

GOOD FRIDAY 2020

MEDITATION ON THE CROSS OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

In the ancient world crucifixions are never given a positive interpretation – they have no symbolic power for Jews, Romans or Greeks. However, for the authors of the New Testament the cross became, not just the instrument of death for our Lord Jesus but also the symbol of our salvation.

Crucifixion was a public spectacle – an expression of barbarism and in societies which exhibited high cultural and civic development it was often used on slaves and aliens as a deterrent and punishment for petty criminals and those who disturbed the peace.

In the Gospels, the cross has many interpretations: indeed each of the evangelists view it differently. I am going to reflect on two interpretations of the cross: the first from St Mark, where the cross is unrelieved pain and suffering: a gallows from which Jesus hangs helpless and torn apart by his isolation and through which there seems to be little hope. The second from St John's Gospel, where we see the cross as a Tree of Life; throne from which Jesus reigns as King and Lord – not just of the people of Israel but for the whole cosmos. I invite you to spend this time of devotion 'looking at the Cross', meditating on its rich symbolism, on its horror as well as its beauty. As we examine some of the meanings let us enter into the crucifixion and stand beside our Lord remembering that the cross is the point at which the sinfulness of human beings meets the love of God.

LOOK AT THE CROSS AND SEE IT AS A GALLOWS



'The Screaming Christ' Guido Rocha 1975

Reading : Mark 15 : 21 – 39

²¹ They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. ²² Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

²⁵ It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." ²⁷ And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁹ Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰ save yourself, and come down from the cross!" ³¹ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³² Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ³⁵ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." ³⁶ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." ³⁷ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

It was a Friday, a little before noon when the crowd passed through the streets of Jerusalem shouting, jeering and acting in a barbarous way. In the middle of the crowd of soldiers and others, a pathetic, vulnerable figure staggered along under the weight of a horizontal bar of a cross. The crowds, fascinated by the horror, the torture and the pain, accompanied him. When we look at that central figure we see a man, already close to death. The soldiers had scourged him so that the flesh of his back was hanging - a bloody, mangled mess. Sweat and blood streamed down his face, a crown of thorns had been jammed on his head and, deprived of sleep the night before, he was utterly exhausted. He stumbled and fell and the Roman soldiers kicked him and pulled him to his feet. Realizing that he might die before he reached the final horror of crucifixion, the soldiers compelled an innocent by-stander to bear the cross for him, so Simon of Cyrene became the first disciple who 'took up the cross' to follow Jesus.

Reflecting on the life of Jesus – the man who lived so close to God that he had said, 'If you have seen me, you have seen the Father' – the man in whose flesh God walked the earth among us, healing the sick, teaching the poor, accepting all who came to him in repentance, the man who understood from his own experience what it was to suffer, - he was prepared to take upon himself that suffering, that intolerable pain for the sin of the world. So, we reach Golgotha, the place of the skull, where Jesus was stripped and nailed to the cross. The hammer blows driving home the nails through the wrist bones cause excruciating pain and as they damaged the radial nerves the muscles cramped and there was a further jolt to the pained body as the cross bar was hoisted into position.

Standing there beside the cross we feel the hammer blows and we wince with Jesus at every gasp of pain: or as Walsham How suggests in the hymn:

*I sometimes think about the cross
And shut my eyes and try to see,
The cruel nails and crown of thorns
And Jesus crucified for me.*

The pain and soreness of the torn back against the rough wood was excruciating and even if the feet were nailed to a ledge, the body weight was taken on the arms and Jesus was unable to breathe. He fought to raise his diaphragm, drawing up his knees as far as he was able to alleviate the pain but the pain continued and he slowly suffocated.

It is an appalling punishment and Jesus was spared, in that for him, the suffering lasted just about three hours, instead of the two to three days that was usual.

Look at the cross and see it as a gallows: the pain Jesus suffered was unbearable and unimaginable. As we look at the sculpture of the 'Screaming Christ' and read the account of the crucifixion in Mark's Gospel, we enter into the physical suffering of Jesus as we would do if we were standing beside him. The sculpture comes out of the unimaginable torture suffered by so many political prisoners in South America. This is not the Christ on the Cross that we are used to seeing – the patient Christ looking as if he suffered no pain, but rather a man undergoing realistic and horrendous torture. Small wonder that Jesus felt abandoned by God and cried out, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani.'

When death came it was a relief to those standing by: an end to all the physical suffering, but from this appalling death arose the possibility of eternity enabling us to participate in the sacrificial death of Jesus, as we participate in his sacrificial life and so live already in the kingdom.

Let us pray

Father, as we gaze upon your beloved Son hanging in agony on the cross, we pray for those regimes which condone and perpetrate violence and we are challenged to work for an end to torture and death. Your last hours showed us the depths of your love: your love in pain, your love through darkness, and your love in vulnerability. Grant that we may love you with all our being and we pray that you will give us strength to love and support our neighbours: for the sake of the same, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

LOOK AT THE CROSS AND SEE IT AS THE TREE OF LIFE



Christ on the Cross : The Tree of Life by Tidjani Agona (1970 Nigeria)

Reading: John 11 : 25 – 26

Jesus said to Martha, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

The Redeemer's Tree

"The cross is the most universal symbol of Christianity. But often we forget that the symbol of our salvation was originally a tree growing somewhere, probably among other trees. Those who cut it down had not the slightest idea that it would one day be the most universal symbol of millions and millions of Christians. They thought nothing about the fact that on that tree God would be crucified in order to reconcile the world to himself; that on that tree redemption was to flow from God to mankind in a once-for-all act of self-sacrifice."

"The tree of the cross has built bridges across rivers and valleys; it has brought people of different backgrounds together; it has torn down barriers and pierced through walls of separation; it has crossed oceans and traveled afar to tell people the good news which it heard one Friday morning two thousand years ago. Indeed this tree has been persecuted, whacked with axes, shot at with bullets, hanged, beaten, given to wild beasts, torn to pieces, chopped up, ostracized, burned, laughed at, condemned, and made to suffer many things. This tree bears upon itself thousands of scars and wounds. Yet in spite of them all, it has continued to heal the sick, to bring hope to the desperate, to comfort the oppressed, to guide the lost, to feed the hungry, to shelter the poor, to inspire the anxious, to illumine the intellectual, to challenge the fearless, to save the condemned and to meet the needs of every generation and every human situation. What a tree! John Mbiti

The cross of Christ is a gallows but at the same time the Tree of Life: the crossroads of time and eternity and the place where the heart of Christ was broken so that the healing power of God could flow through it into a sick and broken world. The carving, made in the 1970's, of the Tree of Life is by a Nigerian artist. The root of the Tree is sprouting new green growth reminding us that when we look at the cross we see a new creation. Or as Jesus said to Martha just before he raised her brother Lazarus from the dead, 'I am the resurrection and the life.'

Jesus was the Word made flesh and that flesh was full of grace and truth. The Creator comes to his own creation: the Eternal within the temporal: the Invulnerable within the wounded. When Jesus made the statement 'I am the resurrection and the life' he had perhaps in his mind the scene in the Garden of Eden where the Tree of Life was placed out of bounds to the human beings. Life is so vitally important – it is not just an absence of death but rather a vitality which spreads life and hope through community. The hope that we need so desperately as we face the Covid-19 pandemic. The Jews had been called to be a nation of priests, to become fully alive yet all they wanted was to be a nation of nations; a group of people moribund and dull. Time and again the prophets called them back but only a remnant returned – a green shoot growing out of a hewn stump remained. For Isaiah the shoot from the root of Jesse was to endow the people with this new life. In the New Testament Jesus and his disciples became the remnant – the group of people so fully alive that others wondered - but at the crucifixion the remnant was Jesus alone. The kingdom of priests was reduced to one who was both priest and sacrifice.

The symbol of the Tree of Life is a very ancient one pre-dating Christianity. It is a symbol of ongoing life and the leafy cross was especially popular with the early Christians in Syria. The leafy cross reminds us that death is not the end of everything but the beginning of a new adventure into life eternal. Jesus said, 'Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die it remains a single grain: but if it dies it bears a rich harvest. So the cross may be seen as the flowering of the dead grain; the battleground between the forces of good and evil; it may be seen as a hospital – a place where damaged people and relationships are made whole; it can be seen as a prison in the sense that the cross sets free those who are imprisoned in their own sins.

In a manuscript dating from 1250, the Amesbury Psalter, the crucifix is depicted as a tree with ragged sawn-off branches and a legend links the cross on which Christ suffered to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. It is a tree, as the Book of Revelation suggests, with leaves for the healing of the nations.

Christ's cross, the Tree of Life, is no longer banned for the food of human beings – rather it is to be our sustenance and our joy, our shelter and our protection.

O cross of Christ, immortal tree
On which our Saviour died,
The world is sheltered by your arms
That bore the crucified.

From bitter death and barren wood
The Tree of Life is made;
Its branches bear unfailing fruit
And leaves that never fade.

Stanbrook Abbey.

Let us pray

Father, the tree of Calvary was only a piece of the truth – transverse section showing the heart wood; the piece that we saw at the time. The life of Jesus was just the piece of God we saw and because Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, forgave sinners, we had a glimpse of God. The pain of the cross continues in our world – the wars and violence, the hunger and thirst, the brokenness. Help us to recognize the healing and loving power of God working within us and through us helping us to change the world; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.

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