

THE CROSS: A TESTIMONY

Zechariah 9. 9-12

1 Corinthians 2. 1-12

John 12. 12-16

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

This sermon is a personal testimony. I would like to share with you something of what the Cross of Jesus means to me as we stand at the beginning of this great and Holy Week, and as we worship together on this Sunday of the Lord's Passion. I hope that my testimony will stand alongside your own personal convictions and insights, for the mystery of the Cross is indeed a many-splendoured thing; it is so mysteriously wonderful that the world itself cannot embrace its fulness. As I speak briefly today, I would like to mention just five of the beautiful facets of the Cross.

Allow me to begin on a personal level. I have often been taken by the tender words written by St Paul in his letter to the Galatians, who wrote, 'I have been crucified with Christ, ...and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, *who loved me and gave himself up for me*' (2. 20).

'...who loved me and gave himself up for me'. I well remember when I was a teenager, when the penny finally dropped that on the Cross, Jesus had done something for me that I could never ever hope to do for myself: that through his Cross, I have been forgiven and accepted, and brought into a knowledge of something of the depth of Christ's love for me personally. It was a life-changing experience. I knew then that my calling was to seek to live out that fact, and to let his Cross motivate and inform my Christian discipleship.

But the good news is that the Cross is not simply about individuals; and a second facet that it offers us is that it embraces all of the human race. You surely remember the eloquent words of the Prayer of Consecration in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which reassures us that Christ's 'full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice' of himself was '*for the sins of the whole world*'. There is no 'limited' atonement. As St Paul wrote again elsewhere, 'Christ died *for all*' (2 Cor 5. 15); and I have come to understand the word 'for' to be a strong word, an embracing word, and an expansive word. The Cross can never simply be about personal piety; it stands at the very fulcrum of human destiny.

Indeed Christ, as Son of God and Son of Man, stands as the new Human Being, the Second Adam, who in his own body re-constitutes humanity by vicariously living our life and dying our death. And he takes our sin on himself, bearing it and crucifying it, so that the power of sin is executed and the sting of death is removed. The wonder of the Cross is that Christ offers his obedience in the place of human disobedience; his 'yes' in the place of humanity's 'no'; his righteousness in the place of human unrighteousness. And the fruits of his Passion are now being worked out in human history and in human destiny. I am fully convinced that when Christ is revealed, all who have accepted his work on the Cross will recognise (and worship) the marks of his Passion. To quote the words of a magnificent hymn (*Lo, he comes with clouds descending*):

'Those dear tokens of his Passion still his dazzling body bears;
With what rapture gaze we on those glorious scars.'

The Cross has a third facet, and that is that it also embraces something in the heavens. I do not claim to begin to fully understand, but I do believe we need to take seriously that strand in the Scriptures that speaks of mysterious 'rulers, authorities and cosmic powers' that are themselves rebellious and wicked. So we read in St Paul's letter to

the Ephesians that our struggle is ‘not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places’ (6. 12).

In other words, there is a cosmic conflict between good and evil; not an equal and opposite conflict, but nevertheless a spiritual reality that motivates the kind of evil that we see in the world and which seems so much greater than the sum of the parts. I take that mysterious verse in the Book of Revelation, ‘...and war broke out in heaven’ (12. 7) to include a reference to the Cross. The conflict raging on earth on the hill of Calvary was also being waged in heaven, as absolute evil and perfect love met head on in the body of Jesus. Of course, the powers of evil thought they had their day. St Paul, in 1 Corinthians, speaks of these powers as ‘the rulers of this age’ who ‘crucified the Lord of glory’ (2. 8). They thought they were frustrating God’s will; but in fact they were fulfilling it! The resurrection of Christ is the great sign that evil has been conquered by love. God’s love is stronger than the greatest evil.

Fourthly, I see the Cross as something that has entered the life of the Godhead. Not only did the Father (and I use this word carefully) ‘experience’ the giving up of his own Son; in some mysterious way, the Father also ‘experienced’ his Son’s death within the life of the Trinity. This means that the narrative of the suffering of the Son is now part of the narrative of the life of God; and if Jesus was fully God and fully man (which he was), when he ascended to heaven after his death and resurrection, he brought with him the tragedies, pains, sufferings and death of the human race. They are now subsumed into the life of heaven in order that suffering and death may be for ever redeemed.

There is a fifth and very important facet. I believe that the Cross is an on-going proclamation of God’s love. It is, of course, the supreme irony that an instrument of brutal execution should become the great symbol of God's love; but isn’t that itself a sign of the transformative redemptive power of God?

Up to now, most of what I have said in this sermon is about what God has done objectively in Christ: the dealing with sin, the overcoming of death and the restoration of estranged humanity to God.

But the Cross also speaks to us subjectively. As we are offered this amazing proof of God's love for us, as evidenced by Jesus's death on the Cross, we are challenged. This same Jesus, this same Son of God who 'loved us and gave himself up for us', challenges us about today. He asks us hard questions about how we are to live. Those of us who have experienced, and continue to experience Christ's love on the Cross, are called to love others just as he has loved us (Jn 13. 34). Because if Christ died for all, then no-one can ever lie outside of our concern; no-one can be excluded or written off; no-one can be regarded as being outside the scope of such a love. We are to love them all, as he does.

Amen.