supposed image of God made by the gathered assembly and towards the true icon of Christ who is the only authentic Mediator with the Father. Christ reigns from the tree, and does so above the place where the sacrifice of the New Covenant is renewed.

The fathers of the church taught that the Cross was venerable for two reasons: firstly, because the Scriptures themselves used it as a sign of the atoning sacrifice of redemption, as the apostle writes *Making peace by the blood of his Cross*; secondly, because the True Cross was the altar upon which the precious Blood was shed, *0 tree with royal purple dight*. Both reasons make it most apt that above every Christian altar should stand the image of the Holy Cross. Before the Cross stood above the altar its sacred character was emphasized by the presence of veils and screens to demonstrate the holiness of what took place there; now altars are no longer concealed, it is not enough to assume that the sacrificial character of the Eucharist and its continuity with the offering of the Cross will be instilled simply by presenting the celebration as a meal.

Your church is a worthy successor to Benedict Biscop with such an attentive sense of liturgical propriety and such a discerning eye for the integrity of true Christian imagery. But neither you nor Benedict pulled off the astonishing coup of S. Radegond, who wrote to the emperor Justin in Constantinople for a bit of the True Cross to live up the visitor appeal of her convent. She received a portion beyond her wildest imagining, and to honour its reception at the monastery the hymn writer Venantius Fortunatus wrote the oldest and greatest hymn in honour of the Cross, *Pange Lingua, gloriosi*. As we honour the Holy Cross on this feast day, from which Christ our King reigns, we recall with thanksgiving his verse:

*Faithful Cross! above all other,
One and only noble tree!
None in foliage, none in blossom,
None in fruit thy peer may be;
Sweetest wood and sweetest iron!
Sweetest weight is hung on thee.*