

Sunday, September 15, 2024
Holy Cross Day

Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner
on
Numbers 21:4b-9; Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17
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"The cross is not a problem to be understood but a mystery into which we enter."

Ken Leech

When I first came to New York, I used to flick through the TV channels to try to understand how America had changed since I first lived here at the beginning of the 1980s. I was particularly taken by the number of religious channels on the TV, but it was Jimmy Swaggart Ministries that would draw me back time and time again. Now, I grew up in quite an evangelical part of the Church of England and, as I grew older, and discovered Anglo-Catholicism, my friends and I would reflect on how evangelicals often went on and on and on, often not listening to other points of view, and always quoting proof-texts from the scriptures. We had a name to describe such Christians – they were known as 'bible-bashers!' So, you can imagine how delighted I was to discover that bible-bashing was alive and well in the USA! I mean, real bible-bashing. Jimmy Swaggart would take his big floppy leather bible, and hit it as he made his points. I also loved how he distinguished between various Christian groups and churches, always proudly setting his ministry and church apart from others because, as he used to say, and repeat again and again while bashing his bible, "*We preach the message of the cross!*"

And I used to smile to myself and say to the TV "*So do we! We preach the message of the Cross!*"

The theologian Ken Leech once said, "*The cross is not a problem to be understood but a mystery into which we enter.*"

The cross is not a problem to be understood but a mystery into which we enter.

Our readings today help us enter into that mystery. This Eucharistic Liturgy, today, helps us enter into that mystery. The mystery of the Cross into which we enter by virtue of our baptism, and a mystery we celebrate day by day in the mass, is the formation of our lives through entering into that mystery, and becoming more like Jesus Christ.

We preach the message of the cross, and that message is counter-cultural. It makes no sense to so many, because they are trying to prove or disprove it or, worse, to explain it. They forget that they actually need to *live it!* The cross is not a problem to be understood but a mystery into which we enter. As St. Paul preached to the Church in Corinth, *"the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."* (1 Corinthians 1:18)

And, my friends, that power is what we proclaim today; the **power** of the cross through which Jesus affords us hope if we can only trust in him. John 16:33: *"I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"*

We live in an age when it is taught that weakness is nothing to be proud of; an age where putting yourself first is what matters; a world where evil people seem to thrive, and the lives of the downtrodden seem utterly hopeless; a world where there seems so much anger and resentment. And sadly, that is what so many children around the world are being exposed to as they grow up. And I am not just talking about children growing up in Gaza or the Occupied Territories; I mean in our own cities and on our own streets. They witness so much bigotry and mean-spiritedness; from racism to gender-based violence; from xenophobia to abusive relationships. That is why we need again and again to preach the message of the cross. That is why we need to bring up our Saint Thomas children to know a different way.

Paul puts it so eloquently in his letter to the Philippians by describing God's response to the enormity of the insult he has received from those whom he had created. We should stop and wonder at the greatness of his utterly unselfish and nonhuman act; that he should *empty* himself into creation and take the form of a human being. In coming among us, how does Paul describe it? As a **slave**. And once he had made himself human, I guess he could have confronted us and challenged us and chastised us... kind of like "Hey – you can't ignore me now – I'm God and you are gonna pay." Of course, that's how we humans might sort things out. What Paul tells us is shocking for, once he was in human form, he humbled himself *again!* *"He became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."*

Which takes us to our Gospel reading and the meeting of Jesus and Nicodemus and, arguably, the most quoted verse in the bible. John 3:16 **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."** My friends, that can't be simply something you stick on your car fender or wear on a T-shirt or a bracelet on your wrist. It has to be lived out in lives of humble, love-filled service.

Did you hear the connection between the Old Testament Lesson today and the Gospel reading? In the wilderness, following the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, the Hebrew Tribes found the going tough and they complained against God and against Moses. Incredible isn't it – yet so true to our human nature – they would rather be slaves in Egypt than take the difficult journey to the Promised Land! The fiery serpents that bit them were a punishment, but the bronze serpent that Moses made, erected on a pole, gave them a reprieve – a chance to live if only they saw it and believed. Now, using that same imagery, Jesus challenged Nicodemus to believe. Jesus would also become a sign of forgiveness and new life, only it would come at such a great cost – his own lifeblood poured out for Nicodemus, for Peter, for Paul, for Mary, for Martha, for you, and for me and he was lifted high for all to see.

Listen again to the words of comfort from the Lord himself, *"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

That is why we preach Christ crucified in a world that seem, yet again, on the brink of disaster brought about by human selfishness, greed, and arrogance. Christ's wounds of love are still fresh as he continues to plead for us at the right hand of the Father for all those who reject God's love and forgiveness. It was this eternal freshness of the wounds of love on the resurrected and glorified body of Jesus that allowed our patron Thomas to declare "*My Lord and my God!*"

I have been reflecting long and hard about the ten years that has passed all too quickly since I first climbed the steps of this pulpit. Next to the pulpit is an image of Christ Crucified. All our preaching is affected by this image of the Lord – all our preaching and our ministry done in his name is influenced by that image – that **God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.** And what is eternal life my friends? Is it something to strive for in the future? Is it a promise of something we will be rewarded with if we manage to die in a state of grace? Or, worse, do we believe that it is mere fantasy, something that keeps us going when life is tough or, quite frankly, dull and boring? No – eternal life is lived in the here and now – it is not a future state, but a state of life to be entered into **now** – a life that will prepare us for the life to come. Eternal life is a **quality** of life not a quantity of life, and the message of the Cross is key to understanding it. Perhaps now we begin to have a glimmer of understanding of what the Lord Jesus meant when he said to his disciples, "*those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*" (Mark 8:35)

Dear friends, if, as your pastor these past ten years, I have let you down, failed in my pastoral responsibilities, failed to preach the message of the Cross, or even caused you hurt – I am truly sorry, and I ask your forgiveness. But for all the things that have gone well, have built us up in Christ, and have been signs of hope in our parish, I thank **you**. For, *together* we have entered into the mystery of the cross, and discovered how to worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me end with the words that I used to end my sermon ten years ago when I stood in this pulpit for the very first time. Words of the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury. Fr. John Andrew, who died in October ten years ago, was sitting just down there; I could see him as I read these words of his beloved Archbishop, and as I read those words, he was looking at the Lord hanging on the Cross.

From Calvary and Easter there comes a Christian hope of immense range: the hope of transformation not only of humankind but of the cosmos too. The bringing of humankind to glory will be the prelude to the beginning of all creation. Is this hope mere fantasy? At its root there is the belief in the divine sovereignty of sacrificial love, sovereignty made credible only by transfigured lives. (Be still and know, pp. 69-70)